Feminism and Understanding Women's Roles in War and Conflict Resolution

written by DEMOS ARAŞTIRMA | 20 Kasım 2015

Dr. Dubravka Zarkov is Associate Professor in the Department of Gender, Conflict and Development at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Netherlands. Her fields of specialization are gender, violence, conflict and war, militarism, media and the politics of representation. She has carried out considerable research in this field from a feminist perspective. She is author of "In the Body of War", a monograph which analyzes representations of female and male bodies in the Croatian and Serbian press in the late 1980s and in the early 1990s, during the war in which Yugoslavia disintegrated.

DEMOS met Zarkov at the Summer School of Gender, War and Security at Leiden University, which was held in Den Haag, 8-19 June 2015, where she gave a lecture on Gender, Conflict and Feminist Theories.

DEMOS: Your research on conflict and gender issues has a feminist perspective. Could you tell us how feminist perspectives on war and violence have changed with the First and Second World Wars and after?

Dr. Dubravka Zarkov: When we talk about feminism, [we have to keep in mind that] in different parts of the world, different feminist groups and scholars have of course done different research. My knowledge is limited mostly to the western feminist traditions and South-Asian feminism, and within that, then again, mostly the second-wave feminist thought. That means the feminist work which started in the period of the post-1968, early 70s, and late 70s. Of course, war and violence, and specifically violence against women have always been important feminist topics. But what was also very much part of feminist research was feminist activism, women's activism and women's roles in war, whether in the role acting against the war, such as women's participation in anti-war struggle, in peace struggle or on the other hand, women's participation in war, be it in First World War, say as nurses, or in the Second World War, as partisans, or in the anti-colonial struggles, in socialist revolutions. Women have participated in all these struggles and feminists have done a lot of research on that. Besides this, [there is the field of] women's experiences of war: their experiences of staying at home while the men have gone to fight or as victims of violence, or being engaged in any of the war efforts, e.g. in economy. Women, for example – especially in the Second World War – worked in the ammunition factories. So, a wide variety of subjects have been topics of feminist writing in the West, in this second-wave of feminism.

In feminism, there was probably always a kind of bias towards looking at men as more violent, more aggressive, and looking at women as more peace-keeping. That is also a part of the feminist political project. It does look at men as oppressors and at patriarchy as a system that benefits men and suppresses women, and it does look at women a little bit more as victims. But, while looking at the victimization of women or the oppression of women and violence by men against women, this early feminist work has also very much looked at women's agency, and has done a lot of studies on women's exercise of agency, of women being empowered by acting, by performing all kinds of roles.

Do you think that revealing the wide variety of women's roles has a positive effect?

I think that in this way the variety of women's experiences has been taking into account. I think, it is a good approach to look at all kinds of different ways in which women are affected or involved in war, because women of different social positions have very different experiences.

Early feminism assumed similar experiences. There was this idea of sisterhood, which was central, and there was not much attention to differences between women. There was a bit of attention to class, in respect to how upper-class women have been privileged compared to working-class women. However, there was no attention to other differences like now. Intersectionality has become a must-do approach and everybody looks at ethnicity, religion and race. It slightly resembles an intellectual fashion that comes and goes. I do appreciate this kind of early approach, which has looked at the complexity and differences, and also some of the work of Elshtain[i], which actually tries to avoid the simple division of looking at women as victims and men as perpetrators. She has written a lot about women who encourage men to go and kill. For me, that was an interesting period. Then came the 80s and early 90s, the war in Yugoslavia, and the genocide in Rwanda. In my view, that created a very important shift in feminist thinking in West.

Could you, please, explain this shift a bit more?

In my view, what happened is a huge narrowing of the western feminist approach to the topic women and war, and gender and conflict, with its strong attention to victimization, which lead to the marginalization of any other topic. So, women as victim, especially as victims of rape, became almost the most important topic in feminist writing. This happened then because of the war in Yugoslavia, the genocide in Rwanda, the war in Democratic Republic of Congo, the massacres in the war in Darfur/Sudan. Rape became the ultimate experience of women in war. So, if you were not raped as a woman in war, it was represented as if you hadn't suffered. Somehow, there was this in my view very problematic theoretical and political shift which reduces women's experiences of war to the experience of rape. For me that is also problematic, because in many ways that is also a very nationalist way of looking. Nationalists would say that *their* men rape *our* women. So, they discuss rape a lot. If we, as feminists, also end up focusing on the same topic in the same way, and define women as rapeable and rape as the ultimate experience, then what are our strategies to fight against nationalism? So, that was a very problematic shift for me.

You criticize western feminism for mainly dealing with the war in Yugoslovia and less with the case of Rwanda. This leads to a number of limitations. What is your opinion on these limitations and their effects on the position of feminists regarding these two wars?

First of all, the war in Yugoslavia happened before the genocide in Rwanda. So, of course, when the mass rapes of women especially in Bosnia became known, it generated very strong feminist activism of women groups, feminist lawyers and everybody. It was a very important global struggle to draw attention to the relevance of sexual violence against women in war, and to enable the possibility to prosecute rape as a war crime. However, as I said, it had this unfortunate effect: While on the one hand, we struggled against rape, we forgot all the other experiences. But, because a lot of feminist research on rape had already been done on war in Yugoslavia, when the genocide in Rwanda occurred, at the beginning, there was not even an awareness that rape was also one of the types of violence that were used in the genocide. Somehow, the focus was really only on genocidal killing. The awareness that there was rape going on as well came later. Some feminist scholars have criticized – and I have mentioned Patricia Sellers as an important feminist lawyer, who has also argued that in the West there was a difference regarding how much attention was given to rape in Bosnia compared to Rwanda, and that the difference in a way is caused by the history of racism in the West, in which Africa has been defined as a continent of wars and violence.

Yes, western feminism has been criticized for neglecting the experiences of Rwandan women in their

thinking, because Africa is regarded less important for Europe than, let's say, Bosnia and Yugoslavia which are part of the European continent, at least partly.

This is very similar in Turkey. When examining the war in Yugoslavia, the feminist discourse also focuses on rape during the war and neglects feminist activism.

There was a lot of activism: Not just feminist activism, there was also women's activism as well. Many women's groups, who don't call themselves feminist groups, would form women solidarity groups. A lot of women NGOs, grassroots groups were created to help refugees, to help other women and so on. There was a lot of activism around the war and displacement etc., but that was recognized to a far less extent.

You say that central problem of some feminist approaches in periods of war is nationalism …

Well, it is kind of a combination. One aspect of it is that the feminist project, as a political project, is about women's oppression and women's victimization, because feminism defines in a many ways the world through this gender line and difference in which women in many fields social life are more exploited, get less resources, struggle more to get any equal access to e.g. education, politics, health, food. So, that the attention how women are excluded, exploited, marginalized, and victimized is a crucial part of the feminist project. The early feminist project looked at all women are in the same way and didn't see the differences among women, didn't see that some women actually benefit from the oppression of other women, that some women benefit from the oppression of men, as well. These nuances only came up theoretically and politically towards the late 80s, with intersectionality and with the attention to these differences among women. But, I think there are a lot of struggles in feminism about how to include these differences in the feminist project without losing sight of women's suffering and struggle in the world. So, it is not an easy political project. There is an ambiguity on how we keep women in the center of our attention without reducing women to the victim or forgetting that there are women who live very rich lives without really caring about who dies, who suffers or whatever. So, there is an ambiguity in this project, which is not easy to deal with, neither theoretically nor politically.

For us, this question of feminism and nationalism is a very interesting point. In Turkey, there is a kind of divide between the Kurdish women's movement on the one hand and the feminist movement, on the other. And they have not always had an easy relationship. But still, there is a mutual struggle for peace and ending the Kurdish conflict. Some feminist writers in Turkey, however, emphasize that the feminist movement has to face its own nationalism. Otherwise, it will not be possible to come together with the Kurdish women's movement. You said that western feminism neglects women's experiences in the Middle-East and Africa. What are the results of that? What is the current perspective in western feminism?

I think this changed to certain extent, because the Gulf War and War on Terror have shaken up western feminism a lot. I think the issue of nationalism is also interesting there, because first of all nationalism is different in different countries. In some places, nationalism is linked to ethnicity and ethnic identity. Let's say there is Turkish nationalism and Kurdish nationalism, or in former Yugoslavia, Serbian or Croatian nationalism. But of course, in the West, there is also nationalism. There is French nationalism or British nationalism. But, nationalism there is also linked to race and racism. Especially, in the countries which used to be colonialists and colonial powers. They went to different places, not only as nations, but seeing themselves as *white* nations. So, I think, there is this combination of racism and nationalism, and the history of colonialism and imperialism which still informs western perceptions of Africa, the Middle-East, Far-East and South Asia. There, nationalism

and racism work together, like in other places ethnic nationalism works. Feminists are part of the [nationalist] political projects of their countries. They may be critical of certain aspects of these projects, but they may adhere to some. If I look at former Yugoslavia, feminists have been divided on the question of nationalism, because some have been absolutely strong anti-nationalists, while others have said: 'well, we are all feminists and nationalists'. In Croatia, it was especially the case that Croatian feminism has split into nationalist and anti-nationalist feminism. I am sure that in Turkey, there would also be Turkish nationalist feminists and those who are Turkish anti-nationalist feminists. Among Kurdish feminists, there would Kurdish nationalists, who say our national struggle and feminist struggle goes together, and those who say, 'I am feminist and my feminism is not only about nationalism. I don't only want Kurdish women to be equal. I want equality also for migrants in our region, for the other women as well'. So, I think these struggles remain important in national and transnational feminism, and the possibilities for solidarity among both within national borders, and transnationalist feminist solidarity is affected by these different political projects.

Western feminism has been also affected by the very strong realization that this struggle for equality in the West has lead to the situation in which you struggle for women to become equally represented and respected as soldiers. But then, as soldiers, they take part of the hegemonic projects. They go as occupying force. They go as imperial racist force. So, for western feminism the Gulf Wars and the War on Terror have brought up a lot of questions about what kind of feminism we are actually arguing for. Trans-nationalism has been important; Questions of solidarity have been a key question in respect to how western feminism can resist being co-opted into the western hegemonic project.

You say that women are very often seen as victims, although in recent decades women are recognized as agents in wars and conflicts. For example, in Kobani, Rojava, women are fighting against ISIS, especially Kurdish women are actors in the region. What do you think is the meaning of this, what is changing and how do you read these kinds of experiences?

I think for South-Asian feminists – whether e.g. Indian or Sri-Lankan – it would be easier and much more normal to say that there are women fighting in arms in these or that military force, not only liberatory and emancipatory ones, but also in some of them problematic ones, because in their experience throughout the history in India and Sri-Lanka, women have been important part of the Tamil tigers movement. In India, women have been an important part of Radical Hindu nationalism. So, there, it is much more obvious. In the West, women have been part of state armies. In the Soviet Union, in former Yugoslavia, during the Second World War, women have been part of partisan struggle against Nazism etc. But, in the West this military role of women has somehow been a bit different. This is why there are not so many feminist authors in the West, who have written about let's say women in the Italian fascist movement or women in German Nazi movement. There have been a few. But, there was the assumption that women only go in that direction when their brain-washed and not that it can be part of their identity, that you can be a woman and be a Nazi or racist.

That women are not just natural peacekeepers…

Yes. Somehow, there is this assumption about women as a peace-loving, women as a progressive force, as an emancipatory force and not women as a part of reactionary, gruesome kind of military violent movements. While actually we see all of Europe and in the US, women have been part of white-power racist groups. So, a woman's identity is not limited to the identity as a woman, but is the identity of women of a specific group and that group can be racist, can be nationalist, can be totally patriarchal. Women are also carriers of patriarchy. So, I think this is clearer today in western feminist thinking regarding women's participation in these problematic wars which the West is

involved in itself; in the choices how and why we – as western powers – go into Iraq, but not into Syria. So, feminist women have started asking themselves these questions and I think it is extremely important, because a lot of feminist language has been hijacked for the hegemonic project. From Bush to whoever there is now, telling us that they are going to *save* Afghan women, *save* Kuwaiti women, and so on. That kind of language, feminist language of women's human rights has become part of hegemonic war. The machinery of waging wars has integrated feminist language, and it is not easy to reclaim that language as a feminist. In order to do that, feminists have to reflect on how and why it was easy for that language to be hijacked.

That is a very interesting point. I would like to ask you one last question connected to this. There are some articles that argue that western feminists have turned a blind eye on sexual violence against women like rapes, slavery etc committed by ISIS. Do you agree with such opinions?

I don't think that western feminism has turned a blind eye on that. I think ISIS is a rather new phenomenon; that in general as phenomenon, it was not taken seriously by any political forces. It was seen as a small group, some kind of radicals, and that it will be easy to deal with them. There was no idea that they will become a force that will attract so many young people from all over the world. That has been the most recent and rather shocking development for everybody, not only for West. Young people from all around the globe are leaving their countries and going to fight for something that is seen as the most appalling kind of ideology. I think in western feminism there is in fact a lot of discussion about it. There is hardly a conference or event nowadays, where this is not discussed. But, in terms of written productions, it take a year from writing a paper to seeing published. So, I do expect that there will be more writing, but I think there are already a lot of discussions on why this is happening. To what extent is it a reflection of the failure of the whole modernity project, of the whole idea about democracy, freedom, emancipation and so on. So, I think there is a lot of discussion about it. But, maybe these discussions are still within certain circles and there is still not a lot in writing and publications, or on some of the transnational networks.

Another thing is that of course there are a lot of reasons to criticize western feminism and we all do it. But, I think there is also self-reflection in western feminism and feminism in general. If there is a very important – for me, positive – powerful force within feminism, it is self-reflection and a continuous struggle to relate to the world and to understand how we, as feminist, in different parts of the world can make the world better and create more justice, not just for women. I think the period, in which we only focused on women, women, and women is over. There is a much broad thinking in feminism which includes a much more complex understanding of the world. Of course, there is a lot of hegemony, a lot of looking into one's own little turf, but that is characteristic of any political project, look at Marxism, look at nationalism, look at any political project in any part of the world, any ideology, it is the same. But, I think, there is self-reflection as well. Maybe, we are late in realizing some things. I think there is a lot of failure to understand what is coming. I think a lot of us around the world didn't understand how capitalism is something we should fight against, how now liberalism is something we should fight against, that we should not only fight for women, but we should also fight against capitalism, neo-liberalism, the destruction of the earth through profit-making and that this would actually benefit not just women, but many others as well. So, yes, we – as feminists in different parts of the world – have made a lot of mistakes, and especially in the West, because the West benefits. There is a lot to be said about it. But, that is our reality today.

Thank you very much for this interview.

Selected Publications by Dubravka Zarkov

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[i] Jean Bethke Elshtain, author of *Women and War*, first published in 1987 and reprinted in 1995 with University of Chicago Press in which she examines the myths of men as "just warriors" and women as "beautiful souls".