

# Gender, Sexuality and Society: Understanding Contemporary Challenges

## *Interviewing Elisabeth Prügl*

**Ricardo Prata Filho\***

Professor Elisabeth Prügl is Professor of International Relations at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva where she directs the Institute's Gender Centre. Her research focuses on gender in international governance. Currently she directs two international research consortia that work on gender and land grabs in Cambodia and Ghana, and on gender and violent conflict in Indonesia and Nigeria.

The meeting with professor Prügl took place on 22 and 23 October 2018 on the campus of the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). During the morning of the first day, the panel 'Rethinking the Frontiers between Man and Violence: Theoretical Tools and Conceptual Limits' took place in Auditório RDC, where Professor Prügl talked about international framings of women's participation in peacebuilding processes. In the afternoon of the same day, Professor Prügl also spoke at the round table 'The Rise of Conservatives and the Challenges for the Women, Gender and Sexuality Agenda,' in which she discussed the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections and the global turn to far-right extremism. In the afternoon of the second day, I spoke with Professor Prügl at the Instituto de Relações Internacionais of PUC-Rio. Our conversation lasted about an hour. The conversation was lightly edited for clarity.

**Ricardo:** So yesterday at the conference you discussed about women's participation in peacebuilding processes. What does it mean?

**Prügl:** Well, that's a really interesting question because it means of course something entirely different depending on context. My presentation was based on a research project that I've worked on for several years now, on gender expertise in international organizations. For this paper, we picked a total of about 35 documents from different websites of agencies that are involved in the implementation of the women peace and security agenda and gave them a close reading. I was trying to figure out what exactly 'participation' means

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in those documents. And actually, it is somewhat surprising how extensively these documents draw on human rights. I had not expected that because I had previously done the same analysis in another issue area, that is, development and in particular with World Bank documents. It's a very different language that engages with notions of productivity and efficiency gains and things of that nature. So, I kind of expected to find this kind of instrumental use of gender to be more salient also in peacebuilding expertise. But there are different expert communities writing this stuff. And you just have a lot more lawyers involved in the discourse about peacebuilding, who bring in a human rights perspective.

So what then does 'participation' mean in these documents? On the one hand, it seems to mean creating a polity that values participation, equality, inclusion, democratic processes of decision making and so on. But that's not all; no discourse ever has just one meaning, right? They're always plurivocal. So another meaning that emerges is to have 50 percent men and 50 percent women in all the institutions that we consider to be important political institutions—government institutions or UN institutions and the military, which I think is something very different than thinking of the construction of a polity that's inclusive, egalitarian, participatory, focused on the rule of law and due processes and all of those process categories, as opposed to thinking about institutions which are, in a way, fixities that need to be filled with people some of which we call male and some of which we call female and then we try to get some kind of balance. And there was a third theme that emerged and that is related to this institutional perspective which focuses on integrating women into the security projects of the state. Therefore preventing violent extremism should be something that women should be involved in, and peacekeeping missions and creating 'peace' should include women equally. So the goals are not just to include women into government institutions, but to coopt women for state projects.

So participation can mean very different things and can be used for very different projects. It's not inherently something good or benevolent or something emancipatory or transformative.

**Ricardo:** My second question is related to this. You also talked about a specific type of participation that is localized and strategic. What can be said about these ideas towards peacebuilding as state building?

**Prügl:** There is a very interesting book on participation that a colleague of mine, Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay introduced me to, i.e., Partha Chatterjee's *The Politics of the Governed* (2004). We often think participation is a technology of government; particularly when you get into international development, participation often amounts to co-opting people to do something that has been strategically predefined by the state. Maitrayee and I wrote a paper about agricultural development and technologies, in which we approach participation as a technology of government that is used in agricultural research in order to implicate farmers in the development of new seed varieties or new tools and to ensure that they actually adopt these. But Chatterjee also says participation is a technology of government only if you look at it from the top-down. If you look at it from the bottom up, from the perspective of people, it can actually be a technology of emancipation and of liberation.

So again, there's multiple valences to what participation can do in a local context, right? In a local context you would not necessarily have people think about whether they are constructing a new state that is democratic or not. Instead, in their everyday practices participation may provide room to realize visions that may not originally have been intended by whatever top-down state project they have been invited to join.

**Ricardo:** My next question is also related to this participation issue. Do you think that state building, in this sense, is also a localized process?

**Prügl:** It has to be. It seems to me that the strength of the state has to do with how much you can integrate a population so that people feel that they are part of that state and that their interests are taken care of by that state. But questions of state building always lead us back to asking 'What is the state?' What do we mean by building a state? Is it about elections and institutions and courts and all of those things which are really, really important? I'm much more of a Marxist on these issues; I think of a state as the expression of social forces that are more or less organized and are able to realize their particular agendas or particular needs through the state. They use the state as an arena that then actually picks up the needs and agendas in different ways. And this obviously involves power relations, right? So you have huge inequalities, and the state gets captured by the dominant social forces. State building often entails the use force. But a truly strong state needs to seduce people, to make them part of the state and establish a hegemonic bloc that people can fall behind so that they see themselves represented in that state. That doesn't mean that such a state is entirely benevolent, that it is devoid of power relations. Politics is all about power and the state is all about organizing power relations but they can be organized in different ways.

**Ricardo:** In the introduction of *Sexual Violence against Men in Global Politics* (Zalewski et al 2018: 1-19), you and the other authors discuss the invisibility of sexual violence against men in international organizations for example. Do you think that this gap is related to ideas of virile masculinities or heterosexual desire as norms?

**Prügl:** Entirely! One of the really weird things about the topic of sexual violence against men is the extent to which people think it's just like sexual violence against women. Sexual violence is thus imagined as disembodied – we just need to add men to already existing frameworks. Editing this book and also writing the introduction (Zalewski et al 2018: 1-19) with my co-authors – Marysia Zalewski, Paula Drumond, and Maria Stern – opened up so many questions for me. The first thing was, why was there no attention to sexual violence against men? There's a discourse out there that says 'Well, it's because of the feminists. They have occupied that whole territory and as a result they have been exclusionary.' That's true to some extent. After all, it's the feminist movement that made the issue visible. And sexual violence in many ways is still used as another word for rape. One of the papers in the book (Becerra 2018: 184-197) tracks the terminologies in the feminist movement in the 80s and 90s, showing that the issue gradually broadened, but initially it was really about rape. And now you add sexual violence against men and recognize 'Oh, yes, it can happen to men also.' But one thing that's entirely different is that, unlike women

being raped, male rape is usually homosexual, it's usually men on men. How does that matter? Literature on sexual violence against men talks about how rape feminizes men, something that is horrifying, but that permanently already attaches to women. But it also masculinizes the perpetrators without, strangely enough, tainting them with homosexuality. Instead it actually makes them more masculine.

One of the chapters in the book, which I find fascinating, recounts the hazing and sexual violence against male recruits in the US military; and the narrative there is 'you need to abuse them because that's gonna make them real men.' If they are able to take the abuse then they become men. So it's an entirely different narrative: here the victims may be feminized, but if they can take it they become men.

Another realization was that rape has happened to men in all kinds of situations but people didn't call it rape, they called it torture, something picked up in another chapter of the book (Charman 2018: 198-210). And so why is getting forcefully inserted whatever object in your anus – why is that torture but having a penis forcefully inserted to a vagina, we call that rape? And why did we have to invent sexual violence as a separate category to begin with? Is it because somehow the torture to women wasn't considered to be torture? So there are all kinds of really interesting things going on in the question of sexual violence against men, including the question 'What makes sexual violence actually sexual?' Is it sexual when a penis is inserted in a vagina? But, okay, what's sexual about castration, for example? Why do we call that sexual? And we don't provide particularly good answers to that, but the purpose of the book was to open up the category and really look at it through a gender lens, and it ended up destabilizing the whole category of sexual violence to me.

I'll give you another example. I have a PhD student who's developing a dissertation. Originally she wanted to work on LGBTIQ refugees from Syria and the sexual violence that they endured. So she began to talk to some activists and has concluded that the topic doesn't make any sense. She told me, 'What they talk to me about is the massive violence that they experienced in Syria, the massive violence that they experienced on the way because of who they were but it doesn't fit with my category of sexual violence. It's not like they are telling me how they were raped or castrated or whatever.' In other words, she found that sexual violence is not a disembodied category into which all kinds of bodies can be included. So she has entirely shifted her topic to focus on violence against non-conforming bodies, identities, whatever. For some sexualized bodies violence is an everyday experience; so why don't we call that sexual violence? And this kind of violence also refuses to be categorized into violence in war versus violence outside war—as if the two were different. So the whole topic collapsed once she tried to make sense out of it talking with people who were either activists or themselves part of the population she was interested in.

The book (*Sexual Violence against Men in Global Politics*) started with a discomfort about the idea that 'we need to add men' to policies and discourses on sexual violence. And talking to Marysia Zalewski, who is such a good question-asker, we sensed that something was wrong about this agenda of adding men. And so Paula Drumond, who was working on the topic in Geneva, organized a workshop and we invited all kinds of people,

including academics and practitioners, including from the International Criminal Court, and investigators and lawyers and so on. It was such a weird conversation because everybody was kind of feeling their way around and trying to make sense of the phenomenon.

**Ricardo:** We can feel this discomfort in the Introduction, with the idea of just including men: 'Oh, men suffer sexual violence too.' There's something tricky here.

**Prügl:** Right. Once you probe the issue in depth, it blows up the whole category of sexual violence as disembodied.

**Ricardo:** The next question is related too. So, how can we overcome or rethink identity crystallizations like 'men are always rapists' or 'women are always helpless victims' and so on?

**Prügl:** Well, that's a hard one. It's hard because these identities are so convenient and allow us to tell so many stories about things that we feel are important and that should be done, and about war and sexual violence; and victim-perpetrator narratives work so incredibly well. It's also hard because these identities are so common-sensical and are so intrinsic to constructions of gender, and that's why they work so well and can very easily create all kinds of political alliances. In a way, what we might have to question is the 'we' in your question, because the 'we' in that question is ultimately academics and activists. Questioning the gender binary behind the victim-perpetrator narrative is something that is going to require persistent vigilance and calling it out when it happens. And you will get people annoyed doing it over and over and over again, but it also matters in practice. For example, when UN gender experts use the victim narrative and you say 'you did it again,' they know exactly what the problem is. I think the challenge is really to make visible just how powerful gender is as a category such that when it is not questioned it produces all kinds of violence, reproducing certain ways of being and excluding others. That is really the larger question that you're asking here. And it's always going to be hard to explain, and it's going to require constant niggling.

A woman this morning at the conference 'Gender, War, and Peace Efforts,'<sup>1</sup> Ana Clara Telles,<sup>2</sup> made a good point. Responding to the question of 'what can we do?' she said the most important thing we can do is to just keep being annoying. She's right; you just have to be annoying wherever you are.

**Ricardo:** Yesterday, you said that neoliberalism is contributing to the current political crisis. It seems to me that neoliberalism also has the power of embrace new identifications, like you were saying, and to enlarge what is considered 'normal.' Some LGBTI people, for example, can be passable because they are integrated in the neoliberal lifestyle of consumption and because they reproduce institutions like marriage and the bourgeois idea of the nuclear family (Duggan 2003; Puar 2007). In this sense, what is the relation between neoliberalism and the political crisis of our days? How does it happen?

**Prügl:** The main problem with neoliberalism is that it produces inequality. We've known that for a long time. A free market economy that is not restrained in some fashion,

produces massive inequality. And there's a lot of inequality today, all over the world. But neoliberalism also has produced a particular mode of governance, a mode of regulating the polity that relies on individuals to govern themselves. And in that sense, it also atomizes people, and that's precisely part of the conservative critique of our times. I can see how conservatism is appealing because it emphasizes that 'we are a community, we are a nation, we have to come together.' So I think neoliberalism produced both inequality and an atomism that people now react against.

But, what for some is atomism, for others is liberation from oppressive communal values. And there progressive movements meet neoliberalism and some would say get co-opted. But co-optation is never total. Just think about the Jamal Khashoggi murder and the investments summit that the Saudis hosted in its aftermath. Gillian Tett observed this in *The Financial Times*: The first people that said 'we are not going' were the heads of corporations. So you had the multinationals emerge as the standard bearers of values until finally Trump also realized that the US government should not go. So there's something bizarre going on when all of a sudden the multinationals become the enforcers of human rights, and I don't think it's a coincidence because they're liberal entities, liberalism actually works for them. I mean, they're not going to stop investing in Saudi Arabia but they would much rather that Saudi Arabia also become like the US or 'democratic' in that sense.

So there is a family resemblance between liberalism on the one hand and feminism and other struggles for human rights and recognition on the other, as Nancy Fraser (see 2013) has observed. And it's very seductive for feminists, LGBT activists or people who have been shunted aside previously to latch onto the liberal bandwagon—because corporations also have adopted a narrative of inclusivity and diversity. It sells. But the problem is that it also sells out radical movements because it doesn't account for class—diversity initiatives never include class considerations. Neoliberalization also may commercialize movement values and all of a sudden you get the t-shirts with 'I am a feminist' or you have United Colors of Benetton. That doesn't do anything if the problem really is inequality and also economic inequality as I outlined (Prügl 2015). This doesn't mean that there are not pockets of progressive agendas within neoliberalism. I mean, I was glad that the corporations cancelled their participation in Saudi summit. Sometimes I guess you have to make weird allies. You just got to be careful how close you get to them. But, in times that are as unusual as ours, I think we can't be picky about whom we're going to talk to and whom you don't talk to. We have this discussion in the Gender Centre at the Graduate Institute all the time, because every so often we get a multinational saying 'oh, let's do an event on how to create equality and diversity.' And the argument is on the one hand 'why should we give them the platform?' But on the other hand we also are in favour of making life easier for women inside corporations and of having diversity in markets. So it's a tricky balance. I do think one has to be careful about not being entirely co-opted and staying reflexive about what's going on. But I think even people who work for the private sector are people, and you can actually find commonalities around all kinds of things. So I like to keep communication channels open and talk to people in corporations, always well aware that their agenda is

very different. And so, we're not letting them present the latest package that they're selling on our stage, but we want to have a real conversation with them.

**Ricardo:** I think it's clever.

**Prügl:** I think it's tricky and there's no right or wrong answer.

**Ricardo:** Brazil is passing through dark times, as you know. One of the presidential candidates, Jair Bolsonaro, is using the ideas of gender diversity and feminism to mark his conservative (authoritarian) agenda against LGBTI people and women's rights. In his discourse, gender is understood as an 'ideology' that is dangerous to children and young people; something similar, if less extreme, happens in Russia with Putin. All the efforts to fight against his position seem insufficient. Unfortunately, the world as whole is living something similar in terms of politics as you said. What is the role of academia in this scenario?

**Prügl:** I'm really torn about this. I had this discussion with Marysia Zalewski about this this morning and so let me give you her take. She says that we need to get away from the idea that the new conservatism can be addressed rationally because it's not rational. And so academics are not the right people to even intervene in that because we write things and then people pick it up and they make all kinds of things out of it. You can't control your own message; you get it out there, it's out there, and it does what it does. And that clearly has happened with gender. One of the really interesting things is: why do distortions about gender resonate so deeply? Perhaps it's less about the message and more about the reception. Why is it that people so easily put down others? In part it's because it brings them together, because that's the other side of hate rhetoric. You need to have the stranger, the foreigner, the one you fear, on whom you project your own fears and dislikes, issues with which you're struggling internally and that you want to abject. Judith Butler (see, for example, 1990) and Julia Kristeva (1982) work with this idea, the necessity to keep the inside pure. So there are psychological things going on. And if the problem is not intellectual, there's not going to be an intellectual solution to it.

What is the solution then? Camila A. Jardim<sup>3</sup> was very interesting to listen to. She talked about how evangelicals have organized in the favelas and provide community support, but also services, filling key needs. The left doesn't have that. We don't have spirituality as a source of community. We also don't any longer have an intellectual saviour, like the working class, which at one point held the union movement together. So we don't have the emotional part of what it is to organize movements, and there is not enough organizing. I'm saying this with hesitation because there is obviously variation, and I know there's a strong labour movement in Brazil and there's the MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*) that people talked about at the seminar, and other movements, including a strong women's movement. So there's organizing going on, but the evangelicals seem to have out-organized the left; and this is true in countries around the world. So I do think that there's progressive organizing work that needs to happen, and it can even happen through religion. Brazil had Paulo Freire (see, for example, 1987) and his movement way back, that was a progressive movement and it was also religious. So, I don't know what we

should do as academics. But speaking for myself, I'm going to continue to teach. I'm going to bring more contemporary politics into my teaching, from IR theory to feminist theory. I think we have to bring the current conservatism and gender backlash into the classroom and talk it through and continue to be annoying. But that's not gonna change the current political climate; the change is gonna come from somewhere else.

**Ricardo:** It's true. So, last question and a tough one.

**Prügl:** It's another Brazil question, isn't it?

**Ricardo:** How can we resist dark times like this one?

**Prügl:** Survive, that's the most important thing we can do. Survive, make yourself a safe-space, have friends, be in the networks that you trust and support each other so you don't despair. Feminists will not shut up and queers will not go back into the closet. But your new leader, like his clones in other countries, has given permission to hate. So, the first thing we need to do is to be safe. And to know, that this too will pass!

**Ricardo:** Thank you so much!

**Prügl:** You're very welcome, great questions and a great conversation. I appreciate it.

**Ricardo:** Thank you, thank you so much for your time.

## Notes

- 1 A three-day open seminar that took place at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro organized by Paula Drumond on 22, 23 and 24 October 2018. Among the participants were Elisabeth Prügl, Marysia Zalewski, Laura Sjoborg, Henri Myrntinen, Danny Maria Ramírez Torres, Marcela Donadio, Tamyá Rebelo, Tchella Maso and others.
- 2 Ana Clara Telles is author of 'Mothers, Warriors, and Lords: Gender(ed) Cartographies of the US War on Drugs in Latin America' published in this same volume.
- 3 A student who was at the round table 'The Rise of Conservatives and the Challenges for the Women, Gender and Sexuality Agenda.'

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