

# 'Well, what is the feminist perspective on international affairs?': theory/practice

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Is there a straight line? Is there a line which we can draw on/through from sex to gender to theory to legislation to policy to practice? ... Does it help to get gender right? Perhaps not quite the right question.<sup>1</sup>

In 1995, *International Affairs* published Marysia Zalewski's powerful and provocative analysis of the discipline of International Relations' lack of engagement with feminist scholarship. Her essay was entitled 'Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?'. Zalewski explained in the opening paragraph:

The question in the title is one that feminist scholars working within International Relations have been asked many times. The specific issue changes—it might be the Gulf War, or Somalia, or the Cuban missile crisis—but the enquiry is essentially the same.<sup>2</sup>

These enquiries, multiple as they may be, persistently assume absolute uniformity encapsulated in a singular—'the feminist perspective'—which is not only incorrect, but minimizes the possible contributions of, and analyses by, feminism. Instead, as the scholarship by Zalewski and other feminist theorists over several decades persuasively demonstrates, the truly transformative questions of feminism, its contributions and its analyses, originate in different questions—namely, "What work is gender doing here?" and "What about women?"<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the way in which Zalewski and others pose this question with regard to women is itself a double move for, as is made clear in this special section of *International Affairs*, tracing *who* the women are, *where*, *when* and *why* they act, not only forces an analysis of that very category itself but also introduces a 'world in which gender is not just a category, but an epistemology, in world politics'.<sup>4</sup> And indeed, gender is not just about women or men, nor yet about male and female bodies; rather, it is a practice and process of differentiation, reflective of

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<sup>1</sup> Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: exquisite corpse* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Marysia Zalewski, 'Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?', *International Affairs* 71: 2, 1995, pp. 339–56 at p. 339.

<sup>3</sup> Zalewski, 'Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?', p. 341.

<sup>4</sup> Zalewski, 'Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?', p. 341. See also the related discussion in Helen M. Kinsella, 'Feminism', in John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens, eds, *The globalization of world politics: an introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 189–203.

power relations that produce those identities intersectionally and fluidly.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in contrast to a question formulated in terms of an imposed, discrete, hegemonic category, the answers to *these* questions necessitate sober reflection on and radical reformulation of the questions we ask in seeking to understand the world which we inhabit.

By foregrounding and making explicit these framing questions of our research, Zalewski illuminates how our pursuit of knowledge and engagement with the world—and the extent to which these orientations to those activities are founded on particular logics of gender/sex—affect our theorizations of politics and international relations. Moreover, by demonstrating what is lost and what is gained in such an enterprise, Zalewski both contributes to empirical and academic pursuits, and shows the myriad links of such work to the political and ethical responsibilities scholars always bear—if still all too rarely confront. As she so bluntly puts it, ‘all these theories and the bodies keep piling up’.<sup>6</sup> Put slightly differently, in this collection Penny Griffin takes from Zalewski the commitment that ‘a research agenda requires thinking about what theory *is*, what purposes it serves, what gets counted, and who theorists themselves *are*’.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, ‘international politics is *what we* make it to be, the contents of the “what” and the group that is the “we” are questions of vital theoretical and therefore political importance’.<sup>8</sup> Thus, received analysis and conventions left unscrutinized and taken for granted are themselves constraints on politics, knowledge, and the politics of knowledge. Maria Stern acknowledges in her contribution to this collection that there is something discomfiting about beginning with a feminist commitment to ‘undoing’, to ‘seriously reflecting on and engaging with work that undoes’ as much as it does.<sup>9</sup> Yet without such a commitment we risk continuing to reproduce and reify, rather than redress, the very injustices and oversights which motivate research. Stern’s analysis of the ‘harnessing’ of sexual violence to a particular narrative of ‘rape in war’, which results in ‘persistently problematic ways in which both its immediacy and the enduring injury it wreaks are framed’,<sup>10</sup> exemplifies the contributions such commitments produce.

Thus, as the scholars contributing to this special section make clear, an orientation to an undoing insists on recognizing how the posing of questions is

<sup>5</sup> Marysia Zalewski, ‘Introduction: from the “woman” question to the “man” question in International Relations’, in Marysia Zalewski and Jane L. Parpart, eds, *The ‘man’ question in International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1–13 at pp. 8, 12. On intersectionality, see, among others, Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color’, *Stanford Law Review* 43: 6, 1991, pp. 1241–99; Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix, ‘Ain’t I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 5: 3, 2004, pp. 75–86; Nira Yuval-Davis, ‘Intersectionality and feminist politics’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13: 3, 2006, pp. 193–209.

<sup>6</sup> Marysia Zalewski, “‘All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up’”: theory, theorists, theorising’, in Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski, eds, *International theory: positivism and beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 340–53 at p. 352.

<sup>7</sup> Penny Griffin, ‘The everyday practices of global finance: gender and regulatory politics of “diversity”’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, p. 1216.

<sup>8</sup> Zalewski, “‘All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up’”, 352.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Stern, ‘Courageously critiquing sexual violence: responding to the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, p. 1237.

<sup>10</sup> Stern, ‘Courageously critiquing sexual violence’, p. 1240.

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itself political, productive and consequential. As Griffin shows, the response to the global financial crash, which offered certain formulations of gender differences to promote women as the solution and corrective, nonetheless continued to sacralize a putatively neutral and universal understanding of expertise and rationality which is itself masculinized. By carefully locating the effects, Griffin continues to document how hitherto seemingly (still!) 'non-gendered' activities (e.g. financialization) are replete with gendered concepts, structures and outcomes. Significantly, by asking 'What work is gender doing here?' Griffin, like Elizabeth Pearson, highlights the significance of theorizing masculinity in efforts to 'disturb the existing boundaries of both what we claim to be relevant in international politics and what we assume to be legitimate ways of constructing knowledge about the world'.<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, Pearson's work on extremism in this collection illuminates how the oppositional construct of masculinity and femininity poses women as the solution only in so far as they conform to or advance certain logics of rule.<sup>12</sup> As Pearson outlines, the celebration of women as a counter to terrorism and violent extremism, as well as the circulation of notions of 'toxic masculinity', effectively leave untroubled social relations of power and inequity, and celebrates hidebound views of sex and sex roles, all in the name of providing solutions to violence and promoting women's empowerment.

Formulating and offering questions is a powerful methodology, resisting certainty and closure and unsettling those who are used to research providing not questions but answers. Further, when pressure to provide 'the answers' is alleviated, it becomes possible to rethink the dimensions or vectors of the social scientific enterprise in its totality; 'failure and disenchantment are perhaps necessary to re-imagine the possibilities of unrecognisable interventions that lie at the heart of feminist political imagination'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as Pearson's and Griffin's work so effectively demonstrates, disenchantment with the ostensible, some might even say feminist, highlighting of the centrality of women as necessary to international politics is not the fairy-tale ending it is promised to be.

It is this ethic of knowledge that reveals itself in the concept of 'unthinking' and 'undoing' which Paula Drumond uses to such good effect in her analysis of sexual violence against men in her contribution to this collection.<sup>14</sup> Motivated by Zalewski's 2015 collaboration with Anne Sisson Runyan,<sup>15</sup> in which these two scholars theorize the production of the spectacle of racialized and sexualized violence in the context of neo-liberal 'war on terror', Drumond questions contemporary efforts to proscribe (certain forms of) sexual violence and examines

<sup>11</sup> Zalewski, "All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up", p. 352.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Pearson, 'Extremism and toxic masculinity: the man question re-posed', *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 1251–70.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Stern and Marysia Zalewski, 'Feminist fatigue(s): reflections on feminism and familiar fables of militarisation', *Review of International Studies* 35: 3, 2009, p. 613.

<sup>14</sup> Paula Drumond, 'What about men? Towards a critical interrogation of sexual violence against men in global politics', *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 1271–87.

<sup>15</sup> Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, 'Taking feminist violence seriously in feminist International Relations', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13: 3, 2013, pp. 293–313.

the political purchase of questioning the representation, in policy and politics, of sexual violence against men.

Zalewski has not only prompted many scholars to explore those questions most frequently left unanswered, and to interrogate the work that both gender—as a relation of power—and feminism—as a political ideology—do in world politics; she has also insisted that the violences and failures of ‘gender work’ and feminism themselves be scrutinized. The failures and violences of contemporary feminism are many, not least in relation to feminism’s exclusions of disabled women, trans women, women of colour and many others. As Kimberlé Crenshaw, who developed the concept of intersectionality, has suggested:

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women.<sup>16</sup>

Many vectors of exclusion animate world politics, and these exclusions are frequently violent, compounding subordination in complex and intersecting ways. Zalewski’s work identifying the violences of feminism operates within the space created by theorists such as Crenshaw to draw attention to the failures of feminism as well as the questions that feminist analysis opens up.<sup>17</sup>

These are the themes—violence, failure—that Sam Cook elaborates in her contribution to the special section. Inspired by Zalewski, Cook argues that ‘the notion (and experience) of failure can provide both methodological traction and the opening of political possibility’.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on her own extensive experience of advocacy and activism related to the Women, Peace and Security agenda—formally codified in a series of UN Security Council resolutions but with a reach that extends way beyond such formalities—Cook explores what counts as success and what failure can mean in the context of a feminist agenda incorporated messily and incompletely into the conventions of a powerful and exclusionary security institution.<sup>19</sup> The silences and violences of this process of incorporation, and Cook’s own ambivalent relationship with occupying space—corporeally, territorially, intellectually—in the domain of ‘WPS’, as it is widely known, surface in her personal–political account of being a ‘knower’ and a ‘doer’ in international peace and security politics.

<sup>16</sup> Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the margins’, p. 1252.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Zalewski’s engagement with Janet Halley’s work, in Marysia Zalewski, ‘“I don’t even know what gender is”: a discussion of the connections between gender, gender mainstreaming and feminist theory’, *Review of International Studies* 36: 1, 2010, pp. 3–27; Zalewski’s work on feminist violence in Zalewski and Runyan, ‘Taking feminist violence seriously’; and Zalewski’s work on narratives of feminist failures in Stern and Zalewski, ‘Feminist fatigue(s)’, pp. 611–30.

<sup>18</sup> Sam Cook, ‘Marking failure, making space: feminist interventions in Security Council policy’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, p. 1289.

<sup>19</sup> Cook, ‘Marking failure, making space’, p. 1289–1306; see also Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, ‘The futures past of the Women, Peace and Security agenda’, *International Affairs* 92: 2, March 2016, pp. 373–92; Jacqui True and Antje Wiener, ‘Everyone wants (a) peace: the dynamics of rhetoric and practice on “Women, Peace and Security”’, *International Affairs* 95: 3, May 2019, pp. 553–74.

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This brief introduction elaborates on Marysia Zalewski's significant body of work over the past three decades. Zalewski's scholarship provides not only ample evidence of the benefits of feminist modes of encountering world politics, but also a robust framework for enquiry for scholars of politics and International Relations. Her work, while deeply rooted in feminist theories and practice, has implications which go far beyond disciplinary determinations and, as the symposium demonstrates, touch upon the empirics, and the impact, of international politics writ large, from finance to terrorism to violence.

Critically, each of the articles presented here not only works with the concepts that Zalewski elaborates, but also operates in the space of theory as practice. The contributions to the special section demonstrate the importance of thinking creatively about the meaning and use of specific concepts when those concepts are mobilized in service of political or policy goals. As a collection, the essays make a broader argument about the importance of 'words to think with' when we are talking about policy development, design and implementation, and the ways in which feminist scholarship is always and already theory/practice.