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EDITORIAL

On violence: why feminist reflections and critique continue to matter

The past few weeks have once again reminded us (not that we need these reminders) that gendered violence continues to be both exceptionalized and normalized. Shootings have occurred yet again in the United States; a teenager has killed eight of his fellow students and a security guard in a school in Serbia; fighting and killings continue to happen in Sudan; ethnic violence has killed, injured, and displaced many people in the state of Manipur in India; and Pakistan has erupted into violence after the arrest of its former prime minister, Imran Khan. There are also many more unaccounted and unreported acts of violence in different parts of the world. In Kenya, for instance, deaths by starvation have gone largely unnoticed and unacknowledged in the media, and the body count continues to rise. The leader of the Good News International Church, a Christian cult, spurred people to starve themselves to death in order to meet Christ. New reports suggest that some were forcibly killed to harvest their organs, a less talked about but widely prevalent form of violence.

While some of these examples seem like depraved acts by humans, violence has its own vicious cycle and perpetuating logic. What do these myriad forms of spectacular and slow violence tell us about the world that we inhabit and the world that inhabits us? That some forms of violence get more attention than others; that some bodies matter more than others (representation – how and when we talk about them – matters); and that, in our zeal to fix the immediate problems, we often overlook the overlaps of violence in war and in peace, and of sexual and other forms of violence, such as colonial and postcolonial violence (historical, political, and cultural continuums of violence matter) (Yadav and Horn 2021).

The articles in this issue address the angst of our times. How do we *represent the gendered bodies* of war, militarism, and violence, and how do these bodies *inhabit warring spaces*? What is silenced, erased, and/or made visible through actions, discourse, and political utterances (Parashar 2023)? Furthermore, how do we understand *violence on a continuum* of historical and intersectional multiplicities? Violence “cascades” in many forms and is never merely an exceptional occurrence in warring societies; it is rooted in histories and intersecting identities (Braithwaite and D’Costa 2018). We are all implicated in these (mis)representations and continuums, as scholars, researchers, teachers, observers, and policy practitioners (Väyrynen et al. 2021).

Eda Gunaydin’s award-winning article underscores once again how Western representations of women fighters (in this case, Kurdish female militants) legitimize Western military interventions that prevent the emergence of more subversive forms of agency. Henri Myrntinen and Philipp Schulz address the complexities of broadening the scope of gender-based sexual violence (GBSV) to include sexual violence against men and boys; while this is a progressive move, it also runs the risk of invisibilizing women and girls and recentering masculinity and male privilege in GBSV debates. Tarya Väyrynen examines women’s war agency in the context of the Finnish auxiliary military group Lotta Svärd during the Second World War. She argues that we should do away with the artificial boundary between the political and the apolitical in the representation of women’s war efforts, and recognize the political labor and agency of women that emerge out of the mundane and the everyday. Emma Dolan and Nataliya Danilova turn to art and aesthetics as a form of storytelling to argue that “herstory” theater can make women/LGBT+ soldiers visible through stage performances, but can also at the same time invisibilize the problematics of and struggles against heteronormative and masculinized military cultures.

How does violence cascade and what kinds of continuums are visible in wars and beyond? Sif Lehman Jensen draws attention to relational ties and intimacies that enable women involved in the insurgency in Mindanao in the Philippines to disrupt and reshape the public/private divide. Diana Gómez Correal, Pascha Bueno-Hansen, and Julissa Mantilla Falcón point to the importance of understanding historical continuities in learning from Peru's inclusion of gender in transitional justice (TJ) processes and applying those insights to the Colombian case. Central to their analysis of the continuum of violence against women is the need to recognize how gender intersects with class and race, and to have deeper conversations on TJ initiatives and society to ensure more meaningful and long-term structural transformations. Hilary Matfess, Roudabeh Kishi, and Marie E. Berry draw on troubling empirics from Kenya to argue that increasing the representation of women in political offices can lead to more cascading violence against women in general. Finally, in her powerful piece on the Democratic Republic of Congo, Charlotte Mertens wisely cautions us to stop seeing sexual violence as an exceptional occurrence in civil wars and instead to situate it along the continuum of colonial violence.

As editors of a feminist journal, we always run the risk of condoning violence and militarism by publishing so much about them, at a time when we need to think about building transnational feminisms through new vocabularies and alliances to address and end violence. However, as we have repeatedly pointed out, presenting these complex arguments and research to our audiences is critical to our feminist politics. Challenging the normative gendered myths and rationale about wars and violence is essential to break the vicious cycles that perpetuate war and militarism. Our mission is to continue to put the spotlight on all that is messy and complex, and also to continuously scrutinize our own positions and embrace the discomfort and angst that we continue to feel about the body counts all around us.

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shine choi (she/her/hers)

*School of People, Environment and Planning, Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University,
Aotearoa New Zealand*

[[[INSERT EMAIL LOGO]]] S.Choi1@massey.ac.nz

[[[INSERT ORCID LOGO]]] <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6583-7563>

Natália Maria Félix de Souza (she/her/hers)

*Department of International Relations, Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, São
Paulo, Brazil*

[[[INSERT EMAIL LOGO]]] nmfsouza@pucsp.br

[[[INSERT ORCID LOGO]]] <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9914-8985>

Amy Lind (she/her/hers)

Taft Research Center, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

[[[INSERT EMAIL LOGO]]] amy.lind@uc.edu

Swati Parashar (she/her/hers)

School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

[[[INSERT EMAIL LOGO]]] swati.parashar@gu.se

[[[INSERT ORCID LOGO]]] <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7162-6367>

Elisabeth Prügl (she/her/hers)

Gender Centre, Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland

[[[INSERT EMAIL LOGO]]] elisabeth.pruegl@graduateinstitute.ch

[[[INSERT ORCID LOGO]]] <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4363-3540>

Marysia Zalewski (they/them/theirs)

School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

[[[INSERT EMAIL LOGO]]] ZalewskiM@cardiff.ac.uk

[[[INSERT ORCID LOGO]]] <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0449-2199>