

Introduction to “Border and Gender Studies: Theoretical and Empirical Overlap”

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Cultural and economic globalization has led to a more integrated and multicultural world. This has improved the access for people throughout the world to resources and a better quality of life. It has also created resentment and a backlash in communities that see a decline in their access to resources and quality of life. The fundamental conflict between liberty and equality has arisen, with the control over who has access to resources and institutions in contention. Progressives on one side look toward a more global world with equal access but this is impinging upon individual’s liberty as they compete for resources with those who have a new level of access to the system. The system of course includes both the economic and political resources within a nation’s borders.

The debate on human rights is central to this debate on globalization and is played out in questions of borders and gender. We see this through the many similarities in the study of borders and gender. In much of the literature, borders and gender are each defined by the lines of power and authority within a society. Both are a central part of the interaction and separation of people, which leads to the ability to access resources and institutions. These are based in political and cultural institutions, which are enforced by a nation’s legal system. Whereby the legal system provides the link to the political and economic systems found in each country. It is a continuous, self-supporting loop that revolves around resources and power. In a global world, we can add in international law or transcontinental law and basic agreements on the fundamental human rights.¹

International law moves the ideas of who has the ability to obtain resources and power across borders. It also leads to new perspectives on the relationship among globalization, democracy, and sovereignty. Benhabib provides an interesting discussion of issues of democracy beyond borders and their implications, particularly for women’s groups in Muslim communities throughout the world.² Women’s rights groups now work across borders to create new rights based in legal systems. This transnational activism is changing societies but there are still questions as to what the impacts are within border zones. These areas are directly impacted by the conflicting ideas found in the global citizenship vs. the nationalist movements. As much has been written on the impacts of globalization across borders and the impacts to democratic movements with civil society, the goal within this special edition of *EBR* is to focus this discussion directly to border zones through an analysis of gender issues and the application of feminist theories within borders.

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¹ Seyla Benhabib, “Claiming Rights across Borders: International Human Rights and Democratic Sovereignty,” *American Political Science Review*, 103:4 (2009): 691–704.

² Ibid.

Solutions to many of the issues confronting borders and their inhabitants can be found in ideas and concepts of feminist or gender theories. This is another link between the two areas of study. As geopolitical lines/borders are hardened with the movement of people and from security threats in the world, both real and perceived, it can be argued that it is important for those managing these systems to look toward feminist theories that promote human rights and an ethical and moral response to challenges confronting the global society. As noted by Jane Addams, during the era of pragmatism in the United States, “if we grow contemptuous of our fellows, and consciously limit our intercourse to certain kinds of people whom we have previously decided to respect, we not only tremendously circumscribe our range of life, but limit our scope of ethics.”³

In bringing the study of border and gender together, a panel was held at the Association of Borderland Scholars conference in spring of 2015. Led by Kathleen Staudt of the University of Texas, El Paso, a number of border scholars came together to discuss a range of topics and from this a special edition of the Eurasian Border Regions Journal was proposed. This special edition will be presented in both the spring and the fall editions. There are a total of six different works projected in these two special issues. The spring journal begins with manuscripts from Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera and Jennifer Bryson Clark, and T. Mark Montoya.

Correa-Cabrera and Bryson Clark are researching the impact of Mexico’s Southern Border Plan on vulnerable groups and individuals, particularly women and LGBT, traveling across Mexico’s southern border to reach the United States. These vulnerable individuals are put into precarious situations with the enforcement that comes from the hardening of Mexico’s southern border with the support of the United States and limited anti-trafficking legislation. Correa-Cabrera and Bryson Clark explore how the legal systems and development of institutions have caused more harm than benefit to women and vulnerable migrants. It is a study that exposes the harm that is done to individuals through a security approach and begs the question what should be the ethical response of the government to those pushed into precarious situations because of security.

The second essay by Montoya explores theoretical concepts within a changing notion of citizenship. Who is included in the rights provided by citizenship is an important component to border studies and goes to the heart of the thesis of basic human rights and borders. Those who are part of the system and also outside of the system are important components and linked to concepts found in the feminist literature. Within this context the notion of citizenship changes as the nation-state does not provide the protections required as part of the bargain with the citizenry for their participation in the process. There are also a number of issues for those seen as outside of the citizenship protections because they are not formally part of the system, but live within it. Again, a theoretical approach through the feminist literature helps us to understand how this phenomenon can occur. For many it is clear that citizenship is based on the passport that one carries, but as Montoya expounds, people create their own bonds based in the ideas of citizenship because of need and for survival.

The next set of papers to be published in the *EBR*’s 2017 fall edition provide additional case

³ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1902), 8.

studies and responses to borders and gender. A case study by Staudt and Coronado explores and analyzes violations by the state against legal migrants in the U.S.-Mexican border. They propose that the actions of the state against women and other migrants in search of drugs is close to state sponsored sexual assault. The second manuscript, by this author, discusses the actions of the Department of Homeland Security, the main bureaucracy working on security issues along the U.S.-Mexican border, and the ethics of care. There are a number of well-known management and human right abuses occurring in the borderland by DHS agents, and the response developed thus far by the agency is missing an important piece that is found in the gender studies literature – the inclusion of the ethics of care. The responses to violations of human rights have focused primarily on administrative fixes with little discussion on the ethical and moral dilemmas for the agencies. As it has been seen over the centuries in the functioning of the bureaucracy, without a focus on ethics and particularly, the ethics of caring for those who are in your service area, real challenges and abuses can arise.

After these works we move outside of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands to explore matters of borders and gender in the Brazilian-Colombian border and the fate of Korean women migrants in Japan. José Miguel Nieto Olivares and Flávia Melo Cunha provide an interesting case study which discusses the relationship between the border and gender in the tri-border region of Colombia, Brazil, and Peru. It is an understanding of the development of the state and the region from a gender perspective. It is the myth vs. concept in the construction of the border zone taking on a masculine role but moving through time to a more feminine perspective. Women hold power in the region and are empowered to improve the human condition through government programs. This article provides a different perspective on how gender can shape a region and also change the perspectives by which the region is created in myth and concept.

The last article by Naomi Chi explores the unique situation of migrant brides living in Korea. Strong nationalistic tendencies and beliefs in cultural purity have made it very difficult for migrant brides to assimilate into Korean society easily. The need for women in rural areas is being answered by the migration of women brides from other parts of Asia, primarily from Vietnam, China, the Philippines, as well as CIS countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, but there are few programs to help them assimilate or access assistance once in the country. It is a precarious situation for most and Chi provides a strong case study of the conflicts and challenges for women crossing borders – even if they are meeting a real need by the community.

Our goal is two-fold in developing this special edition of the *EBR*. It is hoped to begin to build on the theories regarding borders and gender – creating stronger connections and discussions to build upon issues rarely touched upon in the literature. We are also working to establish a community of scholars that analyze borders and gender in a systematic fashion, creating new theories and case studies for a greater understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing women and other vulnerable groups in a world of increasingly hardened borders and securitization.

Note: This special section on “Border and Gender Studies” will feature over two issues of *Eurasia Border Review*, with the second part appearing in Vol. 8, No. 1.