

Crisis and hypocrisy?

(Not) A final word on our symposium

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2020-01-20T11:00:19

The Book Review Symposium on Feminist Engagement with International Law has been taking place against the backdrop of multiple crises. The crisis that has been dominating the news worldwide is one that culminated in the [killing](#) of Qassem Soleimani, in Iranian [attacks](#) on a US military base on Iraqi territory, and in the [downing](#) of a civilian airplane. It is unclear what the mid- and long-term fall-out of this crisis is going to be.

Meanwhile, Australia continues to be ravaged by unprecedented wildfires, with devastating effects for wildlife and for public health and further ratcheting up carbon emissions, speeding up the rise of temperatures of the ocean and possibly the melting of glaciers, thus exacerbating the ongoing climate crisis.

In India, protesters continue to face [police brutality](#) and other forms of violence, after violent [attacks](#) on student and faculty members of Jawaharlal Nehru University on 5 January 2020 drew attention to a pattern of systematic violence against anyone voicing a critical stance toward Modi's citizenship amendment act.

Many other crises did not even make the news beyond the countries in which they have been taking place, for example the [earthquake](#) in Puerto Rico on 7 January 2020, which left thousands of people homeless.

During such times, how dare we devote the space of a blog on international law and international legal thought to a symposium on feminism?

The first answer to this question is that there are specifically feminist aspects to every crisis. Several chapters of the Handbook deal with specific crises. For example, Katie Woolaston writes about the role of eco-feminism in addressing the ongoing biodiversity crisis. Rownea Maguire looks at the climate crisis and at the international law instruments aimed at combating it – notably the UNFCCC – through a feminist lens. Gabriele Simm examines the impact of so-called 'natural' disasters on women and the role of gender in the way in which international law relates to these disasters.

Apart from dealing with specific crises from a feminist perspective, feminist engagement with international law consists mainly in questioning the way in which we distinguish 'crises', i.e. issues demanding our immediate attention, from 'everyday' issues that are deemed to be of 'secondary' importance. In the [words](#) of Hilary Charlesworth: 'International lawyers revel in a good crisis. A crisis provides a focus for the development of the discipline and it also allows international lawyers the sense that their work is of immediate, intense relevance'. International lawyers' focus on crises, however, draws attention away from systemic injustices that occur

in everyday life. Systemic violence or structural discrimination against women, as Charlesworth goes on to state, generally 'do not constitute a crisis for international lawyers'.

We can only understand systemic violence and structural discrimination if we understand how the categories that constitute the basic entities of our thinking are shaped by a system of power that has traditionally excluded women. As Jaya Ramji-Nogales states in her contribution to the Handbook, the 'overarching common experience of exclusion from international law's power structures' of people who inhabit the category 'women' is what justifies a continued engagement with said category. In line with the overarching goal of the Handbook, which according to the Introduction consists in making feminist ideas more inclusive, diverse, and influential, the contributions to the Symposium drew attention to the mechanisms of exclusion, systemic violence, and structural discrimination that occurs within and at the margins of the category 'women'.

The contributions to the Symposium concur with Ramji-Nogales both in recognizing that working with the category 'women' is problematic and that it continues to hold important promise as a catalyst of political mobilization. It may also serve as a reminder to more privileged women, many of which now occupy seats at various tables, of their connection with and solidarity toward those women who remain at the margins, e.g. poor women, women of color, and trans women.

A common element of most versions of feminist theory consists in acknowledging that knowledge is always situated. Therefore, feminist epistemology not only emphasizes the lived experiences of individual women but also acknowledges that our social location [shapes](#) our epistemic position. This results in two main prescriptions around which to construct our research and our activism: The first of these prescriptions consists in listening to the specific people who are affected by a specific claim to knowledge or political claim. The second consists in acknowledging that any kind of privilege alters our epistemic position in the sense that it becomes more difficult for us to see the mechanisms of oppression that uphold our privilege.

Thus, we as hosts of a symposium on feminist engagement with international law, even when already consciously taking on a critical and intersectional standpoint, are personally required to remain suspicious of our approach and to question in how far we have fulfilled our own requirements. And in short, we haven't, at least not fully. Our symposium woefully lacks substantial representation of, for example, voices from the Global South. This also shows how feminist academic networks – as [indeed](#) "feminist analysis is like friendship" – are as susceptible of becoming self-reproducing and excluding as the boys' clubs they were set up to counter.

This certainly cannot be a sustainable way of analyzing the ongoing and imminent global legal crises. Now more than ever, therefore, our invitation to all those studying or involved in international law stands: [pitch your work to Völkerrechtsblog!](#)

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Cite as: Sué González Hauck & Isabel Lischewski, "Crisis and Hypocrisy? – (Not) A final word on our symposium", *Völkerrechtsblog*, 20 January 2020.

