

Book Reviews

Feminists under Fire: Exchanges across War Zones



Wenona Giles, Malathi de Alwis, Edith Klein, Neluka Silva, editors
Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003

Times of war in areas of conflict are times of ruptures in traditional patriarchal structures, times when women, as secondary political players, are most vulnerable to the circumstances of war. And yet war situations sometimes enable women to surpass traditional feminine roles and thus to empower themselves, both personally and communally. War brings upon women destruction, displacement, death of husbands and children, rape, poverty, hunger, and other tragic consequences. The majority of women in war zones are victims of policies they have not voted for. But women's resilience, survival skills, and capacity to organize networks of support all enhance and empower their communities to make changes in their own lives. Feminist responses to war situations vary from rejection of war (for example, the organization Women in Black), to support of war in the rear, to recruitment to fighting forces, to name just a few positions. But all feminists tackle wars as patriarchal constructs, and their engagements with armed conflicts (whether in support or in opposition) are filtered through gender divides that are only heightened in war situations.

Nationalist movements have tended to use women as metaphors for the nation: the mother of the nation, the one who instills the mother tongue and the love of the nation in her fighter son. But in times of war, women are also used as the symbolic victims of enemy violence. Rape by the enemy (which has finally been defined as a war crime by the Statute of the International Criminal Court) is used by men on all sides of a conflict as a measure to humiliate and weaken the position of women in war situations. Symbolically, women are raped by the "enemy" only if their men cannot protect them. Furthermore, the phenomenon of forced pregnancies through rape (which was a war tactic both in Rwanda and in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s) situates the woman as the carrier of a mixed race/ethnicity/nationality bastard. Ethnic or national purity, in the patriarchal configuration, postulates the woman as a helpless prop that can be manipulated by the "enemy," as a sign of the emasculation of her original nation. While nationalist liberation movements from Algeria to India to Israel

incorporated women as fighters or in other active roles, these momentary inclusions were generally conducted when they suited the (otherwise) patriarchal goals of the mostly male leadership. Furthermore, once independence was achieved, these movements rarely incorporated women as equals in the new nation-state institutions. As a result, most feminists treat the nationalist project with suspicion at best, although some feminist organizations do recruit themselves to nationalist projects in numerous ways.

How does one come to account for, and analyze from a feminist perspective, the variety of experiences and positions women take, and are positioned in, during wartime and in war zones? This edited collection emerges as the outcome of a multiyear project in which women from two war zones (Sri Lanka and the region of the former Yugoslavia) not only met and discussed the academic aspects of the various conditions and experiences of women in war zones, but also shared skills from operating activist organizations, as well as ways to empower and learn from this comparative project. As such, the book is diverse in its forms of writing and varied in the topics that it engages. Some articles investigate an issue, some report on strategies developed or on data collected, while others describe the emergence of various institutions and their contexts or conduct interviews with activists. The book is necessarily diverse and uneven in its form, but since this is a reflection of the heterocultural conditions of the lives of the authors, I would consider its conglomerate nature an asset rather than a shortcoming. The editors go to great lengths to remind the reader of the many differences in war experiences, class, ethnicity, access to media, agency, and more in the different societies in which these women authors live and work. At the same time, the book as a whole shows that some commonalities exist, and thus the comparative project is justified not so much theoretically as organically. What is common to all the writers is that as feminists they see a continuum from gender-based violence in their own societies to war against an external "enemy." As such, the majority of writers seem to be anti-nationalist, although that does not mean that

they are not national subjects, a position to which they own, especially in accounting for communication with women from the “other” side. The authors also recognize that the assumption that women are oriented towards peace is not always correct, as women soldiers so well exemplify.

The book is organized in four parts, the first of which includes the introduction by Wenona Giles, followed by two overview essays to set up the historical and political context. The first, by Malathi de Alwis, discusses gender and ethnicity in Sri Lanka, and the second, by Maja Korac, women’s organization against ethnic war in the post-Yugoslav states. In different terms, both articles set up the questions or areas of operation — loci that the rest of the articles engage with more specifically: women’s roles in their society, ethnic violence, gender violence, war, communism, religion, and, most importantly, the sense of how complex and specific are the results of these conjunctions on actual women’s experiences.

Part 1 is entitled “Ethnic Nationalism and the Militarization of Women.” It includes articles on Women in Black by Lepa Mladjenovic, feminist politics in Serbia by Zarana Papic, Sri Lankan women militants by Neloufer de Mel, and gender in the Croatian media war by Djurdja Knezevic. The last two essays in particular focus on ways in which women’s actions expose the fissures in the patriarchal system, but are also penalized for challenging that very nationalist patriarchy. De Mel claims that the woman fighter in Sri Lanka is accepted, but contained in numerous ways, rarely reaching any position of real power in the political and militaristic system. More importantly, it is suggested that her inclusion is temporary, until the war is over, at which time she will return to her traditional role as mother. In Croatia, the media ignored and demonized an American tour (Mother Courage) of Croatian and Serbian women peace activists. The women were accused of being dangerous to the nationalist cause. The state organized a competing tour of nationalist women, which was widely covered by Croatian media. These articles show that women’s agency and initiatives are often negatively sanctioned by state or community institutions, particularly if they do not fit a nationalist image that accepts them only as mothers and victims but instead promote a feminist agenda.

Part 2, entitled “Gendered Violence in Times of Conflict,” deals with trauma (particularly rape) and how it is treated and manipulated in the communities discussed. Radhika Coomaraswamy theorizes the issue of honour from her own experiences as the special rapporteur on violence against women to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Duska Andric-Ruzicic analyzes the political manipulation of war rape victims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Ananda Galappatti shows how the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is used to categorize and group together women in Sri Lanka, and Selvy

Thiruchandran looks at the psychological and socio-economic challenges of post-war households in Sri Lanka. The articles in this section show the diverse ways in which women are grouped together to symbolize their victimhood, rather than provided with the help they need as individuals. Coomaraswamy, in particular, identifies a typology of roles that are imposed on women who experienced war violence, and her article poignantly calls for change in the emphasis on ethnic purity, amongst other restrictions on women’s sexuality, so as to enable women to recover from rape in particular, and violence in general, and heal the society in general.

The last part of the anthology is dedicated to cultures of resistance. Neluka Silva discusses the (new) representation of intermarriage in Sri Lankan teledramas, showing that the topic is acknowledged but ultimately presented as less than desirable and carrying a high price for the couples involved. In a painfully introspective article by Lapa Mladjenovic, the issue of pacifism is interrogated at full force. The general tendency of many post-Yugoslav feminists towards anti-militarism was challenged when the issue of international military intervention was discussed, both in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995 and in Kosava in 1998-99. Mladjenovic’s essay reminds us how principled ethics can clash with daily realities of friends and neighbours, demanding a stance that is irresolvable ideologically or emotionally. Kumudini Samuel shows how Sri Lankan women used their motherhood as an activist tactic in making political demands, but how that position, while yielding some *ad hoc* results, helped perpetuate their subversive position in social structures. Elissa Helms discusses gender essentialisms and women’s activism in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Wenona Giles interviews long-time activist and academic Kumari Jayawardena. Finally, the editors provide some afterthoughts to the book and the project, which illuminate a list of areas of concern and future directions for research and attention. To name just a couple, it is important to note that women’s peace activism rarely translates into peace negotiations and post-conflict institutions; and the complex relationship between class and nationalism, which has great implications for gender, is rarely discussed.

The greatest strength of the articles in this collection is that they articulate their theoretical concerns from a localized but well-informed perspective. Their claims then are grounded in specific historical circumstances. Thus, in line with third-wave feminism, these articles, while rarely written in the first person, never efface the positionality of their authors *vis-à-vis* the material they write about. But at the same time, when read together, these articles form a jigsaw puzzle where the constancy of some issues emerges above and beyond the diversity in regions and conditions of war.

The weakness in this anthology, as in the underlying project, is that, in its attempt to provide a comparative analysis, it is unclear why Sri Lanka and the former Yugoslavia were chosen as the regions of study. The (somewhat cumbersome) introduction attempts to justify the comparative project, despite the many differences, but never explains why regions like Palestine and Rwanda were not included. The project was hosted by York University in Toronto, and neither the introduction nor the essays discuss the geopolitical role and function of this location as facilitator. Finally, reading the anthology is both utterly painful and inspiring. Not only are the effects of war so devastating, but

the general inability of feminists to penetrate political processes in significant ways is worrisome. At the same time the hope, perseverance, and initiatives discussed in the book are inspiring, and should pave the way to thinking and working towards deeper and necessary social changes.

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Problems of Protection: The UNHCR, Refugees and Human Rights



Niklaus Steiner, Mark Gibney and Gil Loescher, Editors
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Fiftieth anniversaries are traditionally celebrated with gifts of gold. However, in the case of the UNHCR and the 1951 Convention, the gift of choice appears to be paper: pages and pages of paper filled with opinions on the past, present and future of refugee protection. One of the most recent gifts of this sort, *Problems of Protection: The UNHCR, Refugees and Human Rights*, edited by Niklaus Steiner, Mark Gibney, and Gil Loescher, attempts to offer a critical assessment of the past half-century of refugee protection under UNHCR.

The Problems of Protection is an outgrowth of a conference held at the University of North Carolina in the spring of 2000. The thirteen essays that make up the book are grouped, by subject matter, into five sections: definitional issues, ethical issues, legal and institutional issues, policy issues, and the post-September 11 context of refugee protection. The essays in the last section were obviously commissioned subsequent to the conference and show less evidence of being part of the “ongoing dialogue” that informed the other essays.

Arthur Helton and Gil Loescher provide the opening two essays, both related to the definitional issue of the meaning of “refugee protection” – and the related topic of UNHCR’s diminishing interest in the subject. Loescher traces the erosion of the UNHCR’s protective mandate to the politicization that was entailed by the expansion of its mandate since the dying years of the Cold War. While Helton does not dispute this premise, he nonetheless professes hope that the expanded mandate of the UNHCR can enhance its ability to “proactively” assist those in need of protection. Ultimately, both authors argue that only greater resources and political

attention, by both the UNHCR and its funders, can refocus the UNHCR on its mandate to protect refugees.

In a sense, the subsequent “dialogue” of the book can be framed in terms of Helton’s and Loescher’s subtly diverging views on the central actor in refugee protection: the UNHCR or a statist international community. Loescher acknowledges the UNHCR as both a mechanism through which states act and as “a principal actor” in its own right. Notwithstanding this dualism, he addresses his concerns to the UNHCR *qua* principal actor:

UNHCR is not a static organization but has constantly changed and evolved over the past fifty years. Dramatic and bold steps should now be taken to revitalize UNHCR’s primary role as the protector of refugees and the guardian of asylum worldwide.¹

While Helton shares Loescher’s concern about UNHCR’s declining attention to the protection of refugees, his prescription favours UNHCR’s alternate persona: UNHCR *qua* a mechanism through which states act (or, in this case, fail to act). This approach is perhaps based in Helton’s understanding of the statist nature of the 1951 Convention and his oft-quoted premise that “when we speak of ‘protection’ we mean *legal* protection.”² In keeping with his approach, Helton’s examples of “proactive” refugee policies (particularly his proposal for a meeting of state “stakeholders” to resolve the West African refugee crisis) all involve increased action by the “international community” (read: state actors and subcontracted NGOs).³

The agent-versus-actor dichotomy expressed by, respectively, Helton and Loescher repeats itself throughout the