

Book Symposium on “Feminist Engagement with International Law”

A note from the editors

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“Feminist analysis is like friendship: an ongoing process of deepening complexity, interactive, contradictory, insightful, emotional, enlightening, challenging, conflicting”, Nancy O. Dowd [wrote](#) in her introduction to *Feminist Legal Theory: An Anti-essentialist Reader* (2003). She was specifically referring to the complex relationship feminist (legal) theory has with itself and its many conflicting claims for representation. Mapping this often ridiculously complicated web of relationships, including both bonds of solidarity and potential mechanisms of exclusion, thus seems to be almost an impossibility even just for one specific discipline. Yet this is precisely what the *Research Handbook on Feminist Engagement with International Law*, [published](#) last year, sets out to do.

While feminist thought has increasingly engaged with international legal issues in the last two decades, the field of international law arguably remains understudied from a feminist perspective. On the other hand, feminist scholars may find it especially difficult to “break into” mainstream legal academia, or, conversely, may self-segregate through voluntary or involuntary mechanisms such as jargon, conference attendance, or publication choices. Some feminist legal texts are well-loved classics within the tribe of feminist scholars but rarely known to the academic community at large, and are hard to just stumble upon due to lack of citation in mainstream publications.

The *Handbook* strives to bridge at least some of this gap by rounding up a wide variety of authors, including both academics and practitioners, and texts engaging with almost any imaginable facet of international law from a feminist perspective. Even from the outset, its perhaps most impressive contribution can thus be found in making a vivid and up-to-date cross-section of feminist international legal thought readily available to a broad audience. Can it additionally deliver on Dowd’s promise of complexity, meaning, most importantly, anti-essentialism – the rejection of ‘woman’ as a fixed (legal) category?

Engaging with the category ‘woman’ is a thematic thread that connects the various contributions to this online symposium. The editors of the *Research Handbook on Feminist Engagement with International Law*, **Susan Harris Rimmer** and **Kate Ogg**, explain in an expository interview how they approached this category in the composition of the *Handbook*. While actively engaging with rather than rejecting ‘woman’ as a category or term, the editors stress that they deliberately chose ‘feminism’ rather than ‘gender’ or ‘women’ as part of the title of the Handbook to adopt a broader and more openly political perspective.

Katharina Wommelsdorf relies on feminist postcolonial approaches to international law to question who is included and who is excluded when powerful European white women claim to promote ‘sisterhood’ among ‘women’. The example she relies on is the Hashtag #EuropelsAWoman, which Ursula von der Leyen introduced shortly before her election as president of the European Commission.

Gabriele Wadlig, too, adopts a postcolonial perspective and connects it more directly to the *Research Handbook on Feminist Engagement with International Law*. She argues that the objective of ‘building bridges with other critical theories’, which Susan Harris Rimmer and Kate Ogg identify as one of the ‘general future directions’ for the field of feminist international law, should be understood as intersectionality.

Intersectionality is also the key theme of the practical perspective provided by the interview with **Emilia Zenzile Roig**, founder and executive director of the Berlin-based Center for Intersectional Justice. Regarding the category ‘woman’, Roig argues that it is still important to rely on this category to address existing systemic inequalities. However, she also highlights that it is crucial to deconstruct this category as a supposedly biological natural category and to challenge the gender binary as the building block of the patriarchy.

Michele Krech tackles one of the specific problems that the gender binary produces. She highlights the problems of relying on a rigid distinction between a supposedly fixed biological sex on one hand and gender as a social category on the other hand. Krech does so by working through the example of how women with an atypically high amount of testosterone in their body – predominantly women of color from the Global South – have been barred from the women’s category of international athletics competitions.

By using the platform of an online symposium, we hope to critically engage with the “interactive, contradictory, insightful, emotional, enlightening, challenging, conflicting” matter that is feminism in international law well beyond the published blog posts and look forward to input from our readership.

Sué González Hauck and Isabel Lischewski are members of Völkerrechtsblog’s Editorial Team.

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