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The US Policy on Women, Peace and Security: Feminist Empowerment or Masculinist Protection?

PANEL: Redressing Patriarchal Pain, UCLA

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The US Policy on Women, Peace and Security: Feminist Empowerment or Masculinist Protection?

The United States Government has been concerned about Third World Women for some time now, especially since the terrorist attack of 9/11. The US Government has been interested in these women in a very particular way feeling a sort of political mission to save them from their oppressive men and culture. This attitude has already been interrogated and criticized by many feminist scholars (Ferguson 2007 et al) and hence, in my research I focus on a different approach deriving from the UNSC Resolution 1325 (2000) aiming to empower women in conflict and postconflict settings.

This paper critically looks at the US policy on Resolution 1325 from a transnational feminist perspective. I use the What’s the Problem Represented to Be?-approach to the interrogation of a selection of US policy documents. The research question of the paper is as follows: Can this policy be regarded as feminist empowerment? Or is it rather organized according to the logic of masculinist protection?

Theoretical Framework, Methodology & Data

The point of departure for this paper is the UN Resolution 1325 – the first document putting women and war issues on the table of the UN Security Council (Barnes 2011). Resolution 1325 was introduced in October 2000, nearly a year before the terrorist attack of 9/11. What was so remarkable about this resolution (which is nowadays the most often quoted document on women and armed conflict), is that this document promises to address women differently, that is not only as victims. Resolution 1325, as well as its daughters’ resolutions, recognizes that war and armed conflicts affect women differently and, as a result, often put them in a vulnerable position. These
resolutions diagnose, for instance, the destructions caused by sexual and gender based violence on women, and the use of rape as a tactic of war. However, Resolution 1325 goes beyond that. It is, first and foremost, a resolution aiming to empower women, where “empowering women” means, to put it briefly, increasing women’s participation and representation in conflict prevention and in all peace processes. Thus, Resolution 1325 aims to consider women not only as the victims of war but, more importantly, as contributors to peace efforts (Barnes 2011).

One of the very fundamental objectives of Resolution 1325 is to encourage the UN Member States to develop national implementation documents. Therefore, this paper refers to a few main findings based on the critical textual analysis of the United States National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2011) as well as the action plans recently introduced by the Department of State (DoS, 2012) and the Agency for International Development (USAID, 2012). However, first I will briefly introduce my methodology.

My analysis refers to the approach of Carol Lee Bacchi called “What’s the Problem Represented to Be?” (Bacchi 2009). This methodology, inspired by the achievements of poststructuralism, social constructionism, governmentality studies and feminist body theory, includes several questions which draw on the problem representations in a particular policy. Traditional approaches consider a policy as addressing and solving an identifiable problem that exists before and outside this policy, and they work according to the pattern: there is a problem – we need to find and fix it – so we invent a policy which will solve this problem. Furthermore, these conventional approaches usually focus on implementation difficulties: a policy proposes a change in order to solve a problem, and the research question is: How well is the policy implemented? What are the obstacles on the way to full implementation of the policy? On the contrary, What’s the Problem Represented to Be?-approach starts in a different place. This
Methodology recognizes policies not as reactive (as it was in the case of conventional approaches: a policy was a reaction to a problem) but as productive (a policy actually produces, constitutes and shapes the meaning of the problem to be addressed) (Bacchi 2009). When investigating the problem representation of a particular policy, Bacchi proposes to critically research the presuppositions which enabled this representation as well as its possible implications and effects (discursive effects, subjectification effects and lived effects). Nevertheless, this interrogation is not concerned with intentionality, and leaves out the intentions of political actors (Bacchi 2009). Following Bacchi’s approach I will critically look at the problem representation in the US policy on women, peace and security.

**Dis)empowerment and (in)security**

Analyzing the US policy documents on Resolution 1325, we can distinguish two central issues: international security problem and women’s general disempowerment; this paper concentrates only on these two issues and the possible relationship between them. Starting with the last, women’s disempowerment seems to be represented as a two-folded problem: firstly, women are abused in the situation of armed conflict and war, and secondly, they are excluded from peace processes. Violence against women, and particularly sexual and gender based violence, persists before, throughout and after armed conflicts, and at the same time, women’s voices are not listened to: neither their early warnings of approaching conflicts, nor the articulation of their needs in peacebuilding and reconstruction processes. The aim of the US policy is, thus, to integrate a gender perspective in all peace efforts: to protect women from violence and to include women’s different considerations and experiences into peace processes (n.b. “a gender perspective” apparently refers to women exclusively).
The exclusion and the abuse of women seem to be underlain by the assumption of existence of (a) violent actor(s) responsible for the harm. Who is he or who are they? Traditionally, in feminist analysis “they” represents men. “They”, however, appears not to refer to “all men” in this case. The violent “they” would rather relate to Third World Men, since only few remarks are drawn on the potential violence performed by male peacekeepers. On the contrary, in this dichotomy “them”-“us” (where “us” would have double reference on different levels) the existence of the violent “they” would simultaneously evoke the presence of “their” opposite – some chivalrous “us” whose aim is to empower those women. This reminds a lot Spivak’s “white men protecting brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988).

The will of the US Government to empower the Third World Women brings me to the other central issue of this policy: the security problem. The goal of empowering women as represented in the policy documents seems to be rather a question of global security than of gender equality or democratic priorities. Although the concept of security is neither explained nor problematized, security is apparently considered a necessarily “good thing”. However, any concept of security refers, on the one hand, to some kind of danger or threat (which may be embodied here in the Third World Men), and on the other hand, to the concept of insecurity, where security and insecurity function as gendered binaries: while the first is masculinized (masculinity is to provide security), the second is feminized (femininity is to be protected) (Wibben 2011). Feminist security studies challenged the belief in the concept of “security for all” showing that security for some might be predicated upon insecurity for others (Wibben 2011). Therefore, the important question to ask is: Whose security matters? (Wibben 2011).

Anyhow, the US policy documents point out to the necessity of empowering women in order to achieve and maintain global security. The way in which these women can be empowered seems,
however, to be quite limited: they are to be empowered as “meaningful participants”. This rather vague expression can refer to particular subjects named by some feminist scholars “peaceful mothers” (Shepherd 2008 et al): feminine and caring Third World Women where womanhood is associated with inherent peacefulness. The Third World Women empowered as such subjects could be interpreted as a sort of desirable medium between the Third World and the First World. Their inclusion would ensure achieving lasting peace and stability, on the one hand, and maintain the status quo of the (postcolonial) relationship between the First and the Third World, on the other (Puechguirbal 2010).

**Conclusions**

Since feminist scholars have been interested in gender and war issues, masculinity is mainly associated with (physical) violence, whereas not enough attention was given to the concept of masculinity as the protection of women (although it might be as violent). These men are often considered chivalrous, loving and self-sacrificing as they provide security for women (Young 2003). However, "[t]he heavy price of institutionalized protection is always a measure of dependence and agreement to abide by the protector's rules" (Brown 1995: 167).

This may be considered a very particular way of empowering women, empowering under specific conditions, according to certain rules and as particular subjects. The relationship of masculinist protection (which is also a postcolonial relationship) may, as a result, take away the autonomy of those women and put it in the hands of foreign governments and the international community. Producing women as such subjects may in the end lead to reinforcing gender inequalities instead of reducing them.
To sum up, the US policy documents on women, peace and security can be very powerful but not only in the sense feminist researchers and activists prayed for. Instead of empowering women by supporting their autonomy and decision-making, they could institutionalize the relationship between the Third World Women and the First World Men according to the rule of masculinist protection. Consequently, they would produce relationships between the First World and the Third World based on the dependence and obedience of the latter, and reproduce the postcolonial hegemony of the former. What we can observe now is that this security discourse originating from the US actions in the context of post-9/11 has been developed globally. These trends seem to redefine normative context of world politics and to shape the policies on Resolution 1325 in the US and world-wide, which have been organized according to the rule of masculinist protection.
References


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