

# Personal-Political Imaginations: Feminism, Gender and Security in Serbia

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LAURA MCLEOD, JUL 17 2015

My forthcoming book, *Gender Politics and Security Discourse: Personal-Political Imaginations and Feminism in "Post-Conflict" Serbia* (2015), seeks to make sense of the politics of gender security in Serbia. Internationally, gender security concerns have been heightened by the presence of UNSCR 1325, a UN Security Council resolution which urges for the inclusion of gender in post-conflict processes. Through a perception that 'gender security' is a discourse that is performed and reiterated, I investigate the way in which activist articulations about UNSCR 1325 have been made.

In the book, I investigate how activists reach their individual and organisational position on gender security by paying attention to their gender politics (a term that I use to describe the profile held by individuals or organisations about gender, feminism and feminist organising) and senses of security and insecurity. I also discuss how the very configuration of 'gender security' itself matters, through a detailed examination of two policy-related deliberations that activists have been involved in: feminist-pacifism and domestic violence.

The thread running through this analysis is the insight that the way in which conflict and post-conflict is conceptualised matters in the shaping of gender security discourse. Serbia has a complicated relationship to the conflict of the 1990s. Theoretically, the Serbian state did not go to war with another state, but the Serbian state is thought to be a key collaborator in the conflicts, reproducing violent nationalist, and war-like rhetoric, and Serbia suffered many of the social, cultural, political and economic effects of war, in addition to facing aerial bombardment at the hands of NATO. Even today, debates continue about responsibility for the war crimes committed during the 1990s, including the July 1995 genocide at Srebrenica. However, it is this complicated relationship that opens up fascinating questions about UNSCR 1325 and how the concept of gender security within the resolution is interpreted. Very simply, given that the resolution aims to develop strategies for gender interventions in post-conflict zones, it matters *how* a particular space is configured as "post-conflict".

To explore these different configurations of conflict and post-conflict, I make use of, and develop a popular feminist insight: the personal is political, which I rework as 'personal-political imaginations'. The rest of this article expands on the notion of personal-political imaginations and briefly considers the broader significance of this framework for understanding how gender security discourse is configured in particular ways.

### **The Personal is Political: Feminist Perspectives and Insights**

The popular feminist insight, 'the personal is political', is derived from the title of Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay (published in 1970). Feminist organising in the US during late 1960s and early 1970s was characterised by consciousness-raising sessions, where female participants would share experiences of oppression from men and male-dominated structures. There were concerns that these second wave feminist consciousness-raising sessions were personal therapy rather than a form of political action. In response to these concerns, Hanisch wrote her paper – which was given the title 'the personal is political' by someone else – to point out that these sessions were hugely political and drew attention to the political power of all these (apparently) private worries, fears and hopes. The aim of these sessions was to demonstrate that problems in women's lives should not be dismissed as being merely

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'personal' but that these apparently 'personal' issues were in fact systematic forms of oppression.

The very notion that the personal is political has been extended far beyond the consciousness-raising sessions of US feminism in the early 1970s. Within the discipline of International Relations, the insight has been used by Cynthia Enloe, particularly in her 1989 book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*. For Enloe, the personal is political because power relations determine aspects of our lives that we imagine to be private. Noticing power relations means that 'the personal is political' becomes a deceptively simple feminist insight – indeed, a 'disturbing' insight. Disturbing because it highlights how patriarchal political decisions affect our personal lives. For Enloe, the realisation that the personal is political enables us to make sense of international politics: 'the personal is international' and the 'international is personal'. Thus, the manifestation of international politics affects our personal, daily lives, and likewise, our day-to-day activities affect the processes and practice of international politics. The insight that 'the personal is political' is useful for reminding us of the ways in which our daily lives and political power are connected in a global way.

The significance of 'the personal is political' is also made apparent by a number of other feminists within international politics. For instance, Laura Shepherd, in her book *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture: Telling Stories* reminds us that while the very act of watching TV shows might appear to be a personal act, it is, in fact, profoundly political. Indeed for Shepherd, popular television shows bridge the gap between deliberate analytical work and subconscious dreams. While television shows fill our private spaces (living rooms) and our private lives (leisure time), they should not be merely dismissed as irrelevant, "personal" issues. As Shepherd powerfully demonstrates, television shows have much to tell us about how ideas about gender and violence come about, and the profoundly political consequences of these ideas. In essence, the feminist insight that the personal is political (and vice versa) has had wide-reaching ramifications for how we go about understanding power within international politics.

## What are Personal-Political Imaginations?

The notion that 'the personal is political' is a useful starting point for thinking about representation and subjectivity. However, there is an element of contingency missing – how can we account for hopes and dreams for future change and the way in which these activities are personal and political? I believe that these ideas about the future are central to thinking about social movements (which tend to push for social change or stability *for* the future) and security (which is something which always seems possible *in* the future).

To make unambiguous the role of representation, subjectivity, and contingency within the insight that the 'personal is political' I develop the classic feminist insight to talk about *personal-political imaginations*. The notion allows us to make explicit ways of understanding representation within our daily lives as something that is deeply personal and political, and to expose antagonisms in our personal-political stories. That is, personal-political imaginations indicate that we are making meanings and making sense of our world via a series of representations.

I do not use imaginations to evoke a vivid make-believe world where we pretend to camp under a bed sheet draped over two chairs, or where we lie in the grass and look for animal shapes in the clouds (although these make-believe practices do matter as well). Rather, I use the word 'imagination' to indicate that we are making meaning. Critically, *personal* memories, experiences, hopes and dreams merge with – and shape – *political* life, struggles, ambitions and history: forming an imagination. Imaginations conjure up a text about our world: guide images of our world, shape senses of our world and invoke conceptualisations of our world. In other words, the notion of personal-political imaginations highlights that we make meanings about our world via a series of personal and political stories.

Talking in terms of personal-political imaginations is useful because it highlights how the personal-political stories that we tell are representations. We understand daily lives and the everyday through stories that we tell ourselves and others around us: therefore, we represent particular and specific personal-political stories about our daily lives. That is, any presumed reality is represented and depends upon a range of constructed knowledges which re/produce discourses. Furthermore, representations are not simply descriptive practices. Rather, they are *normative* practices, allowing inclusion and exclusion. In sum, what we present as "real knowledge" is *represented*.

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The notion of personal-political imaginations is also useful because it gives a sense of *subjectivity* to the relationship between the personal and political. Subjectivity is a concept used to understand how the individual and his/her sense of self relates to the world. Thus, different experiences (differently) shape ways of constituting the meaning of our experiences. Yet, experience itself is given meaning through a range of representations. That is, our experiences, no matter how real they seem, arise out of how we conceptualise our context and the meaning that we give to these experiences. In this respect, talking of personal-political imaginations allows us to understand representations of the self, and how this is both personal and political.

For instance, the slogan 'the personal is political' during the late 1960s and early 1970s was used to describe something about how the life of a female subject has been affected by patriarchal power relations. When I refer to personal-political imaginations, I use it to refer to how the 'sense' of 'self' articulated by activists has been crafted through a juxtaposition of personal memories, experiences, hopes and dreams, which shapes the way activists understand politics. In the case of feminist and women's activists in Serbia, this was most powerfully apparent when they were discussing their gender politics – i.e. their individual and organisational stances towards feminism. Most surprising to me was the fact that activists self-represented their activities as being "political" and "non-political" (a vocabulary which I discuss in more detail in the book). What became apparent to me, and I discuss this briefly in the conclusions, was that the invocation of these labels relied upon their own personal-political imaginations about Serbia's relationship to war and conflict.

## Conclusions: Personal-Political Imaginations of Post-Conflict and Security Discourse

Talking about personal-political imaginations of conflict and post-conflict in Serbia suggests that personal experiences and aspirations about Serbia's relationship to conflict and post-conflict *are also* political. There are a number of questions that we can ask about politics in Serbia, and the way in which these questions are answered are profoundly shaped by personal-political imaginations of war and conflict. Should Serbian state and society accept responsibility for the war crimes of the 1990s? Can we understand the prevalence of domestic violence in Serbia as being linked to the heteronormative masculine environment of war and Milosevic's regime? What does it mean for Serbia to join the European Union (EU)? Why is homosexuality so controversial in Serbia? What is the position of Kosovo in relation to Serbia? The way in which these questions are answered very much depend upon your personal configuration of Serbia's relationship to post-conflict – and these configurations are also political.

For instance, in articulating their gender politics, some activists – who could be said to be associated with the "political" claim briefly mentioned above – drew connections (via nationalism) between homophobia and prevalence of violence in Serbia to the need to accept political responsibility, recognise Kosovo's independence, and to move towards EU integration. There is temporal complexity within these political claims: activists aspire to a future free of homophobia, economic and social injustices and greater EU integration. Crucially for our understanding of personal-political imaginations, these hopes for the future are linked to experiences of the past and present: the conviction that Kosovo independence and political responsibility matters.

Through this temporal configuration, we can see that this vision of gender politics is reliant upon their personal-political imaginations about conflict and post-conflict in Serbia. A number of temporal "dots" are required to be joined: for instance the future of social justice can be achieved through facing the past and recognising the importance of Kosovo independence in the present. Thus, their claim to being "political" (rather than "non-political") invokes a particular set of gender politics which is recalled through a temporal aspect, connected to how Serbia's past, present and future is envisaged.

Imaginations of the future matter in the formation of gender security. How activists and groups advocate for particular outcomes and/or positions relate to what they see as desirable for the future of Serbian politics and society. These may be explicit aspirations for how the Serbian state and society will progress – as in the case of Women in Black, who urge for political responsibility. But there is also a sense of futurity and progress in the group where activists want to focus on provision of immediate support to those who have experienced gender violence. These views about what is desirable for social change become linked to ideas about what is making activists feel secure and insecure, shaping perspectives about what the achievement of gender security means. These ideas about what 'gender

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security' means influence activist campaigns and interpretations of UNSCR 1325 in Serbia.

In sum, to understand how a particular meaning of 'gender security' has come about, it is necessary to pay attention to personal-political imaginations of conflict and post-conflict. Paying attention to personal-political imaginations opens way for a more temporally complex analysis, where we notice how past, present and future function together. These personal-political imaginations of conflict and post-conflict shape, and in turn, are shaped by, both gender politics and security discourse.

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**Laura McLeod** is a Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom. She has written about security, peace negotiations and constitutional reform in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina from a feminist and gendered perspective. Her first book, *Gender Politics and Security Discourse: Personal-Political Imaginations and Feminism in "Post-Conflict" Serbia* is out in July 2015 with Routledge, London. Laura is also Conversations co-editor of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*.