

Interview - Columba Achilleos-Sarll

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Columba Achilleos-Sarll is a third year PhD ESRC funded candidate in the department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick. Columba's research is located at the intersections between postcolonial theory, feminism, UK foreign policy, civil society activism, and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. She recently published in the *Journal of International Women's Studies*.

What (or who) promoted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I can trace my interest in women's rights, women's history, colonialism and its ongoing legacies, to my mother's consciousness and expression of justice and injustice, right and wrong, and social inequality when I was growing up. She embodied these concepts in the stories she would tell my brother and I about our paternal and maternal family history. She would recount stories of my grandparents' arrival in the late 40's from Cyprus and Ireland. My grandfather was an illiterate farmer from a village in southern Cyprus. As there was no money in Cyprus, the British took farm produce from the farmers in lieu of taxes. Consequently, my grandfather would find their produce rotting on the harbor at Larnaca whilst the people, whose labours produced it, went without. Encouraged by poverty, and his right to a British Passport, my grandfather left Cyprus seeking a better life. And, although, the welcoming mantra at the time was 'no blacks, no Irish, no dogs', they settled in the slum area of Paddington.

Forty years on, adjacent to Paddington, similar social injustice was also apparent in the North Ward of Kensington and Chelsea where I grew up. I saw people struggling to live with incomes below the poverty line, which disproportionately impacted women, children and minority groups. I have also witnessed the creeping insidious gentrification of North Kensington, making affordable housing for local people impossible. Such experiences have profoundly influenced the way I see the world and, perhaps rather unconsciously, encouraged me to pursue my area of research.

There are also a number of academics and writers that have inspired and supported me at various stages. Latterly, as an undergraduate, I read Cynthia Enloe's seminal book, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. This introduction to feminist IR gave a label to my feminist curiosity. I went on to read other feminist and postcolonial scholars who continue to shape my thinking, and offer me the analytical tools to make sense of the questions that interest me. In many ways these books act as a quasi confirmation that studying IR as a site structured along intersecting lines of gender, race, class and other relations of power is a legitimate and indeed important area of enquiry. In a roundabout way, my PhD – and the research questions that I am interested in, the long-term complex legacies of Empire and colonialism on present-day foreign and domestic policy in the UK as seen through the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda – is a culmination of these experiences.

In your recent journal article, you argue that foreign policy analysis pays little attention to postcolonial and feminist theories. How can these theories be brought into foreign policy analysis?

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I stumbled across this analytical lacuna when attempting a first draft of my PhD literature review. I was quite taken aback by the absence of feminist and postcolonial work from theories of foreign policy analysis (FPA), which are embedded in positivist epistemologies and methodologies. I believed that this approach offered only a partial view of the discourse and practice of foreign policy, reinforcing notions of rationality, abstraction and a perceived separation between the foreign and domestic. Taking instruction from yet extending the post-structuralist turn in FPA, I argue that feminist and postcolonial theories – by recentring intersectionality, colonial legacies and normative orders, can advance a different approach to studying the discourse and practice of foreign policy, which overlooks the ways in which foreign policy is profoundly gendered, sexualised, and racialised. In attempting this, I argue that we may be able to think anew about how to translate this beyond the discipline: advocating for a symbiotic, inclusive and complimentary feminist foreign and domestic policy.

Your thesis focuses on the institutionalisation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the UK, at the interface between government and civil society. What is your assessment of the UK's engagement with the WPS agenda?

In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). The Resolution was considered a landmark document, as it was the first time that the UNSC addressed women's experiences and gender issues in relation to fragile and conflict affected states. Latterly, the UNSC adopted a further seven UNSC sister-resolutions under the name of WPS, addressing various priority areas across the four WPS 'pillars': prevention, participation, protection and relief and recovery. Since then, WPS has become increasingly institutionalised at the state level – predominately through the adoption of National Action Plans (NAPs), but also through other institutional means. Alongside this, civil society networks have sought to facilitate this institutionalisation, encourage implementation, and hold various governments to account to their WPS commitments.

In my thesis I explore, and trace, the interface between UK civil society and the UK government on institutionalising the WPS agenda in the UK. Through documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews, I explore the sociological micro politics of that engagement structured along intersecting lines of gender, race and class as well as other relations of power. I read that against an exploration of the colonial logics which I argue underpin the UK's engagement with the agenda and which are variously mediated, reinforced, contested and resisted, as feminists operating within these networks engage with the state and its political institutions. While 1325 and WPS has been widely celebrated in part this has detracted from the ways in which colonial logics instruct how WPS is being institutionalised in various settings.

It's particularly interesting to observe the different advocacy strategies used, as well as the different advocacy points raised by civil society, and think through why some points get taken up by the government whilst others are effectively ignored. In the context of the UK, for example, there are a number of perennial issues continuously raised by civil society: the exclusion of Northern Ireland, refugees, asylum seekers and trafficked women from UK-WPS provisions as set out in the NAP, as well as the hypocrisy of the arms industry. To make sense of this phenomenon, I take instruction from those writing specifically on WPS, like Laura J. Shepherd, whilst also borrowing from writers like Bell Hooks, Anne McClintock, Anna M. Agathangelou, Inderpal Grewal, and Sara Ahmed, among others.

What role has gender played in Brexit-related discussions and negotiations? What impact has this had?

Benjamin Martill and I have just finished a chapter for an edited book titled *Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit* that will be published next year where we explore this question. Ben and I decided to collaborate – bringing together our very different research agendas and backgrounds, to develop a blog that I had written last year. The chapter that resulted from this collaboration attempts to demonstrate the extent to which Brexit has been dominated by discourses surrounding the institutionalization of a dominant masculinity, which we argue manifested in two principal ways. Firstly, through the deployment of language that was associated with militarism and, secondly, through language that was associated with business interests and 'deal-making' rhetoric.

Discourses of militarism highlighted Britain's assumed global role in the world and emphasized strength, security and

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global power, whilst discourses of 'deal-making' equated the negotiations with a business transaction and, consequently, represented Anglo-European relations in conflictual terms – as a contest between two sides. These discourses gathered strength in the run-up to the referendum, such that the result was a decision to leave the EU, and they have become highly influential since the vote. We argue these prevailing discourses rely on gendered norms, hierarchies, and exclusions, which inhibit fundamental conversations that address, and call attention to, the gendered social consequences of post-Brexit policies in the United Kingdom (UK).

What are you currently working on?

Mainly I'm trying to steer my way through the dark, murky, waters that writing a PhD entails. At the moment, I am still trying to make sense of, but also do justice to, the empirical data that I have gathered. Alongside that, but connected to the PhD, I have been exploring the visibility of the WPS agenda, as seen through visual representations of race and gender in the UK National Action plans (NAPs) on WPS, although this is very much a work in progress.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

I'm not sure that I am best placed to answer this, as I am still rather clumsily navigating these waters! However, I would agree with many who have noted in these interviews the importance of researching what interests you and not what you think others expect you to research, or what others consider to be the most relevant areas of enquiry in IR. I would also emphasize that it's also legitimate to research what makes you angry and frustrated about the world you live in, and – perhaps rather idealistically – how you would like to see change in the world, where possible making the connections between scholarly practice, solidarity and activism.

I also cannot emphasize enough just how important it is to take care of your mental health. Writing a PhD can be an extremely isolating experience, and combined with how competitive the environment is post-PhD, it can become all too easy to neglect your mental wellbeing. I've entered my third year and I am still harboring doubts that I will manage to complete my PhD! However, we must continually remind ourselves that our value extends beyond our research and nothing is more important than our mental health. Keeping regular, healthy, working routines, and always taking time out to spend with friends and family, and to explore other hobbies and interests is, therefore, paramount. That is why I would also highlight how important it is to seek out supportive research communities that are asking similar questions to you, knowledge production is always a collective endeavour. I could not even begin to name all those academics, peers, and the wider feminist community, who have generously (directly and indirectly) shared and continue to share their time to give me advice and encouragement at many 'sticking posts'.