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Feminism as Counterterrorism?: Is feminism being used as a prop for imperial foreign policies?

By Vasuki Nesiah, August 14, 2012.

"So here in one word is my new counter-terrorism strategy: feminism." — Barbara Ehrenreich

The most prominent and unequivocal public articulation of an alliance between feminism and counterterrorism came at the dawn of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, when Laura Bush argued that "the fight against terrorism is a fight for the rights and dignity of women." This approach was criticized by many as "just a few opportunistic references to women." However, today, what we may term "security feminism" is becoming embedded in American foreign policy — a trend that has been emphatically empowered by Hillary Clinton's State Department.

This "securitizing" of women's issues means that feminist interests have been "muscled up" and framed to have traction as a mode of counterterrorism. For instance, Isaac Kfir argues that rather than advocating for gender equity "as a basic right," we should be "changing the discourse and using national security" language "to advance gender equality." In other words, it is not just counterterrorism advocates opportunistically playing the gender card. Feminists also play the security card. Over the long term, their goal is to heighten the visibility and significance of gender issues. More immediately, some also hope they can secure greater funding for women's groups as "an important countermovement to terrorism."

The security paradigm is, crucially, not just a framework to advance nationalism and militarization. For many in the counterterrorism field, it is also about highlighting vulnerability. It is the focus on vulnerability and victimization that converges with those invested in mainstreaming feminism within foreign policy agendas. For instance, feminists and counterterrorism advocates have found common cause in anti-immigrant policies through issues such as human trafficking. Laura Sjoberg's language of "empathetic war-fighting" draws from feminist security theory to capture this convergence. "Empathetic war-fighting," she writes, brings a "focus on individual human security [that] will strengthen just war [theory]'s effectiveness, increase its relevance to modern warfare, and decrease its insidious abstraction and gender bias."

However, the gendered dimensions of insecurity are quite complex. The female victim is not the only victim, and not all females are victims. The universalizing of terror threats and gender insecurity everywhere — from the bedroom to the battlefield — distracts from the fact that imperial wars and counterterrorism efforts have winners and losers. Unpacking the universalism to track these particular effects is crucial. In fact, in today's world, "security feminism" is often a specific manifestation of Islamophobic campaigns to "save" Muslim women from Islam. Feminists have engaged and fractured on these issues for years. A global snapshot of these robust debates may include the heated controversies that have attended the sexual politics of the Dutch government's citizenship test, the

French ban on public veiling, and the Israeli government's "pinkwashing" campaigns to leverage support for its occupation of Palestine.

Bringing a feminist agenda to foreign policy has been a fraught initiative. Indeed, those strands of feminism that have invested in the "securitizing" project have done more to condemn feminism than redeem foreign policy. Foreign policy has been inextricably tied to the politics of counterterrorism and empire, so it is not surprising that such efforts towards convergence have been deeply troubled. The task of the moment is not formulating a common "feminist" agenda. Rather we need to analyze the stakes of the national security paradigm and highlight divergences within feminisms.