

# Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies

## **Women, Gender, and Contemporary Armed Conflict**

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Print Publication Date: Mar 2010 Subject: Conflict Studies, Politics and Sexuality and Gender

Online Publication Date: Nov 2017 DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.62

### **Summary and Keywords**

More than twenty years ago, feminist scholars began challenging conventional approaches to the study of war that they accused of being gender blind and excluding women's involvement and experience of conflict. This feminist critique was articulated by Cynthia Enloe in her question "Where are the women?" in reference to the study of conflicts. Since then, numerous scholars have produced works that not only include women in existing accounts of war but also offer radical alternative approaches to the study of war. This body of feminist scholarship has sought to deconstruct and challenge three foundations of mainstream scholarship on armed conflict: equating gender with women or women's issues; conflating women and children together as victims of war; and narrowly defining war as a masculine, public activity with a clear time frame. Feminist scholars such as Judith Butler theorized the concepts of gender and sex in order to complicate feminism beyond "women's studies." Despite these inroads into the way conflict is conceptualized and researched, mainstream approaches to the study of war in the past decade remain resistant to systematic and comprehensive considerations of gender. Recent scholarship presents a broader picture of women's relationship to international conflicts. Feminist scholars demonstrate women's multiple roles within, and impacts on, war; disrupt stereotypes and gendered norms associated with "women's place" during war; and highlight some of the many different ways that women—as soldiers, rebels, and as perpetrators of violence—perform in, and influence war.

Keywords: war, gender, women, armed conflict, Judith Butler, feminism, women's issues, stereotypes

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### **Introduction**

It has been well over two decades since feminist scholars began critiquing conventional approaches to the study of war as being both gender blind and absent of women's involvement and experience of conflict (Enloe 1983; 1993; Sylvester 1990; 1996; Tickner 1992; Cohn 1993). This critique was perhaps voiced most clearly by Cynthia Enloe's famous question: "where are the women?" in reference to the study of conflicts.

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Numerous scholars have taken up the challenge of this question and produced invaluable contributions that not only add women to existing accounts of war but offer dramatically alternative approaches to the study of war. Although scholars have made significant impacts to the way conflict is conceptualized and researched, mainstream approaches to the study of war in the past decade remain resistant to systematic and comprehensive considerations of gender.

Today, feminists' inroads into the study of conflict continue to be blocked by dominant perceptions about war as a hyper-masculine arena (Whitworth 2004). All too often, gender has been sidelined as "women's issues," or generalized into an account of women's experience as victims in conflict. In addition, despite a growing body of literature in the area, female actors in conflict and violent women remain under-researched and under-theorized. Finally, issues that primarily impact females during conflict, such as wartime rape, have received an increased attention in the literature (Schott 1996; Peterson and Runyan 1999; Hansen 2001; Gottschall 2004); however, these issues are more often addressed as a humanitarian or social concerns than security ones (Hansen 2006). Each of these obstacles has contributed to a fundamental problem relating to the study of conflict. That is, the inclusion of gender in this area has frequently amounted to a discussion of the impact of war on women rather than women's impact on war.

This essay surveys and highlights recent scholarship that challenges this trend and demonstrates women's multiple roles within, and impacts on, war. It examines the contributions of feminist international relations scholars to the study of war since Enloe first asked "where are the women?" and provides a picture of the state of the discipline more generally in terms of its treatment of women and war. Stereotypes and gendered norms associated with "women's place" during war are seriously disrupted by scholarship that presents a broader picture of women's relationship to international conflicts. This scholarship also isolates the drawbacks to generalizations about "the impacts of war on women" and instead highlights some of the multiple ways that women perform in, and influence war - including as soldiers, rebels, and as perpetrators of violence.

## **Gender, Feminism, and Women**

Christine Sylvester has identified the following general signposts of feminist theory: it critically probes social theories for marks of gender that have gone unnoticed; it reveals distortions, biases, exclusions, inequalities that may be endemic to arguments, assumptions, and organizations; and it traces how gendered theories appear neutral (Sylvester 1996). Feminist scholarship has served to deconstruct and challenge three foundations of mainstream scholarship on war: equating gender with women or women's issues; conflating women and children together as victims of war; and narrowly defining war as a masculine, public activity with a clear time frame.

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Feminist scholars such as Judith Butler theorized the concepts of gender and sex in order to complicate feminism beyond “women’s studies” (Butler 1990). Despite attempts by scholars to differentiate between a gender perspective and “the study of women,” war remains an area in which gender and women have historically been used interchangeably. Joshua Goldstein’s seminal text *War and Gender*, published in 2001, found that every gender-related index entry in a comprehensive survey of scholarship on war and peace concerned women. Goldstein concluded that, according to the literature, “men still do not have gender” (2001:35). It is not just select scholars that muddle understandings of gender, feminism, and women’s issues. The United Nations, a major advocate for gender mainstreaming and women’s rights and equality, uses the term gender almost exclusively in relation to women. In fact, although [www.un.org/gender](http://www.un.org/gender) and [www.un.org/womenwatch](http://www.un.org/womenwatch) are listed as two separate websites, when you enter the first site you are automatically directed to the second, effectively equating “gender issues” to “women’s issues.”

Recognizing that women and matters pertaining to women have typically been under-represented, under-examined, and in need of advocacy should not excuse the lumping together of an intellectual frame with a category of people. Particularly for policy makers, equating gender with women’s issues means that rather than critically thinking through gender as an analytical category and considering the ways in which institutions and approaches might reinforce specific gender norms and stereotypes, gender becomes exclusively linked to women. The result is that both gender and women remain at the periphery as a “special” sub-category of policy issues.

## Gender Bias, Sexism, and War

As a result of gender-based stereotypes, aid agencies and military and peacekeeping operations have historically based their operations on the assumption that women and children are the most vulnerable victims of conflict. Speaking of girls in particular, Carolyn Nordstrom has pointed out the belief that children “are acted upon; they are listed as casualties – they do not act. They are not presented as having identities, politics, morals, and agendas for war or peace” (Nordstrom 1998:81). There is evidence that women, children, and the elderly are the most represented category of victims in war and are more likely to be uprooted due to conflict and likely to experience sexual violence (Lorentzen and Turpin 1998); however, there is also important research that has considered the detrimental impacts of making generalized assumptions about victims and perpetrators (Carpenter 2006; Sjoberg 2006B; MacKenzie 2009A; see also Bannon and Correia 2006). For example, in “Innocent Women and Children” Charli Carpenter summarizes how, throughout history, women and children have been defined as inherently more vulnerable than males. Carpenter argues that the focus on protecting, evacuating, and providing aid to women and children during times of crisis has actually rendered males – particularly civilian males – susceptible to violence and other forms of insecurity. Laura Sjoberg responded to Carpenter’s analysis with the conclusion that her

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analysis of gender requires a feminist understanding of the roots of the gender biases that are at the foundation of the civilian immunity principle (2006b).

Carpenter aptly demonstrates that men, in addition to women and children, can constitute vulnerable civilians; however, the reverse argument that women, in addition to men, are combatants or perpetrators requires further consideration in the literature more generally. Critical work on women and militant groups and armed movements has revealed the heterogeneous roles that women have played in armed struggles for centuries and their continued participation in modern warfare (Morris 1993; Baksh et al. 2005). Women's participation in armed movements and conflict have taken place over time and in a variety of geographical and cultural contexts, including the Chinese cultural revolution, the resistance to the racist brutality of apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, opposition to Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, and a globalized opposition to the American occupation of Iraq (Carter 1998).

Authors such as Liz Kelly have pointed out that depictions of conflict often focus on "activity, heroism and masculinity" (2000:48). Rather than accepting such portrayals, scholars have begun new conversations about the gendered meanings of war. Questions such as "When is war a war and what constitutes peace from the perspective of women?" (Kelly 2000) and "What is a feminist 'take' on war?" (Cockburn 2000) have reopened debates on the manner in which war is defined and conceptualized. In turn, various gender and feminist perspectives have served to broaden conventional understandings of war and conflict to include factors such as sexual politics and the militarized state (Kelly 2000), colonialism (Mohanty 1998), cyborgs (Haraway 1995), and the intersections of gender, class, and race (Cockburn). By reformulating the meaning of war, feminists have also carved room to create novel theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of war (Sjoberg 2006A).

The broader intellectual and social implications of women's roles during conflict are multiple. Research on women's participation and activities during war can contribute to several extensive theoretical debates both within international relations and between feminist scholars. The first of these debates is one within international relations regarding the value and impact of feminist theory in international relations (see Keohane 1989; 1998; Tickner 1997). Cockburn is not alone in her position that "war cannot be explained, as it normally is, without reference to gender" (2000:7). War is a major focus of international relations; therefore, if women's activity within war is ignored or only partially documented, there is much to be lost for the discipline. Further, if accounts of war continue to be limited by gender biases there is also much to be lost both in terms of research outputs and in terms of ill-advised policy-making.

Another central debate engrossed by the issue of women's participation in conflict is between feminists themselves. For decades feminist scholars have deliberated the extent to which feminism should aim to promote equality or recognize difference. Women's relationship with war has polarized some members of this debate. On one side there are those that argue that women are, by nature, peaceful and are united by their opposition

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to war (Ruddick 1989). Women's historical involvement in peace movements and the low participation rates of women in armed movements are indicated as evidence of the argument that women are essentially different than men in their support of, and response to, war.

Reactions to this position have included the argument that women indeed do participate in war and that women's historically low enrollment in militant groups is more an indication of the patriarchal nature of military institutions than of women's inherent nature (Enloe 1983; 2007). Further, research indicating increasing numbers of women participating not just as supporters of the war but also as aggressive actors and perpetrators of violence (MacKenzie 2009A) problematizes conclusions about essential differences between men and women. Rather than making the case that men and women are, or should be, equal, emerging research encourages an investigation of the nature of militarism, the construction of masculinity and femininity through war, and the economy of power in war.

The global political repercussions of increased evidence of women's multiple activities and roles in conflict are also significant. Given emerging information about women's involvement in conflicts across the globe, including Sierra Leone, Israel, Columbia, and Iraq, political discourses about the major actors in war, as well as policies linked to war, have begun to shift. Current attention to female suicide bombers in the media is merely one example of the pertinence of women's contributions (whether forced or voluntary) to militarized movements (see Sylvester and Parashar 2009). In addition, women's involvement in war has begun to impact recruitment approaches, security measures, truth and reconciliation processes, and post-conflict reconstruction policies.

## Historical Contributions to the Literature on Women and War

### Masculine War and Feminine Peace?

There are multiple sources in the literature on war that make the argument that "men make war, women make peace" (Lorentzen and Turpin 1998:3). Constructions of peaceful, vulnerable women rest on a gendered bifurcation involving two distinct identities: the aggressive, valiant, protective male soldier and the weak, frightened female civilian in need of protection. These two imaginary subjects have become icons in conventional accounts of conflict. Exploring the social norms, the myths, and the assumptions that inform this subject binary is an essential first step in considering the dominant understanding of women's roles in conflict as well as the resistance to notions of female soldiers and violent women.

War, in general, has been described as "a masculine endeavor for which women may serve as victim, spectator, or prize" (D'Amico 1998:119). Masculinity has traditionally been *linked* to traits deemed essential for warfare. In addition, masculinity is partially

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defined by differentiating it from virtues deemed “natural” to the female subject, including compassion, cooperation, and nurturing (Daly 1984; Elshtain 1987; Ruddick 1989; York 1998).

In fact, by some accounts, war is the absolute test of masculinity and manhood and its success becomes defined by soldiers’ ability to distance themselves from “feminine” qualities (Whitworth 2004). Sometimes fueled by Freud’s work on aggressiveness and male hormones, the logic to this approach is that aggressiveness is required for the acts of bravery and chivalry required in warfare; since men have more testosterone, they are more capable of acting out these behaviors (Seifert 1996). Accordingly, women’s lack of testosterone explains their ineptitude in conflict as well as their natural affinity towards peace (Jacoby 2005).

This construction of warfare as a definitively masculine activity is also supported by the presumption that women make up the largest portion of victims and civilians while men constitute the majority of the actors in war. The construction of women as victims in conflict should be read within a larger discursive context that has served to define women and girls as “ideal victims” and men as typical perpetrators or protectors. In particular, in criminology literature, the “ideal victim” is frequently associated with a powerless woman or girl. Esther Madriz describes the stereotypical victim as a respectable woman who is weaker than her attacker and attacked while engaged in a respectable activity and at an appropriate time (Madriz 1997).

Similarly, Nils Christie admits that a helpless woman fits the characteristics of an “ideal victim,” or a person or a category of individuals who – when hit by crime – “most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim” (Christie 1986:18). These discourses inform widespread perceptions of who are typical actors and victims in war. Although historically women and children have been overrepresented as victims in war, this does not mean that they should not be understood *always* and *only* as victims in war.

The notion that women are somehow naturally more peaceful than men is also based on foundational assumptions associated with motherhood and perceived essential oppositional characteristics between men and women. Lene Hansen’s account of identity formation sheds light on the process that takes place in defining the male and female subject: “‘woman’ is defined through a positive *process of linking* emotional, motherly, reliant and simple, but this female series of links is at the same time juxtaposed to the male series of links through a negative *process of differentiation*” (2006:19, emphasis in original). In essence, males are linked to traits deemed essential for warfare, including courage, chivalry, and strength. At the same time male subjects are differentiated from virtues deemed “natural” to the female subject, including compassion and cooperation.

Women’s peaceful nature and their “aversion” to risk (York 1998:21) are often described as stemming from their “natural” capacity as mothers (Griffin 1981; Daly 1984; Ruddick 1989). Jodi York explains: “women [are] inherently concerned about peace because of their special connection to life preservation and moral guardianship” (1998:19). York found that the logic behind notions of peaceful women “relies on the conservative – even

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Victorian - ideal of motherhood, where women function as caring, nurturing and protective moral guides for their children” (1998:19). The work of maternal feminists has helped to construct an image of women as possessing an “essential” life-giving, peaceful nature based on their reproductive capacities (Elshtain 1987). Perhaps the most succinct summary of this argument comes from Elizabeth Cady Stanton: “That great conservator of woman’s love, if permitted to assert itself as it naturally would in freedom against oppression, violence and war, would hold all these destructive forces in check, for woman knows the cost of life better than man does, and not with her consent would one drop of blood ever be shed, one life sacrificed in vain” (1975:64). In effect, roles that are depicted as natural for women during conflict stem from beliefs about their reproductive capacities and their ability to nurture, cooperate, and sustain life. Therefore, instead of soldiering, women’s primary roles during conflict are often described as “wives, girlfriends, and mothers, waiting for their soldiers to return [or] caring for wounded” (Carter 1998:33).

### Quantifying Women’s Peacefulness

There are a multitude of tests and studies aimed at quantifying women’s inherently peaceful nature. For example, studies done in the early 1960s and 1970s found that women within female groups were more likely to form relationships than compete with one another. These types of studies concluded that women were more oriented toward cooperation than achievement in comparison to men (Cattell and Lawson 1962; Constantini and Craik 1972). There are also studies that have found that states with “higher levels of domestic gender equality” are not as prone to violence during conflict compared with states with “lower levels of domestic gender equality” (Tessler and Warriner 1997).

Similar research includes Connie de Boer’s poll on the European peace movement (1985) and Clyde Wilcox et al.’s analysis of the gender gap in attitudes toward the Gulf War (1996). Such analyses have been used to support the thesis that women are less inclined to support and participate in war. The unfortunate by-product of studies and literature that constructs women as “naturally” peaceful is that violent and aggressive women become constructed as unnatural or an aberration from the presumed norm. In effect, the study of women who commit violence can sometimes be seen as the study of exceptions rather than the disruption of traditional gendered norms and typologies associated with sex roles and war.

Another adverse by-product of research arguing that political conflict is “no place for a woman” (York 1998:21) is that it has fueled arguments that women’s natural place in society is in the private, domestic sphere. The construction of women as passive, apolitical, and fundamentally conservative has led to conclusions that women lack the capacities necessary for various types of political activity, including warfare. In turn, women’s perceived placidness and aversion to public clashes sustain traditional

conclusions about women's inability or unwillingness to participate in politics more generally.

### New Directions and Contributions

Although gender historically has been left as an afterthought or a side note to so-called "harder" international relations issues, the literature on gender and war is diverse and growing significantly. (See, for example, Meintjes et al. 2001; Moser and Clark 2001; Cockburn and Zarkov 2002; Biles and Hyndman 2004; Whitworth 2004; Bouta et al. 2005; Sylvester 2005; 2007; Sweetman 2005; Carpenter 2006; and Sjoberg 2006B.) There are a growing number of researchers who have been challenging assumptions about the "natural" qualities of men and women, women's participation in war, and women's impact on war - particularly from radical, postmodern, and poststructural feminists, constructivists, critical security studies, and postcolonial and development studies. There is a pressing demand to recognize the value of a gender perspective and to take seriously the work of feminist scholars. Scholars have begun redefining the study of war through an emphasis both the gender dimensions of conflict and on women's roles in conflict.

Cynthia Enloe's *Beaches, Bananas, and Bases* was perhaps the first "gender and war" text to be given significant attention by mainstream international relations scholars (Enloe 1983). Despite its maturity, it remains a valuable introduction to the study of how femininity and masculinity are constructed within military cultures. Enloe's work has inspired an entire generation of scholars and her more recent contributions continue to press issues related to gender, violence, and militarism (1988; 1993; 2000; 2007).

It has been made clear that taking gender and feminist scholarship seriously does not equal including women into existing analysis or theoretical approaches to war - or, the well-known "add women and stir" approach. Instead, new scholarship has shown that feminist and gender approaches challenge the fundamental conjectures of traditional approaches to the study of war. Laura Sjoberg's book *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq: A Feminist Reformulation of Just War Theory* (2006A) and Christine Sylvester's article "The Art of War/The War Question in Feminist IR" (2005) are excellent examples of feminist scholarship that wholly reformulate traditional approaches to war through a feminist perspective.

The work of critical feminists such as Cynthia Enloe, Elise Barth, Louise Olsson, Inger Skjelsbaek, Karen Hostens, Patricia T. Morris, and Tina Johnson has also helped to disrupt stereotypes of "women as victim" and "women as naturally peaceful." Some of the research that has disrupted these dominant discourses focuses on issues such as the construction of masculinity and femininity within the military (Sasson-Levy 2003), legal issues in relation to women's participation in conflict (Harries-Jenkins 2002), the interplay of race and gender within militaries (White 2007), and issues of citizenship and nationality associated with military membership (Segal 1995; Feinman 2000).

### Redefining War

In addition to challenging foundational beliefs about women and war, scholars are working to redefine war, including the notion of war as a public event with identifiable time-lines (Jacoby 2005). Classifying war as a period of public activity characterized by hypermasculinity, aggression, and heroism discounts women from the study of war *by definition*. Revealing the limitations to this definition and offering alternative conceptions have been a major focus for feminist scholars. For example, novel scholarship has criticized the historical emphasis of the identifiable time frames of war. Alternative approaches include an analysis of the *spaces* of war (Jacoby 2005). Jacoby identifies geographical areas experiencing or prone to war as “zones of conflict” in contrast to “zones of peace,” which have typically included the West (2005:4). Jacoby’s rethinking of the “boundaries” of war lays the foundation for her fascinating research on women’s participation in the military in Israel. Further, considering both the time and space dimensions of war encourages scholars to acknowledge the geographical constraints or advantages that individuals and states face as a result of their proximity to so-called zones of conflict or peace.

Men and women’s experience of war and their security during and after the conflict is being reconsidered (Sjoberg 2006B; MacKenzie 2009). The very definition of violence, peace, and security has also been challenged by several authors working in this area (Nikolic-Ristanovic 2000; Allison 2004). Liz Kelly points out that “neither patriarchal violence nor genocidal colonialism are termed war in mainstream accounts” (2000:48). Kelly marks this as a gross oversight that particularly eclipses women’s experiences of violence and insecurity. More unique feminist conceptualizations of war include Donna Haraway’s conception of modern war as a “cyborg orgy” (1995). Haraway describes cyborgs as “cybernetic organisms” or a hybrid of organism and machine. In effect, her work seeks to reassess the perceived actors in modern conflict.

Part of the effort to redefine and rethink war has included an emphasis on militarism and its impacts. Militarism can be understood as the manner in which the valorization of war and the military makes lasting and engrained impressions in society – regardless of whether a war is being fought or not. As one author explained, “in militarized societies, war is always on our minds, even if we are technically at peace” (Guesterson 2007:155). Feminists such as Cynthia Enloe and Sandra Whitworth have pointed out that militarization has critical implications for both women and men. Militarization fuels the valorization of violence and aggression and invokes particular notions of nationalism and honor. Enloe admits that “militarization can appear attractive. It can be personally rewarding materially and emotionally” (2007:161). Feminist scholars such as Enloe have warned that militarism legitimizes the use of violence, which can translate into increases in domestic violence and the use of rape (Kelly 2000). Further, militarism institutes hierarchies that tend to disadvantage women.

### Re-presenting Women's Experiences of Conflict

There are several general texts specifically that concentrate on women and war (Giles et al. 2003). For example, *The Women and War Reader* is a classic text that introduces readers to issues from female combatants and sexual violence to militarization (Lorentz and Turpin 1998). The greatest strength of this manuscript is that it highlights violent women as a critical yet under-examined category. In particular, Carolyn Nordstrom's chapter "Girls Behind the (Front) Lines" provides a rare and insightful case study on female soldiers in Mozambique. "What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa" by Meredith Turshen and Clotilde Twagiramariya is another edited volume focusing on women and war with an emphasis on the continent of Africa (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998). Although both of these texts are useful and present novel and rare case studies, the majority of the content focuses primarily on female victims, female activists, and women's experiences of violence rather than female perpetrators, violent women, and women combatants.

Rather than fixating on the impact of war on women, a variety of researchers have begun to produce work focusing primarily on women's involvement as actors in war. As Tina Johnson notes, "while it is often suggested that women are naturally nonviolent, they have been active participants in modern warfare, especially in civil and liberation wars" (Baksh et al. 2005:21). Critical scholarship on women and militant groups and armed movements has revealed the heterogeneous roles that women have played in armed struggles for centuries and their continued participation in modern warfare (Morris 1993; Baksh et al. 2005). Feminist international relations scholars in particular have highlighted the historical contributions of women during war (Dobrow and Boyer 1997). This work demonstrates that women's participation in armed movements and conflict have taken place over time and in a variety of geographical and cultural contexts.

With a renewed focus on terrorism since the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, increasing attention has been paid to female suicide bombers, female members of guerrilla movements, and female soldiers - particularly American female soldiers in Iraq. Christine Sylvester and Swati Parashar's chapter "The contemporary 'Mahabhartā' and the many 'Draupadis': bringing gender into critical terrorism studies" (2009) is an example of cutting-edge research that reconceptualizes the debates within terrorism and security studies. There is also particularly interesting work emerging on women's roles in guerrilla and revolutionary movements in regions such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Columbia (Hernández and Romero 2001; De Volo 2003; Viterna 2006).

Extensive case studies examining women's involvement in military groups are invaluable to an understanding of the impact of women on war. For example, Tami Jacoby's book, *Women in Zones of Conflict: Power and Resistance in Israel* (2005), provides a multidimensional, distinctive perspective of women's involvement in the Israeli military. Jacoby argues that Israel's mandatory military service for both men and women has not necessarily altered gendered perceptions associated with conflict and militarism. She points out that even though women enroll in the Israeli army in unprecedented numbers,

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they “tend to take secondary and less combative roles” (2005:42). Moreover, Jacoby points out that female soldiers are still expected to exhibit traditional characteristics of femininity during their tenure and are even given “cosmetic guidance” as part of basic training (Simona Sharoni in Jacoby 2005:48). Female soldiers in Israel reported “acting like men” as a coping mechanism for integrating, and being accepted, within the ranks of the military. Jacoby concludes that Israel’s nationality is tied to particular conceptions of masculinity and femininity, including the position that “the male role is to fight wars, while the female role is to reproduce fighters” (2005:8). Jacoby’s research on Israel and the military gives insight not only to foundational gendered suppositions related to conflict but also to types of experiences and obstacles female soldiers face from their peers and community.

Much of the recent research on female soldiers focuses on militaries in the Global North, including Doo-Seung Hong’s article “Women in the South Korean Military” (2002), Donna Winslow and Jason Dunn’s (2002) piece on women in the Canadian Forces, and Orna Sasson-Levy’s (2003) work on women in the Israeli military. There is certainly research being done on female soldiers in the Global South; however, the construction of these female soldiers and the implications for female inclusion in militant groups are presented quite differently. Whether it the “challenge” of gender equality and the “implications” for demilitarization associated with the armed forces in South Africa (Cock 1994; Heinecken 2002) or the “disastrous” experience of girls fighting in Mozambique (West 2000), these female soldiers seem to be presented as a problem rather than as a sign of progress and equality like their northern counterparts.

Earlier scholarship on women’s roles in national liberation forces, including work by Norma Kriger (1992), Stephanie Urdang, and Irene Staunton (1990), recognized women’s participation and often highlighted testimonial research; however, more recent research related to wars of the Global South are wrought with negative generalizations about women’s experience of war. For example, The World Bank’s publication *Gender, Conflict, and Development* by Tsjeard Bouta et al. (2005) discusses generally women’s involvement in conflict in Algeria, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Zimbabwe. Without any inclusion of interview material or citation, the authors conclude “whereas women and men can become soldiers for similar reasons, many women do so to obtain more rights and gender equality” (2005:xx). Broad and sweeping general statements such as these are harmful primarily because they are made with little effort to or hope of substantiation. Such generalizations also reveal neocolonial biases, racism, and paternalistic attitudes toward women in the south as such generalizations are not as readily made about women’s experiences and motivations as soldiers in the Global North.

## Violence and Security

The meaning of violence and the delineation of the primary risks associated with warfare has been a particular focus of feminist contributions to international relations. As Hannah Arendt has noted, violence is often associated with political power and the “domination of

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man over man" (2004:241). This narrow view of violence tends to ignore the multiple sources and forms of violence present in warfare – particularly those that impact or involve women. As a result, feminist scholars are attempting to show that violence – like other major concepts associated with war – is not gender neutral. For example, in her analysis of the conflict in the Balkans, Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic concluded that "there is an essential difference between men's and women's experience of violence in war" (Nikolic-Ristanovic 2000:21).

In this vein, there has been a great deal of attention to sexual violence during conflict. Scholarship shows that warfare has historically and consistently involved the use of sexual violence as a tool of war. Since Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975) was published, numerous scholars have examined the extent to which rape is used as a tactic of war (Barstow 2000) and the implications this has on the ongoing transformations of war-torn states (Baldi and MacKenzie 2007). There have been case studies on sexual violence in various regions including the "comfort women" of South Korea (Chung 1995; Hyun-Kyung 2000) and the mass rapes in Bangladesh (Habiba 1998), Germany (Grossman 1999), and Algeria (Chelala 1998). Perhaps the most robustly explored instance of wartime rape happened as a result of the use of mass rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Gutman 1992; Allen 1996).

More recent research has also revealed that female soldiers are particularly susceptible to sexual violence. Data on the civil war in Sierra Leone showed that between 70 and 90 percent of the female fighting forces experienced sexual violence during the conflict (Amnesty International 2000). This data is valuable not only because it challenges the perception that sexual violence happens primarily to innocent female civilians but also because it indicates the dire need for research into female participants in conflict and the policies, programs, and resources available to them during and after the conflict.

Gender-based violence during war is often equated to sexual violence; however, feminist scholars in particular have highlighted alternative sources of violence and insecurity that impact men and women differently. For example, displacement, malnutrition, physical violence, fear, destruction of property, and loss of educational opportunities are forms of violence that are prevalent in war. Furthermore, women and men are often disparately impacted by these events and forces (Kelly 2000; Nikolic-Ristanovic 2000).

Lene Hansen (2001) points to bride burnings in Pakistan and wartime sexual violence as examples of violence or threats to personal security that have generally been ignored or downplayed by policy makers. Hansen is sympathetic to the Copenhagen School's understanding of security and recounts how the Copenhagen School's analysis of securitization depends on the notion that the speech-act is an intersubjective act between the securitizing actors and an audience; however, like other feminist scholars, she laments the absence of a gender perspective within the Copenhagen School. In her article "Anatomy of a Footnote" in *Security Dialogue* (2007), Sylvester discusses the lack of engagement between critical scholars more generally, including those in the Copenhagen School, with feminist scholarship. Hansen (2000) uses "security as silence" to refer to

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situations where a subject who faces a security concern has little or no means to articulate this concern because of gender biases.

Hansen concludes that those impacted by sexual violence and bride burnings are prevented from making their concerns known to policy makers and argues that these subjects are disempowered first because of their gender and second because their concerns are deemed outside of the “national” security interests. Hansen notes that the threats to security women typically face are more often deemed “individual” or “human security” concerns rather considered “national” security priorities. Hansen stresses the limitations to categorizations of security:

it remains crucial to emphasize that the discourse of “national security” might silence women’s security problems when “women’s problems” *conflict* with the securities of the national community. Thus, feminist studies must examine constructions of the relationship between gender and nation not to make them correspond, but in order to analyze how the political structures of patriarchy and state sovereignty condition the way gender security can be thought. (2001:58)

### Post-Conflict

In addition to recent challenges to traditional definitions of security, war, and violence, the post-conflict period is also being reexamined by feminist scholars. The vast amount of scholarship that examines gender and post-conflict cannot be reviewed here; however, a brief discussion of the current directions in this research is helpful in understanding the value and implications of growing knowledge related to women’s involvement in conflict. Generally, the concept of post-conflict is associated with peace, transition, reconstruction, security, and reintegration. The post-conflict period is typically described as the period from the official end to conflict until the reestablishment of social, economic, and political order, or, “the return to normal.” Post-conflict, by its very definition, is deemed to be a period absent of the insecurity, destruction, and violence that characterizes war.

It is important to note growing criticism of depictions of post-conflict as a gender-neutral term as well as representations of the post-conflict era as a time where men and women’s experiences are similar. Assessments of post-conflict reconstruction, rehabilitation, progress, and development have been deeply impacted by emerging research that dispels traditional assumptions about “women’s place” both during and after conflict. Emerging research depicting women’s involvement in conflict and sources of empowerment for women in conflict complicate the notions that the end of war and the transition to peace is attractive to everyone – particularly women. For women who participated in the war, and who may have attained positions of power and authority as a result of their action in war, the post-conflict period can be a time of loss, insecurity, and disempowerment (MacKenzie 2009B).

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Sensitive to gender or not, most accounts of conflict admit that both women and men typically take on new roles during conflict. These shifts have historically resulted in women taking on “non-traditional” activities, including within the domestic workforce or as combatants or support staff in various militaries. Women’s participation in “unconventional” positions has the potential to loosen longstanding patriarchal hierarchies within societies. Researchers have noted that even within the highly patriarchal structure of militaries, women’s participation in conflict can alter traditional relations between women and men (Barth 2002; Farr 2002; de Watteville 2002). These shifts in hierarchical structures are sometimes viewed as occasions for women to renegotiate and hold power (Handrahan 2004). In hope that these temporary shifts in power hierarchies and roles might result in more permanent opportunities post-conflict, the post-conflict period is often described as a time for women to “challenge traditional gender roles, create spaces for new identities and imagine new possibilities for themselves” (Baksh-Soodeen: see Online Resources).

In spite of the positive expectations for women in the post-conflict period, it has been well documented that although women may acquire positions of power during war, and existing patriarchal structures may be destabilized, this shift is often short lived (McKay 1998; Handrahan 2004). Post-conflict reconstruction efforts aimed at reestablishing order, re-instituting political authorities, and encouraging citizens to return to their prewar activities can effectively reestablish a highly patriarchal order and push women into subordinate positions. As a result, for women who participated in the conflict, the post-conflict reintegration process often entails revoking positions of power they may have attained during the war, and in some cases being forced to hide or lie about their wartime activities in order to assimilate. Lori Handrahan explains: “the national patriarchy begins to reassert itself after the war and expects women to return to ‘the way they were before the war,’ that is to their subordinate positions” (2004:436). Susan McKay similarly concludes, “the [post-conflict] reality usually proves that, regardless of culture and place, women’s roles revert to traditional ones, and nation-alistic loyalties are more highly valued than is gender equality” (McKay 1998:356).

Some of the feminist work that has criticized the post-conflict reintegration process has concluded that “post-conflict,” “peace,” and “rehabilitation” are misnomers for women because they presume the benefits of “going back,” or “restoring to a position or capacity that previously existed,” without sufficiently considering either the war as a potential source of empowerment for women or the oppressive or violent nature of power arrangements and institutions prior to war (Baksh et al. 2005). In many cases, post-conflict is associated with a “return to normal” in the most regressive sense for women. As Lori Handrahan has noted, reconstruction and rehabilitation both can refer to “going back” or restoring the prewar order: “when women are allowed or encouraged to participate, it is male leaders who are controlling and creating the conflict within which women are given a ‘temporary’ place. This ‘temporary’ place is usually manifested in the form of revolutionary action and then rescinded during post-conflict consolidation and an attempt to ‘return to normal’” (Bennett, Bexley, and Warnock 1995 cited in Handrahan

2004:438). In turn, for women, the post-conflict period often implies giving up public political activity and roles and moving to the private, domestic sphere.

### Future Directions

The study of war and the landscape of international relations more generally has been drastically impacted by historical accounts and emerging scholarship examining women and war. Stereotypes associated with men and women's typical activities and "place" have been dispelled through careful analysis of the historical constructions of masculinity and femininity in war. In addition, accounts of women's involvement in war – from peace activists to rebel commanders to soldiers – challenge archetypal characterizations of the heroic male soldier and the peaceful, helpless female victim of war. These disruptions to traditional approaches to war force a reexamination of the way researchers study war, the stories that are included in accounts of war, and the manner in which governments and armed groups strategize and create policy both during war and in the post-conflict context.

Despite the excellent array of emerging literature in this area, there remains a dire need for more research into women's activity during war. More specifically, more case studies and first-person interviews with women actively involved in conflict would greatly enhance the literature on women and war. General literature on war is wrought with broad and un-cited statements about women's experience of, or positions within, war. For example, in *Gender, Conflict, and Development* (Bouta et al. 2005) it is concluded that "relatively more women as compared to men operated in armies as cooks, messengers, health workers, porters, and the like" (p. 14). The same source reported "relatively few women as compared to men operate as combatants who engage actively in fighting" (pp. 13-14). These statements seem impossible to qualify, and are made without interviewing a single female soldier, yet the authors make both conclusions without any reference to their source and with no indication of the locations and conflicts that are included in these deductions. Similarly, expansive and un-referenced assertions, such as "in war women generally feel helpless rather than empowered" (Nikolic-Ristanovic 2000:22), still abound in the literature.

There is a need to consider why there are so many attempts to generalize women's experience of war when similar statements about men's perceived reactions to or encounters with war would be deemed irresponsible scholarship. What is even more discouraging is the almost total absence of women's firsthand descriptions of their activities and experiences in war. Gathering these interviews within the context of war is a challenge but it is not impossible and it is far too seldom attempted. Further, there is much to be gained by interviewing women in the post-conflict context – and it is typically more secure to conduct research in this setting – yet, there remain few examples of such efforts (MacKenzie 2009A).

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There also remains a call for feminists themselves not just to approach the study of war but to allow the study of war to impact feminist theory. As Cynthia Cockburn has noted, feminists need to listen to “what war says to feminism” (2000:7). Data accounting for women’s participation in global conflicts has forced a reexamination not only of traditional approaches to warfare but of feminist theory more generally. Women’s participation in conflict and the divergent responses to conflict in the literature demonstrate that there is no single female response to, or opinion of, war. Indeed, not all women feel a natural affinity for peace or cooperation. This has renewed debates about essentialism and maternalism. Further, feminist scholars have been forced to respond to the claim that violent women remain “uncharted territory” within feminist theory as a result of the influence of claims about women’s essentially nurturing and peaceful nature.

Scholarship examining women and war has begun to drastically alter the manner in which war is conceived in international relations. Rethinking women’s participation and impact on war dramatically alters how one thinks about strategy, crimes of war, weapons, and peace. Answers to the question “where are the women” in war have produced alternative conceptions of the definition of war, violence, security, and reconstruction. These contributions have made significant inroads not only in terms of mainstream academic literature but also in terms of media coverage of conflict and policies created to address conflict.

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Baksh-Soodeen, R. "Women on the front-line: rebuilding war shattered Sierra Leone." Commonwealth Foundation News. At [www.commonwealthfoundation.com/news/news/detail.cfm?id=88](http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/news/news/detail.cfm?id=88), accessed Feb. 8, 2008. On this website the Commonwealth Foundation provides a summary of the post-conflict situation in Sierra Leone. It includes recommendations for future action and continued focus. The author of the article on this site, Dr Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen, was the Deputy Director/Head of Gender Section, in the Social Transformation Programmes Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Her article focuses specifically on the impact of war in Sierra Leone on women and children.

Amnesty International. "Sierra Leone: Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence against Girls and Women." Amnesty International 29 June 2000. At <http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR510352000?open&of=ENG-SLE>, accessed Mar. 12, 2007. This page on Amnesty International's main website includes an article focusing on sexual violence in Sierra Leone's civil conflict. It includes interview data with women and girls affected by sexual violence as well as significant statistics related to female soldiers and abductees and sexual violence.

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