# *Feminist experiences of 'studying up': encounters with international institutions*

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# Feminist Experiences of 'Studying up': Encounters with International Institutions

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## Abstract

This article makes the case for feminist IR to build knowledge of international institutions. It emerges from a roundtable titled 'Challenges and Opportunities for Feminist IR: Researching Gendered Institutions' which took place at the International Studies Association Annual Convention in Baltimore in 2017. Here, we engage in self-reflexivity, drawing upon our discussion to consider what it means for feminist scholars to 'study up'. We argue that feminist IR conceptions of narratives and the everyday make a valuable contribution to feminist institutionalist understandings of the formal and informal. We also draw attention to the value of postcolonial approaches, and multi-site analysis of international institutions for creating a counter-narrative to hegemonic accounts emerging from both the institutions themselves, and scholars studying them without a critical feminist perspective. In so doing, we draw attention to the salience of considering not just *what* we study as feminist International Relations scholars but *how* we study it.

**Key words:** feminist International Relations, gender, institutions, methodology, feminism

## Introduction

This discussion started at a roundtable titled 'Challenges and Opportunities for Feminist IR: Researching Gendered Institutions' at the International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Convention in Baltimore in 2017. As part of this roundtable, we discussed our research on the UN, European Union, NATO, UN Women, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and the institutions that engage with them. We considered what it means to 'study up' as a feminist IR scholar. In this article we build further on these discussions and our own subsequent reflections, making the case for feminist IR scholars to 'study up' and the value of Feminist Institutionalism as a tool to achieve this. 'Studying up' emerged as a challenge within Anthropology from Laura

Nader in 1972[1]. At the height of the Vietnam War, she argued that the indignation and anger felt by many scholars should provide the impetus for turning their gaze upwards to study hidden hierarchies and 'cultures of power'[2]. 'Studying up' was not intended as an either/or position, but as a means to further interrogate a problem from a different perspective, be it up, down or sideways through institutions, ideas, imaginaries and people. The emergent scholarship within Anthropology took an interpretivist approach, challenging positivist notions of policy processes as 'linear and logical but also hierarchical'[3]. Ultimately, it meant centering power in analysis, a commitment which underpins feminist IR scholarship.

The call to 'study up' within Anthropology resonates with what later emerged within Political Science as Feminist Institutionalism. Feminist Institutionalism is premised on a commitment to make a distinction between organisations and institutions. It is far more than just a label for scholars who study institutions. It necessitates a commitment to not privileging formal over informal structures because to do so narrows the conception of what an institution is to purely organisational structure[4]. An institutional approach can also mean studying informal institutions, for example peacekeeping. Peacekeeping emerged not as a formal set of rules but has become a convention with specific rules and norms[5]. One approach to doing so is by studying the formal institutions (state militaries) which compose peacekeeping forces. So, while feminist institutionalists often do focus on formal institutions, they incorporate an understanding of the informal structures which shape them. The emergence of Feminist Institutionalism within Political Science has provided an important challenge to mainstream, gender-blind institutionalist approaches, and has made a valuable contribution to understanding gender equality policies in the

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[1] Laura Nader. 'Up the anthropologist: Perspectives gained from studying up', in *Reinventing Anthropology*. Ed. Dell Hymes (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 284-311.

[2] Nader, 'Up the anthropologist', 289.

[3] Cris Shore and Susan Wright. 'Introduction. Conceptualising Policy: Technologies of Governance and the Politics of Visibility', in *Policy worlds: anthropology and the analysis of contemporary power*, eds. Cris Shore, Susan Wright and Davide Pero. (London: Berghahn Books, 2011), 8.

[4] Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny and Louise Chappell. 'New Institutionalism Through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism?', *International Political Science Review*, 31 no 5 (2010), 576.

[5] Christopher Daase. 'Spontaneous Institutions: Peacekeeping as an International Convention', in *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions Over Time and Space*, eds. Helga Haftendorn, Robert Keohane and Celeste Wallender. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 224.

realm of employment and political participation[6]. Others have applied this approach to examine militaries as sites to test theories of institutional change[7].

Louise Chappell's study of the International Criminal Court has opened the way for feminist institutionalist theorising of the international[8]. Yet within feminist IR more broadly, attention to studying and conceptualising international institutions using an institutionalist approach has been slow to emerge. Moreover, it has failed to claim a space in IR in the same way the feminist institutionalist challenge to Political Science has. This is despite an emerging body of feminist IR work drawing on institutionalist approaches to examine engagement with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) and the Women, Peace and Security agenda by international institutions, for example, the UN Security Council[9]; NATO[10], and the EU[11]. As Jennifer Thomson argues, Feminist Institutionalism has valuable insights to add to the design and implementation of post-conflict institutions, particularly in the context of the Women, Peace and Security agenda[12]. Here, rather than calling for Political Science to take stock of international agendas and institutions, we argue that there is space within feminist IR scholarship for an institutionalist approach to make a valuable contribution. We also believe that feminist institutionalists can learn from some of the approaches and insights of feminist IR, as we outline here.

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[6] For example, see contributions in the edited volume *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency and Power*, eds. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

[7] Claire Duncanson and Rachel Woodward. 'Regendering the military: Theorizing women's military participation', *Security Dialogue*, 47, no. 1 (2016), 3–21.

[8] Louise Chappell. 'Gender and Judging at the International Criminal Court', *Politics & Gender*, 6, no 3 (2010): 484–495.

[9] Soumita Basu. 'The UN Security Council and the Political Economy of the WPS Resolutions', *Politics & Gender,* 13, no 4 (2010): 721–727.

[10] Katharine. A. M. Wright 'NATO's Adoption of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security: Making the Agenda a Reality', *International Political Science Review*. 37, no 3 (2016): 350–361; Matthew Hurley. 'The "Genderman": (Re)Negotiating Militarised Masculinities When "Doing Gender" at NATO', *Critical Military Studies*. 4, no 1 (2018): 72-91; Megan Bastick and Claire Duncanson. 'Agents of Change? Gender Advisors in NATO Militaries', *International Peacekeeping*, 25, no. 4 (2018): 554-577.

[11] Annika Kronsell. 'Sexed Bodies and Military Masculinities: Gender Path Dependence in EU's Common Security and Defense Policy', *Men and Masculinities,* 19, no. 3 (2015):1–26; Roberta Guerrina and Katharine A. M. Wright 'Gendering Normative Power Europe: Lessons from the Women, Peace and Security agenda', *International Affairs*. 92 no. 2 (2016): 293-312; Roberta Guerrina, Laura Chappell and Katharine A. M. Wright. 'Transforming CSDP?: Feminist Triangles and Gender Regimes', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56, no. 5 (2016): 1036-1052.

[12] Jennifer Thomson. "The Women, Peace and Security Agenda and Feminist Institutionalism : A Research Agenda." *International Studies Review*, (2018): 1–16.

So why have feminist institutionalist approaches not been widely adopted by feminist IR scholars? The slow emergence of feminist IR insight on international institutions can be attributed to the way in which the project emerged as a challenge to mainstream IR. Early feminist IR scholars sought to 'actively change IR, not just participate in the discipline by 'adding something' – the conventional strategy'[13]. This was undoubtedly an important move and has led to a largely diverse and broad spectrum of feminist IR encompassing post-structuralist and constructivist approaches. Underpinning feminist IR scholarship is an understanding that the personal is political is international[14], yet if we conceptualise IR and international relations as co-constitutive, then we need to take seriously not just what we study but *how* we study it. So while feminist IR's welcome challenge to the mainstream's preoccupation with studying those seen to hold power within the international system – states and latterly international institutions – has provided space to reconceptualise the very notion of international relations, it should not come at the expense of providing feminist knowledge of these institutions. Such knowledge is becoming more pressing given many of these institutions are now actively engaged with the Women, Peace and Security agenda, understood by many as a 'feminist achievement'[15]. As our discussions demonstrate, we believe insights from feminist IR can make important contributions to Feminist Institutionalism. If informal structures are key to a Feminist Institutionalist approach, then feminist IR adds knowledge of how everyday practices and narratives shape institutional outcomes in the context of global power relations.

To be effective institutions must be 'lived' by actors and expressed not only in formal rules but in conventions and the 'unwritten rules' governing day-to-day life. Rules-in-use are 'more than personal habits: they are shared among actors and can be articulated by them'[16]. Here, feminist IR work on narratives can make a useful contribution[17]. One shared view among the contributors of this discussion piece is that the stories people tell of their experiences within international institutions, including those of the researcher, are fundamental for understanding the interplay between the formal and informal. Through listening to the stories of individuals tasked with implementing a particular institutional policy we find out something about the broader institutional

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[13] V Spike Peterson. "Rethinking, Returning, Reflecting – Feminist International Relations (IR)", *Alternatif Politika* 9, no. 3 (2017): 328.

[14] Cynthia Enloe. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics.* (London: Pandora, 1989).

[15] Cynthia Cockburn. 'Snagged On The Contradiction: NATO, UNSC Resolution 1325, and Feminist Responses', (2011), http://www.no-to-nato.org/2011/11/24/snagged-on-the-contradiction-nato-unsc-resolution-1325-and-feminist-responses/ [Accessed 20 August 2018]

[16] Steve Leach and Viviene Lowndes. 2007. 'Of roles and rules: Analysing the changing relationship between political leaders and chief executives in local government', *Public Policy and Administration,* 22(2), p. 185.

[17] Annick Wibben. *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011)

value placed on it[18]. For example, an institution may have a formal policy for implementing Women, Peace and Security but the 'everyday' mundane interaction of the official tasked with realising this may point to strong institutional resistance, or it may reveal how social actors within the institution successfully disrupt established institutional norms and practices to challenge entrenched behaviours and facilitate change.

Feminist IR would appear then to have much to offer the Feminist Institutionalism project. Its primary contribution should be to add a global dimension to institutional analysis of the informal within institutions, to examine the transregional and transnational nature of international institutions, and to draw on feminist IR's engagement with postcolonial theories. The need to investigate gendered power dynamics between international institutions such as the UN and NATO, as they operate and interact with one another within the international system, and affect our gendered everyday lived experiences, is also becoming more urgent. When 'studying up' in institutions, we advocate taking into account the voices of the subaltern – not as a homogenous group, but by identifying the contestations and diversity in the subaltern – to uncover how within institutions, gendered, raced and classed representations and cultural differences are produced, sustained and/or resisted by social actors[19]. Similarly, as we discuss, developing multi-situated postcolonial analyses brings a different sensibility to the study of the institutions and embeds feminist praxis, while supporting the broader decolonising IR project[20]. If we understand the study and practice of international institutions as co-constitutive, then taking a critical, feminist, postcolonial approach allows feminists to explore how competitions between patriarchal regimes take effect within institutions; to examine why some people's bodies are perceived as the accepted norm in some institutions and not others[21]; and to challenge the reproduction of international institutions as white, Western spaces.

Observing the important contribution feminist scholarship can and is making to the study of international institutions, we challenge mainstream approaches to consider their methodological

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[18] Matthew Hurley. 'Watermelons & Weddings: Making Women, Peace and Security 'Relevant' at NATO through (Re)telling Stories of Success', *Global Society*, 2018 [Advance copy available online].

[19] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea,* ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture.* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).

[20] Siba Grovogui. "Regimes of Sovereignty: Rethinking International Morality and the African Condition," *The European Journal of International Relations*, 8, no. 3 (September 2002): 315-38; Chowdry Geeta and Sheila Nair (eds). *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, gender and class.* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005).

[21] Sara Ahmed. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life.* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2012); Sara Ahmed. *Living a Feminist Life.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

choices more carefully, and to be self-reflexive on their positionality as researchers maneuvering within institutions. This includes being more open about the evolution of a project's research design, as well as more explicit about how our positionality affects our biases and assumptions when we decide what to study and how to study it[22]. A key theme of our discussion at ISA was the contribution reflexivity could make to our understandings of institutions. Our own personal stories of the research experience, either within the institutions themselves or through observations from outside formal institutional structures, have informed our knowledge of these institutions. The centrality of these narratives has underpinned our decision to keep some of the conversational format within this discussion article. We consider the value of institutional knowledge for feminist IR; feminist IR contributions to the study of institutions; the challenges of gaining access to institutional knowledge, and the creative strategies adopted when researching in high-security, complex and changeable institutional environments. Our discussion underscores the importance of feminist knowledge of international institutions as a counter-narrative to hegemonic accounts emerging from both the institutions themselves, and scholars studying them without a critical feminist perspective.

**Centering power and gender in the study of international institutions**

**Christine Cheng (Chair): Why do institutions matter and why should feminist IR scholars study them?**

**Katharine A. M. Wright:** Writing in 1993, Cynthia Enloe called for 'feminist anthropologists to imagine their 'field' as lying inside NATO's Brussels headquarters' because 'We [feminist scholars] know all too little about the internal cultural dynamics of institutions such as NATO'[23]. Twenty-five years later, what could be articulated as feminist institutional understandings of NATO and other international institutions are only beginning to emerge. In this respect then, feminist IR is playing 'catch-up' to understand how such institutions function, and their gendered impact on our everyday lives.

**Maria Martin de Almagro:** It is necessary to research international security institutions because of the direction in which the WPS agenda is being taken in by institutions. Institutions such as the UN, NATO, the EU, and the African Union are not going to disappear and they will go on regulating our lives. Without our engagement, we may see the misrepresentation of feminist perspectives. Some of the critical feminist security literature warns about the risks of engaging with the state or engaging with international institutions because they are seen as co-opters of the

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[22] Christine Cheng. *Extralegal Groups in Post-Conflict Liberia: How Trade Makes the State*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). 285-306.

[23] Cynthia Enloe. 1993. *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. p. 203.

feminist project. For instance, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015) explicitly links the Women, Peace and Security agenda to countering terrorism and violent extremism. Some scholars criticise that these links have the potential to align WPS with militarised solutions to terrorism and extremism, co-opting the feminist agenda on participation in security governance and putting in danger the same bodies the agenda claims to protect. The UN fears the radicalisation of Muslim female bodies, but it wants to use those same bodies to stop terrorism.[24]

**Soumita Basu:** Conceptually, I find particularly helpful Robert Cox's[25] characterisation of international institutions as upholding the hegemonic order as well as holding the possibilities for change within it, and Whitworth's[26] feminist adaptation of the same. Feminists should care about international institutions, particularly the UN and its agencies, because it is another arena for emancipatory politics. We know from the work of feminist civil society that international law and norms can be used to put pressure on governments to address gender concerns. International institutions are not only intergovernmental but also increasingly in most arenas transnational in nature[27]. Feminist scholars are critiquing international institutions where these policies are developed and legitimised. On WPS, the work of Pratt[28] and Shepherd[29] is illustrative. There was barely any research on the Security Council, the institution that I study, prior to 2000. There are some publications on peacekeeping, but nothing that really takes the Council seriously. Our interest in the last decade and a half has much to do with the passage of UNSCR 1325. So, scholarship has followed this important policy development, though there are many more policy developments that we need to investigate. Yet, even now there is a tendency to see the Council as a monolith, which limits our understanding of how this important security institution operates. If we do not fully understand its processes, we can neither engage with the institution nor identify possibilities for its transformation.

**Roberta Guerrina:** If we examine the emergence of the EU as a gender actor over the last seventy years, we observe the importance of institutions and institutional actors in reifying, and occasionally challenging, structures of power. Institutions are the spaces where policies are

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[24] Fionnuala Ní Aoláin. 'The 'war on terror' and extremism: assessing the relevance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda'. *International Affairs*. 92, no 2 (2016): 275-291.

[25] Robert W. Cox. 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10 no 2 (1981): 126-155.

[26] Sandra Whitworth. *Feminism and International Relations*, (London: Macmillan, 1994).

[27] Bruce Cronin. 'The Two Faces of the United Nations: The Tension Between Intergovernmentalism and Transnationalism', *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 8, no. 1 (202): 53-71.

[28] Nicola Pratt. 'Reconceptualizing Gender, Reinscribing Racial-Sexual Boundaries in International Security: The Case of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security"' *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2013): 772-783.

[29] Laura. J. Shepherd. 'Power and Authority in the Production of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325', *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2008): 383-404.

negotiated and agreed. They are a platform for different sets of actors and interests. Yet, without understanding institutional structures and competencies, we cannot explain why NATO, rather than the EU, is the institution that has led on the implementation of WPS on the European continent[30]. At first glance, this is an interesting paradox, particularly given that the EU has wide-reaching gender equality provisions that govern the work of the Single Market. Moreover, it has sought to position itself as a normative power, where equality and human rights, are promoted as foundational values. We would therefore expect European external narratives to be aligned to the UN's WPS agenda. However, this has not been the case until recently. We have to explore institutional structures, mechanisms, and how policies are formulated in order to understand this silence. Feminist Institutionalism can help us analyse complex institutional structures and actors. It is through this prism that we can start to unpack the unintended gender consequences of policy domains that are traditionally seen as gender neutral, for example, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, but that are deeply gendered. Annica Kronsell's[31] work is particularly insightful here and looking at the EU security and defense policy from a feminist institutionalist approach helps us to understand the role of critical actors, culture and structures in shaping key policies.

**Matthew Hurley:** International institutions shape and are shaped by human behaviour. We conduct most of our lives within institutions and interacting with them; working with them, supporting, opposing, resisting them. This complex interplay between these conscious and unconscious interactions is an important reason why institutions matter. Since institutions are often treated in mainstream IR theory as unified and homogeneous, they are often discussed in shorthand. My research is on NATO's adoption and interpretation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, but particularly how that impacts the reconstruction of militarised masculinities and femininities *within* NATO. One of the key questions for me is: 'what is NATO'? As feminists we should seek to 'crack open' and expose the complexities and contradictions within institutions such as NATO to problematise shorthand understandings and what they have come to signify. Feminists should also care about international security institutions because institutions are never static. They are never constant. So they can never, in a sense, be fully understood. A constant, collective, critical feminist gaze achieved through a multiplicity of research methods, approaches, projects and theories is needed to account for this constant change and flux.

**Georgina Holmes:** This is why the Feminist Institutionalist conceptualisation of international institutions as changeable and flexible gendered social systems and networks with informal and formal rules and regulations is useful[32]. In his critique of institutions, economist Geoffrey Hodgson argues that institutions use mechanisms of survival and replication[33]. Feminists need to examine

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[30] Guerrina and Wright, 'Gendering Normative Power Europe'.
[31] Kronsell, 'Sexed Bodies and Military Masculinities'.
[32] Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 'New Institutionalism Through a Gender Lens'.
[33] Geoffrey M. Hodgson. 'What are institutions?'. *Journal of Economic Issues*. XL, no. (2006, March): 1-25.

how institutions continually regenerate when we research co-optation of feminist agendas, as well as the replication and reproduction of unequal distributions of power within institutions, and there is some interesting work in the field of feminist politics and sociology around how change takes effect within institutions. Hodgson argues that 'the durability of institutions stems from the fact that they can usefully create stable expectations of the behaviour of others'.[34] Sara Ahmed has shown how institutionalised recognition and acceptance of people of colour, often established through diversity initiatives, can present an image of change and progress towards social justice, while creating a stable expectation of othered bodies. In reality, these initiatives function to stabilise and reproduce white male elite dominance and institutional whiteness by giving the impression that institutional racism is being addressed and in doing so, the centrality of whiteness is confirmed[35]. In Ahmed's case study, pigeonholing women of colour as diversity champions becomes a means to contain and control their bodies, as well as manage their access to power and their ability to instigate genuine change within the institution[36].

**Why should feminist IR scholars 'study up'?**

**Maria:** Before feminists began researching institutions, there were two types of studies. Those institutionalists studying formal institutions[37] and those who engaged in the stories of the informal, of the subaltern[38]. In the study of post-conflict and development settings, informal institutions are often perceived in a very negative ways, as undermining good governance by introducing clientelism and patronage. But in my research on Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, I identify how informal institutions such as Women's Courts can also bring positive change, either by complimenting or substituting formal institutions. We also need to think creatively about how we theorise institutions as feminist IR scholars through connecting the local to the international. This is important because institutions are the rules that structure social and political life[39], and the rules determined at international level are going to have consequences on the everyday life of those excluded and marginalised from formal decision-making processes on and about the reconstruction of their own countries. The adequate recognition of institutional injustices and the possible overcoming of oppression can only be achieved by understanding how international processes of global capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy are shaping social and political life in post-conflict

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[34] Hodgson. 'What are institutions?', 2.

[35] Ahmed, *On Being Included*.

[36] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 44.

[37] Robert Keohane. 'International Institutions: Two approaches'. *International Studies Quarterly*, 32, no 4 (1998): 379-396.

[38] James C. Scott. *The Weapons of the Weak.* (Yale University Press, 1985).

[39] Mona-Lena Krook and Fiona MacKay. *Gender, Politics and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

and development settings[40] and how these can be contested. My research has examined the contestation of the meanings of gender security between UN Women, international NGOs and local women's organisations in Burundi and Liberia during the development and implementation of their respective National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325. This drew attention to how less powerful actors who do not have agenda setting powers, or have scarce financial or discursive resources, such as rural women's organisations, can find 'soft spots' and build on changes through the vagueness of meaning that international institutions often put forward[41].

**Soumita:** It is possible to study the ways in which power operates within institutions, and the consequences of practices within institutions without necessarily endorsing the institution itself. Studying the subaltern within institutions using a bottom-up approach is a valuable research strategy. But, exactly who do we study as the subaltern? As IR scholars, we are attuned to look for patterns, and may miss taking note of the diversity, contestations and indeed contradictions within that which we identify as the subaltern. A multi-sited analysis would go some distance in addressing such a challenge. So, if I study the Security Council, it makes sense to go to New York, to talk to people and conduct research there. But what does the Council look like from different parts of the world? How is its work understood in India, for example? But it may well be limiting to study India just because I am from India. Instead, it would be helpful to also consider the Council's deliberations from multiple sites such as, for instance, Chile, Nigeria and the Pacific Islands. This would bring a different sensibility to the study of the Security Council, even as the question of ease of access to those 'in the know' of Security Council practices in all these sites remain.

However, in spite of the wide array of existing scholarship on international institutions and organisations, we continue to have a somewhat limited understanding of (and explanations for) what goes on in these spaces. Some of these blind spots relate to the realist and liberalist assumptions about the study of world politics that dominate IR. When we are studying up using feminist lenses and research strategies, it is a real opportunity for us to think about reframing the study of IR itself. If we think of IR as the study of centers of power – Enloe, for instance, suggests this – then it becomes an excuse for leaving a lot of material on the 'cutting-room floor'[42]. Instead studying institutions from different sites and using multiple perspectives can be used as a research strategy to re-frame the fundamental assumptions in IR itself, whatever those fundamental assumptions may be.

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[40] Boaventura De Sousa Santos. *Epistemologies of the South. Justice against epistemicide.* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[41] Maria Martin de Almagro Iniesta. 'Negotiated contestation in peacebuilding: maintaining or transforming systemic narratives?' *Critical Studies on Security*, 3, no. 3 (2015): 326-327.

[42] Cynthia Enloe. *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 22.

**Katharine:** Broadening our sites of knowledge of international institutions and finding the 'soft spots' within them is exactly why we as feminist scholars should 'study up'. There are moments, especially crisis moments, when institutions are looking for new directions. For example, it could be argued that NATO is in crisis given the lackluster reception of the current US administration towards it. Crucially, in situations of crisis there can also be opportunities to challenge established gender hierarchies[43]. Change can happen when the cracks become visible. As a feminist scholar you remain an outsider, a stranger to the institution, even as you build knowledge of it and interact with it. You have not learnt the 'rules' so, as Sara Ahmed[44] astutely highlights, you are moving at a slower pace than those within the institution and able to notice things 'insiders' have missed. It can also mean that confrontation becomes more likely, particularly when a crisis makes gendered hierarchies and practices more visible, you point out what seems self-evident to you but has remained invisible to those who know the 'rules'.

**Georgina:** Both external and internal crisis moments elicit change, as Mahoney and Thelen[45] contend. The UN's response to the perpetration of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by French peacekeepers in Central African Republic (CAR) in 2015 is good example of this. In this instance, the UN covered up the crimes, until a whistleblower revealed them. The UN will ordinarily present itself as a singular actor, but when a crisis occurs and they are exposed, the institution seems to morph into a network of social actors, and representatives try to explain away why it was that the individual actors did things wrong. The homogenous institution disappears momentarily and then it reappears once the crisis is over. A UN staff member in New York who is working on preventing SEA explained to me that one of the reasons why the UN realised they had to elicit change and, in his words, 'get their house in order' was because they could not hide behind the racial stereotypes that it is mainly black or brown men who commit SEA or that it is the military masculinities of troop contributing countries from the global south. The view in the UN is that the French should have known better. So racial stereotypes were used as a façade to enable the security institution to operate in a certain way prior to that. Mahoney and Thelen[46] argue that you have to look at incremental change as well change brought on by external crises, and that is where the idea of regeneration is important. If you integrate more women and/or people of colour into security institutions, what does it actually lead to? Is it incremental change or is it co-optation of social justice agendas to ensure the regeneration of male-centric institutions?

**Methodological challenges to 'studying up'**

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[43] Kirsten Haack. 'Women, Organizational Crisis, and Access to Leadership in International Organizations', *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*. Routledge, 38, no. 2 (2017) 175–198.
[44] Ahmed, 'Living a feminist life', kindle location 914-918.
[45] James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelon, *Explaining institutional change*.
[46] Mahoney and Thelon, *Explaining institutional change*.

**The challenges of accessing knowledge in international security institutions**

**Katharine:** NATO is under challenge from the current US administration, and it is interesting that at the same time as this happened, white women have become significantly more visible within the alliance. We know that when organisations are in crisis women tend to be promoted to take on leadership roles[47]. Women become signals of institutional change, yet when they then inevitably fail in those roles because of the crisis, they are held doubly to account for that, which reinforces the glass ceiling[48]. This is worth interrogating in greater detail. The promotion of women, albeit in a superficial manner and the continued marginalisation of people of colour within NATO serves to engender hegemonic whiteness, with women coming to 'occupy a privileged status in the equality praxis'[49]. As Malinda S. Smith[50] observes, this creates a dividing practice, whereby white women become the 'other', and other marginalised groups become the 'other Others' to be addressed as a later date. The 'other Others' are perceived as presenting a greater challenge, rather than a more straightforwardly achievable goal, such as equity for white women. As feminist scholars, we must pay attention to this in order to realise the 'radical transformation of the existing gendered, classed, and racial global order by politicizing which and when differences matter; why inequalities persist; and where military men and women are not equally recognised, positioned or privileged'[51]. We must press for data on representation within NATO as a mechanism to hold the alliance to account. NATO have not released their human resources data on gender and diversity in NATO HQ since 2012[52].

**Georgina:** Another access challenge feminists researchers face concerns the ability of these institutions to control knowledge. For example, institutions present themselves as being in control of change processes, even when these change processes may be brought about by external pressures such as shifting power relations within the international system. Institutions rely heavily on their image and their reputation in order to generate external legitimacy. In the PR industry,

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[47]Michelle K. Ryan and S. Alexander Haslam. 'The Glass Cliff: Evidence that Women are Over-Represented in Precarious Leadership Positions', *British Journal of Management*, 16, no. 2 (005): 81–90.

[48] Susanne Bruckmüller and Nyla R. Branscombe. 'The Glass Cliff: When and Why Women are Selected as Leaders in Crisis Contexts', *The British Journal of Social Psychology*, 49 (2010): 433–51.

[49] Malinda S. Smith. 'Gender, Whiteness, and "Other Others" in the Academy', in *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century*, eds. Malinda S. Smith, Sherene Razack, and Sunera Thobani (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2010), 37.

[50] Smith "Gender, Whiteness, and "Other Others"".

[51] Marsha G. Henry. 'Why critical military studies needs to smash imperial white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy: a rejoinder', *Critical Military Studies*. (2018):1–4.

[52] NATO. *Gender Balance in NATO HQ International Staff – 2012*. (2012), http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_topics/20120301_gender_and_diversity-gender_2012.pdf, accessed 20 August 2018.

this is called brand and reputation management. It is a way of controlling public and institutional knowledge about the institution and maintaining control over the dominant institutional narrative – or narratives – which articulate the identity and brand of the institution. Feminist praxis needs to disrupt institutional control over knowledge production, but this can only be achieved by gaining access to employees within institutions who are willing to open up and speak outside of, what I call in my research, the 'institutional script'[53].

**Soumita:** I think this different – feminist – sensibility to the study of international institutions also helps address a very practical concern in terms of accessing these very elite institutions. Consider, for instance, the geographical location of the headquarters of the institutions we study. Yes, Bangkok and Nairobi are also key centers for UN regional offices and headquarters. However, unless you are looking at a 'field-based case study', you would probably have to head to New York or Geneva or The Hague, certainly for research on Women, Peace and Security issues. Securing research funds is a shared challenge for scholars all over the world, but the return tickets from London to New York tend to be cheaper than the ones from New Delhi. There is another shared experience that cuts across national boundaries - notably the privilege of being the well-traveled international elite. So much of research in this field depends on personal relationships and networks. If you do not regularly travel to New York or to the 'important' conferences and workshops (some that are 'by invitation only'), how do you even develop those relationships that give you access to privileged knowledge? And so, expanding the scope of 'what we want to know' and 'who we want to know this from' is a valuable normative commitment, and it makes our research richer.

**Christine: What creative research strategies might feminist IR scholars develop to study international institutions?**

**Maria:** I have a couple of suggestions that might help feminist scholars when 'studying up'. The first one can be useful while we are in the field, and the second one can is useful throughout the whole research process. When in the field, I found England's strategies helpful[54]. One of the strategies requires the researcher to adopt the position of the supplicant, which means accepting that the knowledge of the person being researched is greater than that of the researcher. This shifts power over to the research participant. This strategy is very helpful in research environments that are hostile to feminism, or to feminist intervention. As a white, European, young woman, I could

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[53] Georgina Holmes. 'Situating agency, embodied practices and norm implementation in peacekeeping training', *International Peacekeeping*, (August, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2018.1503934.

[54] Kim V. L. England. 'Getting personal: Reflexivity positionality, and feminist research', *The Professional Geographer*, 46, no 1 (1994): 80-89.

access sites of power such as the UN mission in Liberia and in Burundi quite easily. I would sometimes feel ashamed of my own privilege and complicity with power, particularly because I was studying the interplay between these sites of power and grassroots women groups, which did not have very much access to those institutional spaces where knowledge and policy are produced. Research is political and feminist ethics compel us to consider whether we are contributing to the perpetuation of inequalities when we become entangled in power relations in the field. Here I found the work of Becker and Aiello quite useful[55]. They claim that while in the field, you should evaluate your decisions over the long-term, and not try to evaluate every single decision you have to make. This helps you navigate power relations in the field, but also to be self-compassionate. Sometimes you cannot resist gender, race or class dynamics in the field, sometimes you can. For example, using reflexivity to understand why I nodded when the person from the Ministry of Gender told me, 'Well, we cannot entrust grassroots women organisations with money'. Reflexivity here helps you as the scholar to identify the informal rules. It does not mean that you are condoning the actions or words, rather that instead of challenging the power dynamics at the time, you prioritise critical feminist research outcomes that will help you influence that policy debate in order to uncover and challenge the broader power dynamics.

**Matthew:** I am interested in the interplay between the institution's formal policies and the experiences on the ground, of the people in NATO headquarters who are tasked with implementing those policies; in particular, the stories that they tell about that work. Annick Wibben argues that understanding and accounting for narratives in the study of security is 'essential because they are the primary way by which we make sense of the world around us, produce meaning, articulate intentions and legitimise action'[56]. Specific stories facilitate the construction of a broader 'gender narrative', helping the organisation to promote the 'relevancy' of new gender initiatives and overcome resistance[57]. One of the strategies that I have taken in my research is to focus on storytelling within NATO, particularly the complexity and confusion between the stories that people tell about themselves and their work, and the broader narrative that NATO wants to construct and advance about its engagement with WPS[58]. I focus on the multiplicity of stories of the same events. Asking questions such as: how do different members of that institution

[55] S. Becker and B Aiello 2013. 'The continuum of complicity: "Studying up"/studying power as a feminist, anti-racist, or social justice venture', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 38, pp. 63-74.
[56] Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies.*
[57] Robyn J. Ely and Deborah E. Meyerson. 'Advancing Gender Equality in Organisations: The Challenge and Importance of Maintaining a Gender Narrative', *Organisation* 7, no. 4 (2000):589-609.
[58] Hurley 'The "Genderman"'; Hurley 'Watermelons & Weddings'; Matthew Hurley. 'Gender Mainstreaming and Integration in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation' in *The Palgrave Handbook on Gender and the Military*, eds. Claire Duncanson and Rachel Woodward (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 403-417.

experience, recall, retell particular events, policies and practices? Do they do so in different or similar ways? How does the institution choose to tell or represent the same event? Analysing this interplay between formal and informal narratives helps to expose the complexities, contradictions and power dynamics inherent within the institution.

This approach also includes listening to participants' accounts of the 'everyday'. This is essential as sustained ethnographic studies of military institutions are often very difficult to do and therefore participants' work might not be directly observable. It allows for the ways gendered power dynamics manifest – often through repetitive or seemingly mundane tasks – to be explored from those individual perspectives. For example, during my first interview at NATO HQ, the female participant's office door was open, when a male military officer stopped and stood in the doorway, leaning into the room, listening to our conversation. You could see him physically filling the doorframe, taking ownership of that space, not saying 'excuse me' or anything like that. He then began helping himself to a big bowl of sweets by the door. My participant acknowledged him and had a brief chat and we exchanged some awkward smiles. After he left I asked: 'So, what happened there? That was slightly strange'. She explained: 'When I first came here, the office door was shut, everybody would just walk past. It was my strategy to open the door and keep a big bowl of sweets. Now people walk past, they take a sweet and maybe they talk about gender'. So, an interaction that I initially took as strange and rude, was the result of a deliberate – yet informal – strategy to increase my participant's visibility and awareness of her work that spoke volumes about the institutional context she was working within. She finished by saying: 'What man would think of that?'

**Georgina:** Part of the challenge when you conduct research in institutions, is that the institution hosts you and therefore controls your access most of the time to ensure only sanctioned information is made public and that the institution's image and reputation is preserved. Matthew gave the example of the man in the doorway. It was by chance that Matthew was there, rather than he had gone out to find it specifically. We need those moments of chance, but how do we develop a strategy to gather chance information? I research into how male and female uniformed peacekeepers from African and European troop contributing countries are trained and deployed to UN peacekeeping operations. Like Maria, I adopt the position of a supplicant in an attempt to access the personal stories of social actors that work within military institutions, although some of the techniques I used in my previous career when I worked on improving staff engagement and delivering organisational change programs in large multi-site institutions have proven useful. I think about staff engagement. How engaged is the staff member in the institution? And I ask questions to find out, to gauge what they think and feel about their position in the institution and the institution itself. In their feedback, you get their stories and you start to hear how they perceive themselves in relation to those formal and informal systems. They give you examples quite often. Not all of them do and not all of them want to talk outside of 'the institutional script', but then that's an interesting aspect which I explore in my research and it has allowed me to consider how

interviewees exercise their agency in different ways during the research encounter[59]. I think about staff morale in relation to agency, norms, practices and structures. I find myself stepping back into the role of the consultant who goes into an institution and speaks as a third party: 'I am not part of your department or team. I am here to feedback your opinions and feelings to management'. I found this was the most successful approach I used during one-to-one conversations and focus groups when working in strategic communications. Perhaps I used a feminist approach to interviewing then or perhaps I am now employing some of the feminist techniques which male-dominated institutions use to enable them to regenerate and survive. I was working for the elites in power, but I was required to develop trust with staff across the institution so that they would confide in me.

Ahmed describes how people of colour are hosted by white institutions, and as visitors, are managed in order to stabilise their behaviour within the institution. Researchers are also outsiders and othered bodies that have the potential to destabilise institutions. As a white, British woman, my body is not the institutional norm when I conduct research in African militaries. Nor is it the norm when I conduct research in the British Army because I am a civilian (who in one tranche of the research was pregnant). Yet research participants may also regulate their behaviour during the research encounter in accordance with institutional codes of conduct. In interviews with British peacekeepers, white male and female military personnel openly discussed racial and sexual discrimination, but some men of colour and one gay man (identified by his white, male commanding officer, who expected his colleague to talk very openly) would not speak of experiencing discrimination, preferring instead to revert back to the institutional script promoting progress towards diversity and inclusion within the British Army. Perhaps because they were in such a minority (the 'other' others), they knew there was a high chance they could be identified by their responses and were cautious. Yet women of colour were extremely vocal when discussing their experiences of race and gender discrimination. When the Ghana Armed Forces (GAF) hosted me, a male major was instructed to organise my access to research participants. Aware of the objectives of the research project, he seemed keen to avoid appearing to embody toxic masculinity. Sometimes his actions seemed exaggerated. For example, he repeatedly performed as a chivalrous man by opening my car door when I exited, which I found uncomfortable, particularly since chivalry is a colonial-imposed European code of conduct. His performance was completely at odds with the rest of the men's performances within the military institution, and he may have believed that in his role as host (and representative of the Ghana Armed Forces), he could somehow influence the findings of the research project, or at least exonerate himself from the ongoing subordination of women within the GAF.

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[59] Georgina Holmes.'Gendering the Rwanda Defence Force: A Critical Assessment', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 8, no. 4 (2014): 321-333; Georgina Holmes. 'Gender and the Military in Post-Genocide Rwanda' in *Women and Genocide: Multifaceted Roles and Global Perspectives*, eds. Elissa Bemporad and Joyce W. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018); Holmes, 'Situating agency: embodied practices and norm implementation'.

**Matthew:** We also need to account for our own 'research stories', especially those 'beginning tales'[60] as we venture out into a new field or new institution. Being aware of, and opening up, the 'black box of awkwardness'[61] that can come with entering a new and unfamiliar institution is important because tensions and awkward moments can be analytically productive and yet we rarely ever write about them. In my research, assumptions and misperceptions about gender and particularly my sexuality led to several awkward encounters. Reflecting on these purposively, in-depth and with a view to improving the rigour of the claims drawn from such social encounters and co-constituted knowledge, exposed certain gender and sexual norms, behaviours and expectations – such as a pervasive heteronormativity. These norms are so ubiquitous they become invisible, unremarkable and 'built into the walls' of institutions of hegemonic masculinity, such as NATO, yet nevertheless remain powerful exclusionary barriers to those who do not conform[62].

A collaborative reflexivity on varied and similar experiences is useful here too. Katharine and I have written a piece on our gendered experiences of doing interviews at NATO[63]. We were asking relatively similar questions to relatively similar groups of people, but we had very different experiences, and very different data was generated from the interviews that we conducted. Bringing these experiences and this data together is invaluable and produces a fuller understanding of an institution such as NATO. I am also interested in the physical architecture of the institutions that we study. How and in what ways does NATO HQ as a physical space work and how does it feel to me as a researcher? Where are – and what is the role and impact of – the various symbols of NATO's identity on display? Where are those gender offices located in that building and does that tell me anything about the importance NATO affords to WPS? I'm fascinated by methodologies that explore the architecture of security institutions – though this is not yet something I have used in my work. I think this could be a productive avenue of research to explore in regards to NATO.

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[60] Kathy Charmaz and Richard G. Mitchell. 'The Myth of Silent Authorship: Self, Substance and Style in Ethnographic Writing', in *Reflexivity and Voice*, ed Rosanna Hertz (Thousand Oaks, CA, and London: Sage, 1997), 193-215; Daniel Conway. 'Masculinities and Narrating the Past: Experiences of Researching White Men who Refused to Serve in the Apartheid Army', *Qualitative Research* 8, no 3 (2008): 347-354.

[61] Juliette Koning and Can-Seng Ooi. 'Awkward encounters and ethnography'. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 8, no 1 (2013): 16-32.

[62] Annica Kronsell. 'Gendered Practices in Institutions of Hegemonic Masculinity: Reflections from Feminist Standpoint Theory', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7, no 2 (2005): 291.

[63] Katharine A. M. Wright and Matthew Hurley. 'Navigating gender, power and perceptions when researching NATO: a conversation', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 19, no 3 (2017), 390–392.

**Roberta:** In order to unpack the impact of the EU as a gender actor, it is essential to understand the positions of key actors within this institution's complex organisational structure. Looking at the development of the equality agenda in the context of employment policy, Alison Woodward used the concept of Feminist Triangles[64]. This framework conceives of there being three cornerstones to development of the equality agenda within European policy-making structures. The first pillar is Femocrats. These are feminist bureaucrats working within the institution. They have detailed institutional knowledge that allows them to maximise their impact on the very fabric of the institution. The second pillar are civil society groups. They provide critical voices and counter narratives thus exerting pressure on the institution. The third, and final pillar, are epistemic communities, so academia itself can provide another pressure point. An opportunity for civil society and certain communities to inform policy and the decision-making processes and allow gender norms to shape those processes. When these triangles, or feminist constellations, work effectively, they open up a space for the institutionalisation of gender equality policies. We have tried to transpose this idea of feminist triangles or constellations to the work of the EU as an external actor[65]. Of course, security and defence, as a policy area, does not lend itself as easily to the input of civil society groups or epistemic communities. The role of femocrats working within the institutions therefore becomes all the more significant. Researching this particular aspect of the development of the European foreign policy agenda requires high levels of sensitivity to the internal dynamics of the institution, the way power is exercised and the role of multiple interests in shaping the agenda.

**Katharine:** Perhaps my approach is creative from a NATO studies perspective, but actually it is just inherent to how I operate as a feminist scholar. The reflexivity in the research process, which Matthew talked about and we have discussed elsewhere[66], is key here. I am still reflecting on interviews I did a year ago. One man I interviewed in NATO was very resistant. Then I got to one particular question and he shut down the interview, and said, 'Aren't you a clever little girl?' I packed up my stuff and out I went, seemingly defeated. For several days I was annoyed about this, but as I got over my own ego, I began to think that actually that particular thing that I mentioned was really important and I followed up on that. He will never know that this led to further research in this area and a publication[67]. I probably would not have pursued this, at least at that stage, if it was not for that encounter.

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[64] Alison Woodward. 'Building velvet triangles: gender and informal governance', in *Informal Governance in the European Union*, eds. Thomas Christiansen and Simona Piattoni. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2003).

[65] Guerrina, Chappell and Wright 'Transforming CSDP?'.
[66] Wright and Hurley 'Navigating gender, power and perceptions'.
[67] Katharine A. M. Wright. 'Telling NATO's Story of Afghanistan: Gender and the Alliance's Digital Diplomacy.' *Media, War & Conflict*, (September, 2017).

**Christine: I am going to throw in one more thing, about body language. If we are talking about techniques, I know that I am very conscious of, and always processing the social dynamics in the room.**

**Matthew:** To link it back to what I was saying before, I have always felt very awkward in large groups of heterosexual men, being very aware of my own and others' body language. So, going into an institution of hegemonic masculinity like NATO HQ was an interesting experience. It was particularly apparent during the interviews with male participants as some of the bonding ploys[68] they used to try and establish rapport with me were uncomfortable in that they were based on an assumption of a shared heterosexuality. They mentioned their wives, girlfriends and children straight away. I suppose to prevent any misperceptions about their sexuality that I might have about them, which has been identified as a common fear for men working on gender initiatives within various institutions[69]. This threw up all manner of interesting and useful observations and reflections particularly around the heteronormativity that pervades NATO and what it might mean for me to 'pass' as a straight, white man in that setting.

**Concluding remarks**

After our roundtable at the International Studies Association Annual Convention in 2017, it became clear that more could be made of the issues and themes raised by the participants. Publishing our thoughts as a journal article has provided us with the opportunity to further reflect on our own approaches to the study of feminist IR and international institutions and it is hoped, will facilitate further debate and discussion more broadly. Our grounding in feminist ethics and our feminist curiosity has provided each of us with tools to research a range of institutions, and the article itself has been an example of collaborative reflexivity. In particular, the discussion has pushed us to reflect more carefully about what is meant by 'creative methods' and what 'studying up' actually entails. Broaching the issue of positionality and the possibility that knowledge of institutions such as the UN Security Council or NATO and the EU exist outside of New York or Brussels, we have made a case for multi-site analysis of international security institutions, including studying the subaltern.

Our reflections also identified the normative underpinnings of feminist IR research of international institutions, such as finding the 'soft spots' – particularly when they become visible during institutional regeneration and crisis moments. The strengths of feminist IR in the narrative

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[68] Conway 'Masculinities and Narrating the Past'; Michael Schwalbe and Michelle Wolkomir. 'The Masculine Self as Problem and Resource in Interview Studies of Men', *Men and Masculinities* 4, no. 1 (2001): 90–103.

[69] Sandy Ruxton and Nikki van der Gaag. 'Men's Involvement in Gender Equality – European Perspectives', *Gender & Development*, 21, no 1 (2013): 161-175.

approach, the everyday, and in engagement with postcolonial approaches have significant value for the broader Feminist Institutionalism project. They contribute to understandings of how the informal and formal interact within institutions that are influenced by, and are able to influence, international relations. Feminist knowledge of international institutions, even those we as feminist scholars may be critical of, is essential if we are to understand more comprehensibly the myriad ways in which the personal is international. This article reaffirms that it matters not just what we study as 'International Relations' but how we study it. As a result, our discussion is a challenge to the future direction of feminist IR and the future of IR as it enters its one hundredth year.