

Interview – Jessica Cheung

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 early career scholars.

Jessica Cheung is a PhD candidate at the Freie Universität in Berlin. Prior to commencing her PhD, Jessica completed an LLB at the University of Hong Kong and an MSc at the London School of Economics. Jessica's research interests include critical feminist theory, gender studies, intersectionality, critical race theory and decolonial studies. Currently, Jessica's research focuses on the strategic function of feminist foreign policy adoption, and the production of "feminist states" through "othering".

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

This is a difficult question to answer as I have been inspired and motivated by so many different situations, individuals and communities. My experiences working with UN Women in Beijing prompted my research into feminist foreign policy. During my time at the UN, I worked collaboratively with a number of foreign embassies in Beijing on gender equality projects within China. A large proportion of my time was devoted to working with the Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish embassies on different educational and outreach campaigns. Witnessing how certain feminist ideals played out in practice peaked my interest in the politics behind the production of "feminist states" and "feminist foreign policies".

Prior to my time at UN Women, I was more interested in engaging with cultural and sociological studies of gender representation, however, the transition towards a more political science-informed approach has allowed me to investigate the notion of gender from an interdisciplinary perspective. Additionally, undertaking an MSc at the London School of Economics (LSE) was extremely influential in shaping me as a researcher. Studying at LSE, especially at the Gender Institute (now the Gender Department), provided me with the analytical skills, theoretical framework, community and space to "undo" the normative ways of "knowing" that have restricted my voice, identity and politics.

I am also incredibly inspired by my supervisory team (Prof. Lora Anne Viola at the Freie Universität Berlin, Prof. Annika Bergman Rosamond at Lund University and Dr Julie Sunday at Global Affairs Canada) who have remained a constant source of knowledge, support and encouragement throughout the PhD process. Finally, experiencing life as the "Other", in predominately "white" spaces, has made me acutely aware of the intersectional forms of discrimination that structure, disenfranchise and restrict individual and collective action. Finding ways to resist this violence through my research has provided me with a renewed sense of hope for what the future can hold.

Your doctoral research explores the strategic adoption of the label 'feminism' in relation to foreign policy. What political work does this adoption do?

My research questions the function of a feminist label in advancing a country's politics and political identity. A key distinction made through my research relates to the strategic adoption of a feminist label, namely, the politics underlying a country's decision to adopt an explicit feminist foreign policy. This is considered in relation to leading

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gender equality countries that possess substantively similar gender-informed approaches to foreign policy, yet opt out of an explicit “feminist” label. By highlighting this distinction, or substantive lack thereof, I tease out the nuanced strategic political action(s) that are being mobilised and instrumentalised through the inclusion and omission of “feminist” foreign policies.

Given that my work adopts a more critical approach towards understanding feminist foreign policies as a larger political and socio-cultural phenomenon, my research highlights the embedded global hierarchies that are perpetuated through the proliferation of feminist foreign policies. What I am alluding to here are the Western colonial logics of the liberal international order that effectively “other”, subordinate and marginalise “developing” countries, the “Global South” and the Islamic world. Eurocentric impositions of gender equality standards, despite representing some degree of reform and progress, function to legitimise the superiority and progressiveness of liberal Western nations. Consequently, feminist foreign policies cannot be viewed as existing within a power vacuum, rather, they are implicit in the re-production of normalised regimes of power.

Countries that have adopted an explicit feminist foreign policy (Sweden, Canada and Mexico) have constructed their own working feminist foreign policy models. Despite falling under this larger category of “feminist foreign policy” and existing referentially, countries with a feminist foreign policy are not grounded in, or by, a universalising standard or set of guidelines as in the case of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and UNSCR 1325. Consequently, this freedom to determine what is representative and actionable as a feminist foreign policy has allowed countries such as Sweden and Canada to define “feminism” as a state practice. What has resulted from this political mobilisation is the strategic use of feminism as a source of soft power, political capital and site of gender de-politicisation. This reading of feminist foreign policies mimics the critiques made within the fields of women, peace and security and gender and development. Consequently, the same problematic approaches are being re-enacted albeit through a different policy frame.

As a political tool, feminist foreign policies also work to generate “feminist nations” whereby a commitment to gender equality functions as a source of national identity. This in turn acts as a political signal demonstrating a nation’s progressiveness and superiority over other countries. We can witness this operating at a global level (e.g. Sweden and Saudi Arabia) and also within regional contexts (e.g. Canada and the U.S.). However, the production of feminist states and accompanying practices of “gender washing” masks the violent discourse being produced through the dissemination of Western institutional practices of “equality”. In line with the work done on homonationalism, femonationalism, and more recently feminist foreign policies, feminism as a source of self-identification re-frames the exceptionalism of “good” feminist nations by re-directing the problem outside national borders.

Sweden and Canada both self-identify as caring and ethical states in and through their feminist foreign policies. Yet both states have failed to ‘care’ for the indigenous communities that they have colonised. What tensions exist between Swedish and Canadian feminist foreign policies and indigenous injustices?

A large part of this tension hinges on the cognitive distinction drawn between “domestic” and “foreign” policy. Through the practice of feminist foreign policies, issues relating to gender have been externalised and constructed as “foreign issues”. This allows countries to maintain a wilful ignorance as to the ongoing intersectional inequalities occurring within their own borders. In this sense, “gender inequality” has become de-politicised domestically by drawing attention outwards. Hence, the same colonial logics that created Sweden and Canada are being re-framed through the patriarchal re-production of Western civilizational discourse.

The limits of Swedish and Canadian solidarity can be witnessed through the state’s treatment of indigenous communities. Sweden and Canada demonstrate a disturbing lack of awareness and accountability for the colonial histories that have shaped existing policies and attitudes towards indigenous communities. Violence through state action and inaction is manifold, from Sweden’s mining and extraction pursuits in Sápmi to the genocide of indigenous women in Canada, the notion of a feminist consciousness is domestically absent. Nevertheless, in the face of this ongoing historical injustice Sweden and Canada continue to wave their feminist flags.

Together with Stefanie Boulila and Orsolya Lehotai, you have conducted a study on challenges

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encountered by early career researchers in European gender and women's studies. What are the most prevalent challenges, and what support is needed to improve the situation?

The main challenges identified in the study related to job insecurity and a lack of overall support. This was connected to the epistemic disadvantages associated with being a “gender” researcher outside the norms of mainstream academic research. What was revealed through the study was the significance of mentorship and supervisor relationships, as well as research-related support networks. Supervisors and mentors were highlighted as a strong source of support as they possessed the most potential to provide practical and emotional guidance in relation to navigating the difficulties associated with being an early career researcher. Participants also identified the need for opportunities to connect with a community of like-minded individuals, receive peer-to-peer support and to gain training in tasks such as grant writing and job applications.

What are you currently working on?

At the moment I am writing an article with Prof. Annika Bergman Rosamond (Lund University) and fellow PhD candidate Georgia De Leeuw (Lund University) on the tension that we discussed earlier, between feminist foreign policy and indigenous injustice within the context of Sweden and Canada. I am also working on publishing a journal article that heuristically organises feminist foreign policies according to a typology. This publication is a work in progress and something I hope to publish by the middle of 2022. Outside of academic writing, I am collaborating with the members at Young WILPF (Women's International League of Peace and Freedom) Germany to construct a set of guidelines and a toolkit on how feminist foreign policy can be incorporated into existing foreign policy agendas. This publication is also being produced in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Germany. The results will be officially presented through a Webinar at the end of 2021.

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

There would be three pieces of advice that I would offer young scholars. The first is to never underestimate the value of community. Academia is a very solitary pursuit: you spend a lot of time alone. However, there are moments of hope generated through collaboration where the “loneliness” of the work becomes a gateway to interacting with like-minded individuals. The second piece of advice I would give is to always be critical: “undoing” what is “known” as the “truth”, and questioning where your knowledge comes from will completely alter your lived reality. This will not only assist you in navigating the academic world but also the social structures which stratify you. Finally, I would encourage feminist researchers to embrace the discomfort of being a “feminist killjoy” – our mere presence is an act of resistance, let alone the content of what we have to say.