



Article

## International Security and Feminist Sociotechnical Imaginaries: Inclusive Futures for Peace

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### Abstract

*In Hesitant Feminist’s Guide to the Future, Ivana Milojević states that feminist alternative visions for the future diverge from traditional utopianism by challenging notions of natural roles and functions, seeking ways to address current societal issues such as inequality and structural limitations. Building upon this, we explore the intersection of feminist approaches to international security and the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries. By integrating these frameworks, we argue that “feminist sociotechnical imaginaries” offer innovative ways to critique and reimagine security practices, with a focus on inclusivity and equity for peace. This approach challenges traditional state-centric, militarized perspectives on security and highlights the importance of diverse voices in shaping technological and social futures. With this framework, we challenge the presumed neutrality of technological innovations in security and peacebuilding, advocating for participative processes that reflect diverse social realities and ensure more just futures for all social groups.*

### Keywords

Feminist Studies, Sociotechnical Imaginaries, Feminist Futures

### Introduction

Traditional studies of international security exhibit two main characteristics. Besides their focus on the state and military conflict, they tend to frame the future as a linear dimension, in which war and peace occupy opposite ends of the spectrum. While these frameworks help explain certain international dynamics, particularly regarding relations between major powers, they also have significant limitations, as they overlook fundamental aspects of human and social experiences.

In *Hesitant Feminist’s Guide to the Future*, Ivana Milojević states that “over many centuries, feminists have produced a wealth of alternative visions for the future” (2024, p. 84). According to the author, these perspectives diverge from traditional utopianism by challenging notions of natural roles and functions, seeking ways to address current societal issues such as inequality and structural limitations. Building upon this and understanding that feminist approaches to international security offer a broader analysis of the causes of conflict and their impacts on various social groups, we propose a juxtaposition between these gender-sensitive approaches and the notion of sociotechnical imaginaries. In other words, we suggest that the concept of “feminist sociotechnical imaginaries” can reveal new perspectives and alternative pathways toward a more equitable and peaceful future. This approach not only analyzes existing structures but also serves as a (de)constructive tool to rethink security practices.

To explore this issue, the article is divided into three parts. First, we revisit some of the key propositions from feminist international security studies. Second, we briefly introduce the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries, followed by an analysis of how to combine these elements into a framework of “feminist sociotechnical

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imaginaries". We argue that it contributes to critical analyses of contemporary security, enabling the construction of more collective future visions.

### **International Security and Feminist Perspectives**

Traditional security studies usually focus on the states and military survival in an anarchic international environment. When these narratives include women, they often limit their role to passive victims of atrocities in conflicts, ignoring their agency and significant contributions both on the front lines of combat and in peacebuilding. In this sense, feminist studies of international security enable us to destabilize these pseudo-homogenizing discourses, break with gender stereotypes, and challenge the maintenance of patriarchal and segregative institutions.

Feminist approaches emphasize the individual and seek to "place at the center of the agenda the experiences of men, women, and communities for whom the current world order is a cause of insecurity rather than security" (Wyn Jones, 1995). Recognizing that many traditional analyses fail to account for gender hierarchies, feminist perspectives highlight how governance structures reinforce inequalities and neglect policies aimed at improving the conditions of women (Sjoberg, 2010). In addition to examining the causes of war, feminist international security studies focus on what happens during conflicts and peacebuilding processes, emphasizing their impact on different social groups.

This perspective seeks to understand security from a broader view, which goes beyond the mere absence of physical violence to include social and cultural security. Adopting a "gender lens" on security issues helps us recognize that security policies and practices interact differently with individuals, depending on their identities and bodies (Shepherd, 2019). By questioning the foundational assumptions of international politics and how they silence certain groups, feminist approaches promote a multifaceted and intersectional analysis of social and cultural hierarchies, their articulations, manifestations, and effects (Barros, 2007). These approaches not only analyze the roles assigned to and performed by women in conflict situations but also consider how political processes of peacebuilding (dis)regard and affect their lives.

According to Hudson (2008, p. 124), feminist approaches are concerned not only with the marginalization of gender studies within international security but also with the fact that "the voice that appears to be gaining ground is overestimated because it does not encourage a deep rewriting of the male-centered grammar that characterizes the field". Thus, feminist approaches go beyond merely including women in analyses. Instead, they advocate for a critical re-evaluation of the epistemological foundations that shape the field of international security, questioning who has the power to speak and how patriarchal norms are reproduced. By exposing how security studies and practices produce, disseminate, and recreate hierarchical and patriarchal structures, these approaches provide the tools to critique and rethink power dynamics within international security, fostering the inclusion of marginalized voices and the construction of more just and equitable security practices.

Feminist approaches to security challenge traditional, male-dominated perspectives by emphasizing how security policies and practices impact individuals differently based on their gender. These approaches stress the importance of considering the specific vulnerabilities and roles that women experience in conflict settings – not just as victims but as agents of change. In other words, "this alternative cognitive frame envisions society marked by gender equality and challenges all other social hierarchies whilst simultaneously focusing on the centrality of human relatedness, valuing peace, justice and life" (Milojević, 2012, p. 62). Feminist security studies advocate for the inclusion of women in peace processes, arguing that their participation leads to more sustainable peace agreements, and research has demonstrated that peace negotiations involving women result in better outcomes and longer-lasting accords.

For example, in the Guatemalan peace process of the 1990s, women played a crucial role, contributing not only to formal negotiations but also to civil society-led parallel efforts that emphasized human rights and inclusion (Reilly, 2007). In Liberia, women's involvement in peace processes following the country's civil wars helped drive disarmament and reconciliation efforts, with women-led groups such as the "Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace" playing a key role in ensuring the implementation of peace agreements and the election of Africa's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. These examples demonstrate that gender-inclusive approaches not only promote justice but also lead to more comprehensive and enduring security outcomes.

### **Feminist Sociotechnical Imaginaries**

The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries invites us to reflect on how science and technology are both influenced by and influence social, political, and cultural dynamics. These imaginaries challenge the idea that science, technology, and society operate in separate spheres, suggesting that technological solutions and social arrangements are co-produced. In other words, the way we conceive of a problem directly affects the solutions we develop for it.

Contrary to common sense, we do not understand the imaginary as a mere individual fanciful exercise but rather as a fundamental element in the organization and dynamics of social life (Adam, 2010; Appadurai, 2013; Beckert, 2016; Berenskoetter, 2011). The concept of imaginaries enables us to reveal actors' expectations about the future and their perceptions of the past and present. As a component of social life, collective imaginaries are understood as those that mobilize and underpin social practice.

In this sense, following Díaz (2023), we understand that the future has an imaginary nature, as visions and expectations nourish it. Imagining the future can be a source of hope, illusion, anxiety, and fear (Appadurai, 2013). From this point of view, the imaginary has an organizing function for our cultural references, individual and collective expectations, and action purposes (Goode & Godhe, 2017). Fischer and Mehnert (2021) emphasize that we should go beyond focusing on the predictability and potential realization of future states – what they call “future present” – and instead utilize those alternative narratives to shape social reality by attributing meaning to the present. These so-called “present futures” act as drivers for actions and decision-making.

However, despite the contributions of classical approaches to social imaginaries, some critics point to the need to systematically examine two critical forces of modernity: science and technology. Situated in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and deeply influenced by reflections on social imaginaries produced by social and political theory, the work of Jasanoff and Kim (2009, 2015) and Jasanoff (2020) seeks to fill this gap. For these authors, imaginaries not only encode visions of what is possible in scientific and technological fields but also point to teleological social forms of how life should or should not be; therefore, they express society's shared understanding of what is good and evil. The analytical utility of the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries lies in how certain visions can be understood as infrastructures of imagined and planned futures.

Although temporally and culturally situated, imaginaries constitute collective, durable, and performable visions of the future, and, as suggested by their “sociotechnical” quality, they are both products and instruments of the co-production between science, technology, and society. Thus, the sociotechnical imaginaries approach allows us to identify the intersections between power topographies and the forces of science and technology. An essential political repercussion of the concept is recognizing the possibility of social coexistence between multiple imaginaries in relations of dialectical production (Sismondo, 2020, p. 505).

We understand that “future” manifests as a dimension of political contestation in international relations. As Hausstein and Lösch (2020, p. 84) argue, by supporting different epistemological foundations and marginalizing alternative visions as undesirable and unattainable, these visions can yield political clashes. From this perspective, imaginaries represent a means of politicizing and contesting the future. As previously noted, these imaginaries encompass normative visions of actors regarding how the future should be; in these terms, they reflect these actors' political and economic expectations. In other words, “the visions portray a variety of potential sociotechnical constellations in the future and, at the same time, each vision highlights specific future constellations as the most promising or desirable” (Hausstein & Lösch, 2020, p. 84).

The notion of “feminist sociotechnical imaginaries” further critiques the supposed neutrality of these worldviews, arguing that design decisions and expertise processes are shaped by those in control of these technologies, which profoundly impacts how solutions are implemented. This feminist perspective leads us to question not only the outcomes of technological innovations but also who has the power to define the directions these innovations take and whose interests they serve. To illustrate this process, Haraway (1988) critiques the “God-trick” of Western epistemologies, exposing the false objectivity of science and emphasizing that knowledge is always situated.

Haraway (1988) argues that traditional notions of objectivity in science and knowledge production often stem from a disembodied, universal perspective that overlooks the complexities of lived experiences, particularly those of marginalized groups. Thus, feminist sociotechnical imaginaries encourage us to question who participates in the creation of technologies and whose interests they serve. By integrating new voices and perspectives, we can imagine and implement sociotechnical arrangements that break with established hierarchies and open up space for more

inclusive and equitable futures.

### **Inclusive Futures for Peace**

The application of the “feminist sociotechnical imaginaries” framework to international security dynamics reveals that notions such as peace, security, and empowerment are contextual and vary according to local and historical experiences. As Millar (2018, p. 358) argues, “these are not universally constant concepts but locally grounded and culturally defined.” Deconstructing these universal visions paves the way for solutions better suited to the realities of different social groups, which is essential in post-conflict contexts. In other words, imagining more inclusive futures requires a deconstruction of conventional security solutions, often rooted in narrow conceptions of power and control.

For instance, UN peacekeeping operations can be viewed as laboratories to test and implement new sociotechnical arrangements. While UN Security Council Resolution 1325 marked a turning point for gender debates in international security from 2000 onward – highlighting gender equality as a crucial factor for maintaining peace – UN peace operations still prioritize ending armed hostilities and returning to pre-conflict order. This narrow focus overlooks structural and cultural issues, such as the marginalization of local women in peacebuilding processes and systemic violence.

A new feminist sociotechnical imaginary could contribute to a rethinking of peacebuilding, which would not only emphasize the inclusion of women in missions but also critically rethink the very conception of peace, security, and the future adopted in these mechanisms. Women’s inclusion should not be limited to symbolic participation but should actively involve local women in the design and implementation of peace operations, reconsidering what is meant by a “return to normal” after a conflict. However, for these arrangements to truly bring about change, it is essential that marginalized voices be considered from the outset. Only then can we move toward security practices that respond more fairly and effectively to the needs of all social groups.

While feminist sociotechnical imaginaries hold great transformative potential, there are significant challenges to their implementation. Security institutions still operate under paradigms that centralize power and resist structural changes. Additionally, unequal access to technologies and participation in their creation processes hinders the full inclusion of diverse voices. Effectively implementing these imaginaries requires not just the symbolic inclusion of new perspectives but a radical restructuring of security practices and institutions. In practice, this means ensuring that security technologies and policies are designed in a participatory and inclusive manner from the outset. True transformation depends on restructuring the practices and institutions that shape the field of security. Only by deeply critiquing current power dynamics and including new actors in the design of solutions will it be possible to build more equitable futures, where security practices reflect a more inclusive understanding of sociotechnical reality.

### **Final Remarks**

Feminist sociotechnical imaginaries contribute to the construction of more inclusive alternative futures by questioning the epistemic and normative foundations of dominant technological solutions. They reveal that problems and solutions are co-produced and that the hierarchies embedded in scientific and technological practices can be reconfigured if we include new voices and perspectives in the formulation of these arrangements. In this sense, by proposing new ways to imagine and implement technologies and social practices, they offer a pathway to break the cycle of domination and exclusion, allowing for the creation of more just and equitable futures.

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