

IN DEPTH

National security and care work: two sides of the same coin

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Concepts of care and the actions associated with caring are reflected in every corner of our world. The state too, provides degrees of care work. Some government-sponsored opportunities, like free education for children, ensure everyone has access to such support structures. Other mechanisms, like healthcare and welfare, are specifically built to catch those who are vulnerable and in need of help. Care makes the world go round, in local and global ways, and generally functions to keep people safe. Naturally, then, concepts of care manifest in how we understand the general concept of national security.

As an American now living in the UK, my understanding of state-endorsed care has been filtered through my experience in these two societies. The US, one of the richest nations and global superpowers, drags its feet when it comes to such programmes. The UK too is quickly hanging out its care policies on austerity lines to dry. In an increasingly capitalist world, one that is oriented around patriarchal values, care is commodified and manipulated to exploit certain people. However, “in households, communities, and nation-states where the giving and receiving of care are adequate and nonexploitative, the risks associated with other kinds of security threats are reduced”.¹ In other words, care has a ripple effect that impacts every corner of our world.

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While state interest in care decreases, interest in feminist approaches to policymaking is increasing. A growing number of states, including the US and the UK, are engaging with Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) frameworks, largely a result of decades of feminist activism. But efforts to cull social support mechanisms stand at odds with the goals of an FFP, which expressly prioritise the needs of the marginalised and vulnerable and are heavily influenced by human security. How, then, can this be reconciled?

Utilising the ethics of care as a theoretical framework,² I outline how expanding our understanding of national security beyond militarism and deterrence is necessary to implementing a genuine FFP. This article will first take a critical eye to the gulf between ideas about care and ideas about security and highlight some of the useful features of the ethics of care. Secondly, it will explore how an updated association between care and security can be best reflected through FFP.

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Care ethics in relation to security

Feminists have long pointed out the linkages between local and global, personal and political. It makes sense, then, that looking to the ethics of care as a means of understanding identity, subjectivity, and morality through relationship has its roots in

feminist thought. Specifically, how we live in relationship and fulfil our responsibilities to one another is the key lens through which care ethics asks us to filter information. The line between private and public is explicitly blurred, as matters of “intimacy are of great political significance in that their form and nature are determined by relations of power that play out in a variety of different contexts –from the household to the global political economy”.³

The world we exist in and its corresponding power hierarchies have a formative hand in how we respond and relate to one another, be it between people or between states. Currently, these hierarchies are based around patriarchal values, which view power as a limited resource to be hoarded and not shared. This informs mainstream understandings of security and are thus reflected by heavily militarised approaches to keeping a state and its people “safe”. But feminism is actively disinterested in reinforcing hierarchies, and instead seeks to normalise a different kind of relationality which includes compassion, power-sharing and care.

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Fiona Robinson⁴ points out that on the surface, security and care seem polar opposites. The word “care” originates from the Latin root ‘securus’ which in a rather ironic twist means ‘without care’. The origin of the word has a baked in resistance to the idea of caring for or caring about. And this theme has carried through to today, where any semblance of care or caring is often intentionally eliminated from security discourse. In particular, Western national security relies on deeply gendered and realist ideas based on power optimisation. Many states attempt to do this with the development of a military and weapons arsenal. The ability to achieve security, then, becomes based on a state’s potential to cause damage and death in other states. For example, the dramatic nuclear hierarchy between nuclear haves and have-nots means that ideas about deterrence often influence international relationships and processes. The ever looming

threat of force and violence becomes commonplace when establishing mechanisms to keep people “safe”. Dominance and aggression, traits typically coded as masculine, become justified as forms of self-defence. Protection, another masculine coded trait, becomes the role of the state, and “good” leadership is equated with a willingness to inflict violence to keep peace.^{5 6}

With such an approach to security, there is a distinct absence of any semblance of care. However, the label “security” has also been lent to food security, housing security, and social security, which operate to sustain the wellbeing of individuals.⁷ The contradiction between how security is understood and applied in international versus domestic spaces reflects a stubborn patriarchal and rather imperialist insistence that there is little overlap between the local and the global. This is not to say that there should be one, universal application of care in the context of security, nor that care should be blindly held on a pedestal.⁸ This would be counter to the philosophical underpinnings of care ethics, as will be discussed. But rather, by incorporating such principles into security discourse, we can question what has been accepted as objective and begin to wedge the door ever so slightly wider to new and ‘alternative’ ways of understanding security –for instance, that of Feminist Foreign Policy.

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Feminist Foreign Policy, care ethics, and security

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) refers to a policy framework that has recently been championed by a growing handful of states. Some, like Sweden and Mexico, have an elaborated commitment to this agenda. Others, like Canada and France, are engaging with it in part. And others, including Spain, Luxembourg, the US, and the UK, are dipping their toe in the water, with either commitments to or calls for adoption.⁹

FFP represents decades of feminist activism aimed at normalise a new way of doing foreign policy which has the goal of sustainable peace. It draws attention to existing patriarchal structures that shape our societies, which reproduce very narrow and often harmful ideas of security. In practice, this looks like including people who have been traditionally excluded from policy decision making spaces or redistributing funds from defence budgets into education and healthcare, for example. In short, incorporating a feminist lens into foreign policy allows for the scrutiny of power dynamics that manifest between people, communities, and states. Moving away from patriarchal systems like capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism, for example, become of central focus in understanding policy issues.¹⁰

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There are many parallels in ideology behind the ethics of care and FFP. Both are interested in unveiling and then challenging “the way that patriarchy serves to institutionalise hierarchical relations in global politics while dismissing or ridiculing the capacity for attentive listening and empathy”.¹¹ Both FFP and care ethics reject binaries in favour of deeper context, understanding how relationships constitute any given situation or moral dilemma. These ideas move us quickly away from the realist realm of thinking and incorporate principles of human security. We better able to then interrogate how ideas about gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and ethnicity influence how we perceive care as useful or not useful in formulating security policies. In one of Robinson’s more recent works, she offers the theory behind the ethics of care as a guiding frame for developing a more robust FFP. There are three distinct principles that Robinson¹² offers up as useful for FFP: relationality, context, and revisability.

Firstly, relationality speaks to the process of an actor, be it a person or a state, gaining selfhood through relationships with others. Morality becomes about responding to the

needs of others with listening, patience, and understanding. When considered within the context of security, the principles of human security are fore fronted, moving us away from an overt focus on protecting territory and reifying borders and instead reorienting us toward what basic needs must be met to ensure the health and wellbeing of the average person.¹³ Likewise, the habit of coding behaviour as masculine or feminine, and then using this information to inform what and who makes “good” policy, can be rejected. As Robinson¹⁴ suggests, the human bound up in gendered constructs can be found more easily when we are able to build relationships outside of the confines of hierarchies.

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Secondly, under an ethics of care lens, identity is not framed as a way to make distinctions between people but rather speaks to the relationships between them. And to understand relationships, we must also understand context. FFP will not be transformative if it adopts and enacts a rigid set of morals. Instead, it must be a slow process, one in which its framework is intentionally and thoughtfully developed, in order to properly contextualise historical and modern-day relationships between actors.¹⁵ In other words, without being grounded in context, policy decisions will continue to fail people and reinforce abstract morals for the sake of reinforcing abstract morals.

Lastly, revisability indicates that nothing is fixed or set in stone. Navigating complex moral dilemmas and doing so in a way to buck the status quo, invites a constant process of reflexive and introspective thinking. In the case of foreign policy, this means questioning the patriarchy as the main framing of morality. Revisability is oriented around the idea that decisions do not lead to static outcomes, but only better or worse

ones. This final step is inherently linked to the first two, as to move away from a universal and rigid moral framework comes from a concern for context to better understand relationships within the bigger picture. For FFP to present itself as an absolute moral authority based on Western ideas of human rights would be a mistake, one which would lead us down a rigid, inflexible, and therefore unfeminist road.

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Conclusion

The idea of a state reforming its patriarchal motivations and reorienting itself toward justice and equality is thrilling. But many feminists, while celebrating state efforts to adopt and implement FFP, remain sceptical about the ability of a patriarchal body to become a truly feminist actor. Audre Lorde aptly captures this problem in her commentary that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”.¹⁶ Can the state refashion its own institutions in such a way that equality becomes reality, or will we watch as feminist ideas become twisted and manipulated to serve patriarchal agendas? I would venture that it’s too early to tell.

Ultimately, invoking an ethical framework like the ethics of care to guide FFP “is about seeing global actors as constituted and sustained through relationships in specific times and places, and tracing how power, in its various forms, makes those relationships –in various, ever-changing contexts– oppressive or enabling”.¹⁷ If social values and norms set the scene for how we understand any moral argument, as the ethics of care suggests, then utilising these ideas to develop a more robust FFP must include a fierce loyalty to relationality, contextualisation, and revisability. While the achievability of a truly *feminist* foreign policy is still up for debate, we can at least set down the path toward a security that is people-oriented, not territory oriented.

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