

"Counting what counts and telling telling stories – how can a conversation between quantitative and qualitative research improve our understanding of global gender norms?"

ISA Catalytic Workshop Follow-up Report

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### Workshop summary

This workshop brought together different methodological perspectives that have analyzed and explained the international resonance of gender norms. The workshop's goal was to explore how quantitative data generation (based on measurability) and qualitative data generation (with a focus on context-specific processes and complexities) can complement and learn from each other and push scholarly understanding in relation to gender norms. As the papers presented at the workshop impressively showed, scholarship on gender in International Relations provides a unique field for this endeavor: it started out as predominantly interpretive, partly to underline its critique of "mainstream" IR assumptions, but has expanded into empiricist and quantitative domains. Thus, more than in other fields of the discipline, both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used simultaneously, critically examined, and further developed.

During the day, we discussed four papers in great detail (one presenter, Shirin Saedi, had to withdraw her participation due to a death in her family). This day-long discussion attracted 5 observers in addition to the six workshop participants: Sarai Aharoni (University of Michigan), Emma Cannen (University of Technology, Sydney) Kara Ellerby (University of Delaware), Susan Jackson (SIPRI, Stockholm), and Elisabeth Pruegl (Graduate Institute, Geneva). The workshop setting allowed us to not only reflect on the papers presented per se, but to do so in connection with the various research experiences that all the workshop participants brought to the table.

The first paper, "Quantitative Methods for Critical Feminist Theorists?", presented by Laura Sjoberg made a passionate case for the use of mathematical tools in service of critical theorizing. Sjoberg suggested that we understand "quantitative methods" in a far too limited way and that this understanding implies an underlying positivist epistemology. However, given the creativity and complexity of mathematical thinking, this does not have to be the case. Indeed, the possibilities of mathematics are an untapped resource for interpretive epistemologies and critical theorizing. After providing a couple of examples how this could be done, Sjoberg concluded that the real work of translating her innovative epistemological approach into "real" methods is the next step to go.

Reactions to her presentation, including the very thoughtful discussion of the paper by Andrea den Boer, all contributed to a deep reflection on the way we use methods. Obviously, an academic discipline like IR produces an understanding of the suitability of ways (methods) to address a puzzle. This is not a fixed understanding, and it is exposed to challenges, however, we regularly use certain methods without a sufficient



reflection of what kind of tools they are and what kind of questions they can answer. It seemed that all participants and observers at the workshop were present *precisely because* they have been critically reflecting on their own methodical work and the general disciplinary production of un-questioned sound/ robust/ adequate methods. One question that arose repeatedly was on "translateability" of knowledge: For example, if we transpose complex lived realities into mathematics, what is it that we can adequately capture in this different logic and what gets lost, and what happens when we translate it back into "life language"?

The next presentation by Valerie Hudson, "Developing a Mixed Online Database for Research on Women", elucidated the rationale and realization of the ambitious (and growing) Womanstats Project. Womanstats is an impressive attempt to provide data on the status of women globally by bringing together quantitative and qualitative data. It departs from context specific information on a long, comprehensive list of variables (including combined variables) and then codes this information. Thus, one can see a "rank" or number, but also the story behind it (or at least some of that story). The balancing of these different approaches is a fascinating endeavor – on the one hand, it has to do with accessibility (Can I get a fast overview?) and authority in accordance with a quantitative mainstream social science approach (Is there statistical/ representative data on xyz?). On the other hand, Womanstats is deeply committed to representing complexity and contextspecificity in regard to women's lives. Discussion points included the problem of missing data and creative ways to "find it", reactions of the WomanStats team to misinterpretation of the data by others, and ways of funding. The fact that Womanstats is available for free shows its mission to serve the better understanding of women's lives globally.

The next two presentations both provided ways to assess repercussions of CEDAW (the Convention and the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women). Debra Liebowitz and Susanne Zwingel's project of a "Qualitative data collection on CEDAW implementation" aims at shedding light on the multiple ways in which the international women's rights framework has been used by women's activists of different kinds. It is a project that wants to stress the logic of agency behind social change and rethink the hegemony of measuring outcomes, as represented in a variety of cross-national gender indices. What was presented was the methodology for a data collection project combining process and outcome oriented measures. Andrea den Boer's presentation and paper ("Counting what Counts in the application of the Women's Rights Convention: Violence Against Women in Asian States") evaluated very specifically the interaction between the CEDAW Committee and a selection of Asian states in respect to their efforts to combat violence against women. She operationalized the states' responsibility under the Convention in this regard, and analyzed the constructive dialogue between the Committee and each state to identify progress (or lack thereof) in domestic policies on VAW.

These two rather hands-on papers received very interesting comments from Annick T. Wibben (who served as discussant) and sparked an intense discussion among all workshop participants. One recurring point of debate was how to determine the degree of resonance of an international instrument in domestic policy making. This may be



relatively straightforward, for example in legal change, but much more complicated (or not possible at all) in processes of concrete, contextualized de-facto change. However, the point that both papers make is that the answer to this question cannot rely on measuring outcomes exclusively – this would not explain the ways in which change has been produced. Instead, it is crucial to carefully establish the connection between different actors and contexts and identify agency as well as constraints to agency. Some studies – some of them highly regarded in the discipline - do not pay attention to such connections and come to a fundamentally inaccurate "no impact" assessment. Another point of discussion was the measurability of substance and level of policy change, and if a normative assessment of such change is useful or not in the methodological project of process tracing.

One recurring theme of the workshop was that of methodological and political bridge-building and its advantages and disadvantages: While it is important to speak in a way that one can be heard by those who think in other terms, this also bears the risk to compromise one's own principles; strategically, it is important that critical feminist voices are being heard in IR, so it is worthwhile talking "positivist language". But what exactly is then being heard by the counterpart? Likewise, if we feel that bridge-building is necessary toward activists and policy makers, then we also need to reexamine our academic criteria for knowing, measuring, and interpreting phenomena and understand practitioners' priorities on good strategies that lead to noticeable (maybe measurable) change.

#### Follow-up and publication plans

There is a clear demand to continue this debate. As mentioned earlier, the workshop felt like a sounding board of reflection for all of our ongoing work and on how we epistemologically and empirically construct knowledge. Two follow-up initiatives are currently in the works: First, there will be a panel on the bridging of different methodological approaches in Feminist IR on the next ISA conference. This will incorporate decidedly positivist feminist scholars, interpretivist feminists, and some whose work represents a combination of approaches. Second, we are planning a journal publication in forum style with contributions from scholars and practitioners on current trends of measuring and interpreting the status of women worldwide. Possible publication venues are International Feminist Journal of Politics and Politics and Gender.