

Women, the State, and War:

Considering Feminist Navigation of Security

Talley Diggs

Talley Diggs is a 2018 graduate of the Elliott School where she is pursuing a Master's of International Affairs with a focus on Security Policy. During the summer of 2017, Talley served as a Peace Fellow for The Advocacy Project and was deployed to Nairobi to support the Children Peace Initiative in Kenya. Talley spent the summer working for a local team to build peace between pastoralist tribes in northern Kenya, and hopes to return to East Africa after graduation. She has also worked with Chemonics International, the UN Foundation's Better World Campaign, the World Food Programme in Tanzania, and served as Senator Cortez Masto's Foreign Policy Fellow. Additionally, she taught abroad as an English language assistant in France. Talley is originally from Oxford, Mississippi.

ABSTRACT

Despite feminists' progress in advocating for the legitimization of women's security in the international relations sphere, institutional impediments reveal that masculine structures continue to regulate a patriarchal status quo in discourse, policy, and law. Inconsistency in the United Nations' Women, Peace, and Security agenda and in the United Nations' policies on women's security during conflict signifies that the legitimacy of feminist approaches to war and peace remains unestablished by the United Nations Security Council. Discourse condemning sexual violence as a tactic of war in UN Resolution 1820 serves as a case study for understanding the discrepancy between the Security Council's intent to protect states and its intent to protect women. By parsing out the relationship between the reigning theory of realism and a feminist interpretation of security, this paper analyzes the extent to which feminists in international relations have been able to navigate women's security within an innately patriarchal field and proposes recommendations to further improve the discourse, policy, and laws surrounding women's security during war and peace.

“Gender decides who goes to war and who does not; who is a victim and who is not; who is peaceful and who is not; and who is legitimate within the security discipline and who is not.”

(Hoogenson and Stuvoy, 2006)

INTRODUCTION

Feminists in the field of international relations have long advocated for discourse, policy, and law which reflect institutionalized legitimacy of women's security during war and peace. However, a feminist interpretation of the struggle for legitimacy reveals that such credibility is bestowed by masculine institutions reflecting the status quo of a patriarchal society. The relationship between mainstream international relations (IR) and feminism is complex and challenging; efforts to collaborate over issues of women's security in forums such as the United Nations (UN) have been met with both praises of success and critiques of disappointment. While any mild achievement in gendering security policy indicates progress for international peace and security, the inconsistent discourse and policies addressing women's vulnerabilities during conflict signify that the legitimacy of feminist approaches to war and peace remains unestablished.

Have efforts within the UN to institutionalize women's security led to a feminist security agenda, or has it merely entrenched the same structure? In this paper, I will try to answer that question and explore the extent to which feminists in IR have been able to navigate concerns of women's security. To conceptualize the environment in which current security policy and practice are taking place, this paper will provide an overview of feminist engagements in IR, identify gaps in the state-centric model of the realist school of thought, and propose a tailored response to policy discrepancies in the form of feminist security theory (FST). To examine existing conceptual gaps, I will examine the UN Security Council's role as a platform for the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, and will critically examine UN Resolution 1820 adopted in 2008. This paper will consider how feminists have been able to use the forum to protect women, and evaluate the questionably advantageous alliance between feminism and the Security Council. I will conclude by arguing that navigation of feminist thought in mainstream security forums continues to be confronted and undermined by patriarchal institutional structures. As long as states and feminists interpret security at different levels, and until feminist security theory is codified in international institutions, mechanisms for the protection of women in war will remain insufficient and secondary to state interests.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (IR) & FEMINISM: SYMBIOTIC POTENTIAL

As an academic discipline, IR serves as the sphere for inquiry of state conduct. However, the parsing out of power dynamics between states is not a practice that exists solely in an IR vacuum. Although gender is commonly marginalized by mainstream IR pundits as a superfluous or peripheral afterthought, feminist theories question and problematize the status quo upon which fundamental ideas in IR are construed. Often lost is the idea that a more comprehensive understanding of global security is visible at the intersection of feminist and IR theories. I will henceforth refer to feminist theory and feminist activists in reference specifically to theories and actors engaging in IR security policy, but it is imperative to first note that feminism is a vast field advocating a range of interests that cannot be generalized under a uniform banner.

Political scientist Eric M. Blanchard emphasizes that though feminism and gender studies remain alienated from mainstream IR academia, feminist and IR theories are contemporaries with indubitable symbiotic potential.¹ Feminist theory critically analyzes assumptions of power constructs that permeate state, society, and culture. The development of a feminist security theory is not a fruitless endeavor, but rather a necessary and noble one, particularly when one compares the fundamental queries of the two disciplines. IR scholars ask: which state has power and why? Contrarily, though not unrelatedly, feminist scholars ask: which people have power and why? While the actors examined differ in scale, both disciplines examine theories to reveal power imbalances that propagate insecurity.

Mainstream IR theorizes the security objectives of states, which begs an epistemological inquiry into the very interpretation of security itself. What is security? Security for whom? To what extent? Scholar Paul Williams observes, “Most scholars within International Relations work with a definition of security that involves the alleviation of threats to cherished values. Defined in this way, security is unavoidably political, that is, it plays a vital role in deciding who gets what, when, and how in world politics.”² Williams’ depiction provokes additional queries such as: Which values warrant protection and who has the authority to determine those values? Whose security is assured and who is advantaged or disadvantaged by such definitions?

By recognizing that security is “unavoidably political,” Williams invokes Barry Buzan’s explanation of security as “a powerful political tool in claiming attention for priority items in the competition for government attention.”³ Indeed, the practice of promoting agendas by inducing a security lens and “scrutinizing issues that are not conventionally seen as matters of security,” has been a political trend since the 1990s.⁴ Feminist activists have appropriated this strategy to gain a platform for human security and women’s security in a

world where they would not otherwise be granted space. This securitization has developed into a conceptual application targeting policymakers due to its effective ability to amplify urgency and galvanize response through security rhetoric. For example, this political tactic of securitization was strategically implemented by the WPS agenda to propel feminist theory into security relevancy and to legitimize women's rights and gender equality via charged security discourse.⁵ The Feminist Security Theory proposed here is thus a merger of two perspectives on security, and fills the gap that disadvantages women in security rhetoric and legitimizes the political position of feminists. The remainder of this paper is devoted to expanding on the challenges of implementing feminist agendas within masculine mainstream structures and the utility of feminist security theory (FST).

MAN, THE STATE, AND WAR: WHO'S MISSING IN REALISM?

To critique the status quo, I challenge the dominant IR school of thought known as "realism." This orthodox approach to IR dominated foreign policy decisions throughout the 20th century and addresses security as "the business of states."⁶ Realism thus analyzes the relational power constructs that precipitate competition and catalyze security dilemmas between states. Realists operate under the assumption that the international system is anarchic, necessitating self-help for states to protect their survival.⁷ As the facilitator of security, states control which threats and which citizens are legitimized or marginalized in national security discourses.

Most pertinent to my analysis is the realist tenet that considers states, rather than individuals or internal groups, as the sole actors in the international system. States are treated as black boxes, and realism is concerned with the balance of power and relationships between these boxes. The distinct internal composition of these boxes — populations of men and women, human insecurity, political motivations, economic interests, and human rights observance — is not relevant to realist theory that examines state behaviors and interactions in an anarchic international system. Realism observes states, and therefore a realist may argue that the security of women is not within its realm of jurisdiction or applicability.

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

Not only is security highly political, but it is also highly gendered. Within the state-centric framework of realism lies an academic space that is devoid of women; ignorant of gender's pervasiveness in war, peace, and security; and unaccepting of structural inequalities that maintain the status quo. Because

gender personifies specific relationships of power, it cannot be disassociated from security studies and realist theories engaging with the same power dynamics and transitions.⁸ Disaggregation of gender within the IR discipline is irresponsible and willfully ignorant, yet feminists still struggle to be taken seriously in their efforts to highlight women's invisibility in the security sphere.

Feminist pundit Cynthia Enloe would raise the essential question that realists fail to ask: "where are the women?"⁹ The sad reality of realism is that the theory was constructed and directed by elite, white, male practitioners and has maintained theoretical supremacy due to its constructors' privileged access to power. Women are neither on the drawing board nor are they a subject of deliberation. Even the title that the founder of neorealism, Kenneth Waltz, gave his first book, *Man, the State, and War*, signals to the glaring absence of women as endowers, creators, or recipients of security.¹⁰ The hyper-masculinity of realism is clear in the "patriarchal discourse that renders women invisible from the high politics of IR even as it depends on women's subjugation."¹¹

Realism's exclusion of women and gender is no more an academic injustice than it is a reflection of society's ingrained structural practice of oppressing women socially, economically, and politically. Despite its function as a forum for analyzing power balances, realism is criticized, ironically, by some feminists in IR as a product and enabler of power imbalances that honor men in political and academic roles but disempower women and their access to similar positions. Such perpetuated exclusion of women from roles of authority and decision-making can be attributed to the "extent to which international politics is such a thoroughly masculinized sphere of activity that women's voices are considered inauthentic."¹²

Realists and feminists alike agree that power is a relative and relational construct honed by the few who wield it for political purposes. However, feminist scholars would further argue that power is gendered and contrived within a patriarchal hierarchy that endows political, social, and economic privileges to men through the depreciation of women's relative status as inferior. Security and politics exist in the public sphere dominated by men, while women are only allocated space in the private, domestic sphere that are deemed politically irrelevant.¹³ Nira Yuval-Davis explains that there is a division of "society into the public and private domains. Since nationalism and nations have usually been discussed as part of the public political sphere, the exclusion of women from the arena has affected their exclusion from that discourse as well."¹⁴ However, to marginalize women's security as merely "women's issues" or "special interests" is an egregious fallacy that diminishes the efficacy of security policy. Recalling Buzan's definition of security as a political tool to attract policy attention, feminist theory would argue that the inclusion and legitimization of women's security within national and international security discourse are imperative to warrant the necessary attention and action promised to citizens by states.

UTILITY OF A FEMINIST SECURITY THEORY (FST)

This paper argues for the utility of a feminist security theory (FST) that is developed from the intersection of feminism and the transnational security agenda. Theoretical lacunae exist in the security field because feminist theory is often granted only peripheral prioritization or no priority at all. FST is necessitated by the IR community's anemic effort to appropriate academic space to the nexus of security and feminism. These gaps in policy and discourse have begun to shrink, because "FST has subverted, expanded, and enriched notions of security" by questioning "the supposed nonexistence and irrelevance of women in international security politics," as well as "the extent to which women are secured by state 'protection' in times of war and peace."¹⁵

Within the nexus of feminist theory and a transnational security agenda, the dichotomy between traditional state security and newer notions of human security creates an evident aperture in feminist rhetoric and practiced security policy. Heidi Hudson describes her feminist perspective of the politics of security, stating:

Today, more than ever, human security coexists uneasily with security. Since the analytical potential of feminist epistemology cannot be divorced from its political and transformative value, a critical feminist perspective on the study of security, and especially human security, is crucial to overcome certain gender silences. Feminist critiques of so-called natural or depoliticized gender dichotomies within state-centric discourse delegitimize discriminatory practices and institutions as socio-historical constructions and 'repoliticize' orthodox views of security by challenging the role of the state as provider of security. Gender is intrinsic to the subject matter and politics of security.¹⁶

A critical gender lens is imperative in identifying the power disparities that threaten women's peace and security, which may otherwise go undetected or unchallenged by mainstream IR analysis. In the absence of feminist deconstruction, the gendered natures of war, peace, and security may not be exposed and recognized as products of the inherently gendered societies within which they occur. Without exposing this cycle, peace and security are compromised for all. Blanchard identifies "the functions of feminist scholarship in any disciplinary intervention—the critique of existing theory, the reconceptualization of core concepts, and the expansion of empirical knowledge."¹⁷ It is not until realism's assumptions about security are countered by feminism's inclination to question the root of all assumptions that the biases inhibiting inclusive security can be identified and expunged.

A disjunction in discourse and policy has emerged as a result of the incongruity between mainstream IR approaches to state security and feminist approaches to human security. I argue that advocacy efforts for human security, such as the security of women in war, are annulled and objectives are misrepresented when conducted in political institutions grounded in state security. This is due to the differences in how insecurities are perceived by proponents of human security and by bodies that are mandated to protect state security and interests. The utility of a security theory that employs a feminist lens rests in its keen dismissal of the status quo. The essence of realism—focusing on “what is” and not “what should be”—implies a dedication to status quo maintenance. Realists accept the international structures in existence under the assumption that what exists is unequivocally normative. Security, as it is interpreted by IR policymakers, suggests the necessary return to the status quo following a deviation from the norm. That which is deemed “insecure” is classified as such by its perceived abnormality—and thus its threat to the status quo. Therefore, the “task of feminist analysis—rendering the familiar strange, in this case by problematizing the naturalness of ‘security’” instigates scrutiny of classifications of security and insecurity.¹⁸ If states protect women during war from insecurity (identified as abnormal harms), what does that imply about states’ recognition of the daily harms occurring in times of peace that have been normalized within the contexts of a patriarchal society?

I have illustrated the backdrop of realism and security studies to contextualize the framework within which feminist theory strives to broaden traditional security discourse. Through an array of reviewed literature, I have contextualized two theories to war, peace, and security: the mainstream realist approach focused on state security and the peripheral feminist approach interested in human security. By challenging the assumptions of realism, feminists problematize the status quo and question patriarchal structures to demand “where are the women?” Some scholars have argued for the necessary merger of the two theories into a feminist security theory to effectively address and combat the insecurities threatening peace and propagating conflict. Rethinking security with a feminist lens creates new analytical tools to assess existing policies in determining who is intended to receive protection from state-sanctioned security measures? Furthermore, from which insecurities are they protected?

UN Security Council Resolution 1820—the second WPS resolution—is as an apt example for considering the apparent disjunction between feminist expectations of peace and security intended by the WPS agenda and more normative interpretations of peace and security that are upheld by the Security Council. The WPS agenda is an important example for interrogating discourse at the nexus of gender and security because it has been commended as an achievement of feminist collaboration with the Security Council in addition to

exhibiting the broader challenges of humanizing security within a state-centric body.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL: A CASE IN NAVIGATING WOMEN'S SECURITY

Why is the UN a practical setting for exploring this subject? Although there is no international hierarchy, the UN is the most globally overarching institution extending influence to 193 member nations. While the UN may not have an army to enforce the decision of its member states, its power rests in its ability to mold norms and influence behavior. Therefore, it is an extraordinary advancement in women's security that the Security Council, "the center of UN power and primary decision-making body in the area of international peace and security," has adopted a gender perspective through the WPS agenda to include and represent women in conflict resolution and peace processes.¹⁹ Natalie Hudson sums up the significance, stating "the world's largest international organization has now publicly declared that attention to women and gender is integral to 'doing security'."²⁰

The Security Council's acknowledgement that threats to women are interconnected with threats to international peace and security—while welcome and praised by most—has been implemented through a narrow focus on sexual violence against women. Calling the strong "grip of sexual violence" a prevalent theme given "relentless attention" by UN Security Council Resolutions, Karen Engle questions why feminist discussions about security for women have been tethered to the horrors of sexual violence—just one point on the broader spectrum of harms women endure before, during, and after conflict.²¹ Through resolutions on gendered security and the WPS movement, the Security Council has become a platform for banning violence against women during war and condemning strategic rape, believed widely to be a "fate worse than death."²² These incremental successes of feminists in integrating a gender element into Security Council discourse are not without their disadvantages and criticism. The heightened attention of sexual violence by the Security Council is an exemplary result of feminist efforts to advocate for recognition of the gendered ways in which women suffer during wartime; however, it may reinforce shame of rape, emphasize victimization, and overlook the continuum of violence.

CRITIQUING THE SECURITY COUNCIL: CAN FEMINISTS WORK WITH THE MASTER'S TOOLS?

Feminist activists are confronted by a catch-22 in their quest for visibility and legitimacy in the security field. By working from within the Security Council to reimagine the very concepts of security that are maintained by the

Council, feminist objectives are stunted by the unavoidable paradox that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”²³ While many feminists recognize that a partnership of values with the Security Council is a strategic pursuit in securing legitimacy for women’s voices, they are also cognizant of the fact that the Security Council has the authority to grant legitimacy because it is a patriarchal organization. This liaison between feminists and the Security Council is problematic in that the UN’s interpretation of security results in the targeting of strategic rape as the pinnacle of women’s vulnerabilities within the scope of war; meanwhile feminists recognize a broader spectrum of harms that occur in a continuum of violence before, during, and after war in both the private and public spheres. Although the Security Council has implemented feminist objectives to recognize certain gendered effects of conflict, the state-centric security framework reinforces that private (apolitical) violence against women is not a security concern when it occurs outside public (political) violence in wartime, suggesting that state security is prioritized above human security.

Diane Otto questions the efficacy of what she calls the “alliance of gender legitimacy’ between the Security Council and international women’s peace advocates.”²⁴ This alliance is described as two-pronged: “the Security Council’s response to its waning legitimacy” throughout the 1990s “has been to rebuild its ‘symbolic capital’” through adoption of human security resolutions, while feminist activists simultaneously adopted “a new strategy of engagement with power from within rather than from outside the military and diplomatic establishment.”²⁵ The compromise of feminist values in return for exposure and legitimacy on a popular platform is a serious detriment to this alliance, despite the considerable progress that has been made by Resolution 1325 and subsequent WPS resolutions. Otto highlights that the “aspects of the Council’s modus operandi that are inconsistent with feminist ideas” present structural limitations to “the extent to which the alliance of gender legitimacy between the Security Council and women’s peace advocates provides yet another lesson in the futility of engaging the master’ tools.”²⁶

CONSIDERING UNSC RESOLUTION 1820

Because the UN has been mandated to maintain international peace and security since its inception, it is a logical assumption that Resolution 1820 reflects the organization’s function of ensuring security for its member states. Adopted in 2008, para. 1 of UNSCR 1820:

Stresses that sexual violence, when used or commissioned as a tactic of war in order to deliberately target civilians or as a part of a widespread or systematic attack against civilian populations,

*can significantly exacerbate situations of armed conflict and may impede the restoration of international peace and security, affirms in this regard that effective steps to prevent and respond to such acts of sexual violence can significantly contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security ...*²⁷

According to this passage in Resolution 1820, the Security Council ascertains that sexual violence threatens international security when it occurs specifically as a systematic tactic of war. The Resolution differentiates strategic rape, thus granting it weighted significance over mass sexual violence as a threat to peace and security. Why is security impacted by strategic rape and not mass rape or “normal” incidents of rape that occur during peacetime?

Analyzing the security criteria in Resolution 1820, indicates the Security Council’s inclination to protect the state security over human security. FST seeks to expand on broader harms affecting women before, during, and after a war that are disregarded by the resolution. The Security Council operates on a narrow definition of security—one informed by patriarchal states’ interests—to persecute only certain tactical rapes deemed “bad,” because they are strategies of war employed against the state. Reference to “systematic” or “strategic” rapes implies the purpose of that violence, not its quantified occurrence.²⁸ Thus, it is the motive of the violation against women at the heart of Resolution 1820’s objective rather than the sexual violence itself. If strategic rape is a threat to security, is it because it is an instrument used by men against men to destabilize the state? Is non-strategic rape during war classified as less threatening to peace and security because it occurs normatively during peacetime and represents a continuum of violence? Instances of private violence against women occur on a regular basis, but when rape transitions into the public, political sphere of war it becomes abnormal and thus a threat to security. As stated above, the theory is that insecurity is relative to normative behaviors; therefore, deviations from normalized threats to women’s security, such through strategic rape used as a “weapon or war,” become threats to state security.

This weighted measure of injustice and insecurity indicates that it does matter who perpetrates rape, why it is perpetrated, and whether it occurs in the public or private sphere—highlighting the fact that the Security Council is not addressing violence against women in war as a human security concern but rather is concerned primarily with strategic rape because it threatens the state’s status quo. Resolution 1820 asserts that it matters when soldiers use women’s bodies as a vehicle for violent communication to a political foe in systematic rape, but not when men who happen to be soldiers rape women because they have the power to rape. The distinction is that the former example resonates with the Security Council as a threat because it only occurs in times of conflict, while the latter example exists in a continuum of violence that precedes and

follows conflict. In conjunction with Keen's statement that "the label war is often one that conceals as much as it reveals,"²⁹ a feminist lens applied to strategic rape reveals that "harm is not harmed when it occurs frequently."³⁰ To reveal that rape is a threat to peace and security when it is used as a weapon of war is also to conceal that continuous violence, both sexual and non-sexual, against women pervades societies even before they become settings of conflict.

If the Security Council is concerned about the functionality of rape in war because it impedes peace and security, then why do broader harms against women during conflict not threaten peace and security? The ranking of strategic rape in war as more subversive than other forms of sexual violence or non-sexual harms suggests a hierarchy of harms prescribed by the Security Council in Resolution 1820. Within this hierarchy, the male-dominated state rests at the top and determines that the worst harm, the harm worthy of ultimate condemnation by the Security Council, is the one incorporating them. The hierarchy of power in everyday patriarchal society manages to emanate into the hierarchy of harms to continue dominating women and to claim agency over the harms they endure. A feminist analysis of sexual violence in war illustrates that gendered violence in conflict is an exacerbated extension of the pervasive power disparities oppressing women socially, economically, and politically.

A hierarchy of harm is enabled and sustained through Resolution 1820 and similar rhetoric connecting women's experiences in conflict solely to experiences of sexual violence. Aisling Swaine states that in "capturing and focusing predominantly on strategic rape, international legal and policy paradigms (such as the series of UN Security Council's resolutions on this issue), have, in fact, operated to perpetuate the paradigm's foundational hierarchy."³¹ Emphasizing the paradigm that rape is the most egregious harm women can suffer during war is misleading because it generalizes each woman's experience and fails to consider that "strategic rape might not be the predominant form of violence that women experience during conflict."³² Acknowledging the breadth of harms that women endure matters because it should ultimately be women who define their harms, not the Security Council.

Despite groundbreaking progress in policy responses to strategic rape within legitimate international organizations, this progress in identifying one specific harm does not indicate that a feminist view of security—one that is sensitive to the continuum of violence encountered by women—has been indoctrinated into the Security Council, nor that the council prioritizes women's security over the security of the state. Normative continuums of violence against women continue to be part of the status quo, implying that to attack the continuum is to attack the state and its structural dependence on patriarchy. Alluding to the previously theorized normative notion that security is achieved through the maintenance of the status quo, state security is achieved through institutionalized continuums of violence against women and

dependence on power imbalances favoring men. By aiming to protect women from systematic rape during conflict, but not from broader harms represented in a continuum of violence, Resolution 1820 signals the Security Council's intention to return states in conflict to their pre-conflict status quo—even if that means restoring an environment in which women are not protected by the state from violence, insecurity, and broader harms. If the Security Council were to stray from this deeply ingrained status quo and prioritize women's security over the patriarchy's security, it would risk undermining itself as a patriarchal institution reliant on states.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an analysis of the challenges feminists face in navigating the existing security field and promotes the legitimization of a FST. While there have been many policy breakthroughs in the 21st century, the need for a feminist security agenda is still evident and urgent. It is crucial that women increasingly participate in and contribute to the transnational security agenda, with the goal of achieving a broader, more inclusive concept of security for everyone.

This analysis of feminist security navigation, has uncovered several findings concerning the current state of security policy. The Security Council emphasizes strategic rape during conflict because it is perceived as a threat to the state, the security of which is prioritized over women's security due to the institution's masculine structure. Resolution 1820 does not convey grave concerns over the broader range of harms suffered by women in wartime, nor does it consider the continuum of violence that signals pre-existing violence against women in patriarchal societies. Despite the "alliance of gender legitimacy" orchestrated between feminist activists and the Security Council, the patriarchal superiority of men, the state, and war is deeply ingrained in the structure of the council and inhibits policymaking that reflects feminist security objectives. The potential for a productive symbiosis of an IR-feminist theory merger has unfortunately been challenged and undermined by the status-quo-seeking systems in place. Progress has been achieved with the WPS agenda, but it has been built with "tools" loaned out by a "master" who controls the direction and extent of women's security policy. This conclusion regrettably sustains Nira Yuval-Davis' claim that "it is not the exchange of women, but their control, which is so often at the base of social order."³³

In conclusion, feminist navigation through mainstream security forums continues to be confronted and undermined by patriarchal institutional structures. This analysis is rather discouraging—both for the potential of a fruitful relationship between feminists and the Security Council as well as for the prospect of the council serving as a locale conducive to progressive

interpretations of security. My analysis reflects that the largest international organization in the world and the dominant theory guiding IR are both hyper-masculine, they were both conceived by and for the patriarchy, and they both value the maintenance of the status quo. Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State, and War* still wields strong influence in the international security sphere, but I propose that a revised interest in "Woman, the State, and War" would offer a far more comprehensive approach to maintaining international peace and security. Only with the legitimization of feminist theory in security studies, along with all other fields, can these challenges be identified, problematized, and eventually remedied.

ENDNOTES

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