

# International Politics of Women's (In)security: Rejoinder to Mary Caprioli

PINAR BILGIN\*

*Department of International Relations,  
Bilkent University, Turkey*

**I**N AN ARTICLE IN THIS ISSUE of *Security Dialogue* entitled 'Democracy and Human Rights Versus Women's Security: A Contradiction?', Mary Caprioli (2004) has sought to show that notions of security are not gender-neutral and that they do not relate positively to women's security. Although this point has been made before in the feminist literature on security (see, for example, Enloe 1990, 1993, 2000; Peterson, 1992; Tickner, 1992, 1997), the author has made a convincing case by presenting a cross-national, longitudinal examination of women's security and comparing the empirical data to measures of human rights and democracy, her point being that neither democracy nor human rights can 'capture the reality of women's insecurity when measured by violence (rape), health (percentage of births attended by health staff), and political equality (percentage of women in the legislature)' (p. 424). This, in turn, could be read as a critique of existing policies that rely on 'democracy promotion' to enhance 'human security' in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. Notwithstanding the value of the author's findings and conclusions, however, the article can be criticized on two grounds: (1) for failing to problematize the links established (mainly within policymaking circles) between human security, on the one hand, and

democracy and human rights, on the other; and (2) for incorrectly placing the problem purely in the domestic sphere, thereby overlooking the international politics of women's security.

The aim here is not to criticize Caprioli for failing to do something she is not interested in. No study can be about everything, and the author is justified in making choices regarding method and scope. Her interest is clearly in illustrating empirically the practical implications of adopting gendered definitions of democracy and human rights in domestic politics. Yet, the assumptions that there exists a positive relationship between human security and democracy and human rights, and that the roots of women's security (namely, structural inequalities) are located purely in the domestic sphere (mainly culture) remain unacknowledged and unquestioned throughout the author's analysis. This is not a mere analytical point. Caprioli's failure to question the aforementioned assumptions hampers her agenda and prevents her from demonstrating fully the extent of women's insecurities. Pointing to the global social dynamics that create and/or enhance women's insecurities is likely to have implications not only for foreign and domestic policymaking but also for global governance as well.

## 'Why Democracy Is Not Enough'<sup>1</sup>

The author's critique focuses on the fact that existing definitions of democracy and human rights that inform policymaking are gendered, and that policies adopted to promote democracy and human rights do not relate positively to women's security. This begs another question: Do such policies serve to enhance men's security? This is not to underestimate how women suffer disproportionately as a result of the security policymaking of states. Indeed, 'where food is scarce, women are more likely than men to go hungry; where resources are limited, they are most likely to be uneducated' (Terriff et al., 1999: 90). Nor is it to deny that democracy and human rights are vital components of human security as defined by the UN's *Human Development Report* (UNDP, 1994). Yet, the same report also emphasized the need to move away from statist<sup>2</sup> conceptions and practices of security and to make individual human beings the referents of security policymaking – the point being that existing policies do not provide for men's security either. The statist definition of 'human security' that currently prevails within policymaking circles (Suhrke, 1999) is only a shadow of the original definition, which was human-centered (Thomas, 2000). The problem, then, is not only that those definitions that inform policymaking are gendered, but also that they are statist.

Statism in security policymaking further reinforces these gendered relations of power, which allow for existing (narrow) definitions of democracy, human rights and (human) security to prevail. This the author is unable to show, as she tends to conflate 'women' and 'gender'.<sup>3</sup> Pointing

to this conflation cannot be dismissed as mere analytical juggling. For, it is this conflation that 'elides the role of men, masculinity, and patriarchy in the formation of gender in social relations of power' (Agathangelou & Ling, forthcoming), thereby preventing the author from revealing the extent of women's insecurities.

To be fair, the author is aware of the problem of statism. Yet, the 'feminist empiricist' approach she has adopted does not enable her to question the patriarchal philosophy that empowers such statist assumptions by way of defining the goals to be achieved by peoples of the developing world without giving due consideration to local dynamics and/or desires. Current policymaking interest in 'democracy promotion' and advocacy of 'women's human rights' in US foreign policy is shaped by such a patriarchal philosophy, one that not only gives primacy to state interests but also prioritizes the security of some states (such as the United States) over others (such as Afghanistan or Iraq), while claiming to know what is best for 'global peace and security' (as with exporting 'democracy' to the 'Greater Middle East').

Failing to problematize and historicize the links established between human security and democracy is problematic also because it betrays a 'deeply unreflexive attitude' (Barkawi & Laffey, 1999: 423) 'to the analysis of democracy and war and for the historically and spatially evolving relations between them' (Barkawi & Laffey, 1999: 411). The attempts to expand the so-called zone of peace to other parts of the world under the banner of 'democracy promotion' should be problematized not only because democracies do not always provide for women's security (the author's point) but also because the emergence of democracies and the establishment of 'democratic peace' in the 'core' is bound up with 'local and international relations of power' (Barkawi & Laffey, 1999: 409).

The emergence in former colonies of forms of political and social organization

<sup>1</sup> The title of this section is borrowed from Swatuk & Vale (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Here, statism is understood as 'the concentration of all loyalty and decision-making power at the level of the sovereign state' (Booth, 1998: 52)

<sup>3</sup> On 'women'/women in International Relations, see Zalewski (1994).

such as the territorial state, capitalist or command economies, and democratic or bureaucratic-authoritarian politics is unintelligible apart from the experience of colonization and decolonization (Barkawi & Laffey, 1999: 411).

There is also the other side of the coin:

Wars of decolonization shaped the colonizers too, contributing to social and political transformation in France and Portugal. Resistance to imperialism in the periphery led to transformation in the core. The US experience in Indochina had direct consequences for the practice and meaning of US democracy and its relation to war (Barkawi & Laffey, 1999: 411).

The point here is that academic inquiry into the reasons why democracy and human rights are defined and put into practice in such a narrow manner in some parts of the world will be shaky at best if it is conducted as if there is no imperial, colonial or Cold War legacy. This, in turn, should not be taken as underestimating the problems involved when analyses are conducted as if men and women experienced these periods in identical ways (Enloe, 1993).

### (In)security Policies of States

Although the author's analysis is useful in illustrating how prevalent policies that are informed by gendered definitions of democracy and human rights do not always provide for women's insecurities, it is limited in its capacity to help one understand the global structural links that enable the creation and sustenance of such definitions – the point being that by locating the problem purely in the domestic sphere (i.e. local culture), the author has failed to turn her critical gaze to the international politics of women's security (i.e. those global dynamics that engender insecurities for women). The examples of 'cultural violence' used by the author (such as

'wife-beating', 'female genital mutilation', 'trafficking in women') invoke a narrow and static understanding of culture as those (visible) symbols and codes of behaviour that are inherited by the domestic society. Less visible manifestations of cultural violence (as with the patriarchal philosophy that works at the global level to warrant those narrow definitions of democracy and human rights, which, in turn, inform security policymaking in the United States and elsewhere) get dropped out of the author's analysis. Yet, it is the latter that allow the former to (continue to) occur. For, if existing definitions of democracy and human rights fail to inform policies that would provide for women's security in Afghanistan or Iraq, it is not merely Afghani or Iraqi (or Muslim) culture that is the problem. The roots of 'structural violence' (Galtung, 1969) cannot be located purely in the domestic sphere and/or in the local culture: they should also be sought in the historical processes of global social change.

In failing to draw the linkages between the domestic and international political dimensions of women's insecurities, the author's approach is reminiscent of British feminists in the Owenite socialist movement, who identified marriage as the prime oppressor of women to the neglect of their state's policies in the colonies. Cynthia Enloe (1993: 65) writes:

In these women's theoretical framework, the war zone was not India, Africa, or the Caribbean; it was the British domestic household. Lack of peace, they argued, lay in the oppressive structures of patriarchal marriage. For Owenite feminists, the opposite of peace was not militarism; it was marriage. This rediscovered analysis of marriage is provocative and useful as it deepens our understanding of genuine peace. Yet it remains limited in its ability to help us understand the relationship between peace and militarism because it fails to trace the links between the patriarchal

oppressions imposed locally and those imposed militarily overseas.

Enloe's critique is also relevant for Caprioli, who has failed to look at the international politics of women's insecurities. She does not, for instance, consider how security policies of states exacerbate the insecurities of women at home and abroad. This is a point made forcefully by Enloe (1990, 1993, 2000), who has called for shifting the focus away from the purely domestic realm to the international in considering insecurities women have to face when working at banana plantations, near military bases, or in capital cities as 'diplomatic wives'. Understanding the international politics of women's insecurities requires looking at how security policies of states enhance women's insecurities by making it more difficult for them to voice their concerns. In the Arab world, for instance, this requires the analyst to turn his or her gaze to successive generations of Arab women who were made to feel 'unpatriotic' if they made 'radical' demands from their governments (such as the right to basic education) in the face of successive threats posed by colonialism, US/Soviet interventionism and Israeli intransigence (Mernissi, 1993, 1996).

Although some would maintain that the insecurities of women would soon come to an end once democracy is 'fully' established, what often goes unnoticed is the resilience of 'semi-authoritarian' regimes that have adopted some of the formal traits of democracy but continue to operate 'mechanisms that effectively prevent the transfer of power through elections from the hands of the incumbent leaders or party to a new political elite or political organization' (Olcott & Ottaway, 1999). In such contexts, policies that rely on 'democracy promotion' – which William

Robinson (1996) refers to as 'promoting polyarchy', because of the narrow definition of democracy that shapes such policies – are likely to enhance insecurities of men and women. Nor would policies (favoured by the European Union) that focus on enhancing women's human and democratic rights constitute a solution. For, in such 'semi-authoritarian' contexts, 'the problem is not to give women the same rights as men, but to reform political systems so that the entire population can enjoy fully the civil and political rights recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (Ottaway, 2004).

## Conclusion

In the concluding sentences of her article, the author asks 'What is the goal of promoting democracy and human rights if they typically apply only to men?' (p. 425). The problem with prevalent policies that 'promote democracy' and advocate 'women's human rights' is not only that they are based upon gendered definitions of democracy and human rights, but also that they fail to provide for 'human security'. Inquiring into such insecurities would require the analyst to question the patriarchal philosophy that warrants those statist approaches to security and those narrow definitions of democracy and human rights that shape academic analyses as well as policy-making; to cross political and cultural boundaries when seeking the roots of structural inequalities and violence; and to go back in history to delve into the historical processes of global social change that have enabled the adoption of such assumptions and definitions. Hence the need to consider the international politics of women's insecurities.

\* Pinar Bilgin is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Bilkent University, Ankara, and can be reached at [pbilgin@bilkent.edu.tr](mailto:pbilgin@bilkent.edu.tr). She is the author of *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Approach* (Routledge, forthcoming). Her research interests include critical security studies, the study of International Relations and security in the developing world, representations of 'state failure' in International Relations theory/practice, and Turkey's security discourses. She would like to thank Umit Cizre and the editors of this special issue of *Security Dialogue* for their comments and criticisms.

## REFERENCES

- Agathangelou, Anna M. & L. H. M. Ling, forthcoming. 'The House of IR: From Family Power Politics to the Poisies of Worldism', *International Studies Review*.
- Barkawi, Tarak & Mark Laffey, 1999. 'The Imperial Peace: Democracy, Force and Globalization', *European Journal of International Relations* 5(4): 403–434.
- Booth, Ken, 1997. 'Security and Self: Reflections of a Fallen Realist', in Keith Krause & Michael Williams, eds, *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*. London: UCL Press (83–119).
- Booth, Ken, 1998. 'Cold Wars of the Mind', in Ken Booth, ed., *Statecraft and Security: The Cold War and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (29–55).
- Caprioli, Mary, 2004. 'Democracy and Human Rights Versus Women's Security: A Contradiction?', *Security Dialogue* 35(4): 411–428.
- Enloe, Cynthia, 1990. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Enloe, Cynthia, 1993. *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Enloe, Cynthia, 2000. *Manoeuvres: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Galtung, Johan, 1969. 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research* 6(3): 167–192.
- Mernissi, Fatima, 1993. *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, translated by M. J. Lakeland. Reading, MA: Perseus.
- Mernissi, Fatima, 1996. *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*. London: Zed.
- Olcott, Martha Brill & Marina Ottaway, 1999. 'The Challenge of Semi-Authoritarianism'; available at [www.ceip.org](http://www.ceip.org) (accessed 3 August 2004).
- Ottaway, Marina, 2004. 'Don't Confuse Women's Rights with the Promotion of Democracy', *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 7 August.
- Peterson, V. Spike, 1992. 'Security and Sovereign States: What Is At Stake in Taking Feminism Seriously?', in V. Spike Peterson, ed., *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner (31–64).
- Robinson, William L., 1996. *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Suhrke, Astri. 1999. 'Human Security and the Interests of States', *Security Dialogue* 30(3): 265–276.
- Swatuk, Larry A. & Peter Vale, 1999. 'Why Democracy Is Not Enough: Southern Africa and Human Security in the Twenty-First Century', *Alternatives* 24: 361–389.
- Terriff, Terry; Stuart Croft, Lucy James & Patrick M. Morgan, 1999. *Security Studies Today*. Oxford: Polity.
- Thomas, Caroline, 2000. *Global Governance, Development and Human Security: The Challenge of Poverty and Inequality*. London: Pluto.

- Tickner, J. Ann, 1992. *Gender in International Relations: Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Tickner, J. Ann, 1997. 'You Just Don't Understand: Troubled Engagements Between Feminists and IR Theorists', *International Studies Quarterly* 41: 611–632.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 1994. *Human Development Report: New Dimensions of Human Security*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zalewski, Marysia, 1994. 'The Women/'Women' Question in International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 23(2): 407–423.