

# Bananas, Beaches and Bases

*Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*

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## CHAPTER NINE

# Conclusion

*The Personal Is International*

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Theresa Dantes escaped her abusive employer in Qatar and returned home to Manila. At this point, one can imagine what Theresa might have done next. Perhaps she joined a Filipina domestic workers' group that persuaded her country's government to ratify the International Labor Organization's Convention 189 on domestic workers' rights—though she and her fellow domestic workers do not trust their government to enforce all of the convention's commitments. Officials will have to be monitored and pressured by domestic workers to ensure that Filipinas going abroad to clean other people's homes are treated as full-fledged workers, fairly, and with respect.

Imagining the future, we might picture Theresa deciding to invite women from around the world who have experienced international politics firsthand to come to Manila for a workshop. Through Facebook, Skype, and occasional meetings at women's forums and UN gatherings, these women have begun to realize that their political campaigns overlap because their internationalized experiences as women overlap. Theresa thinks that holding a three-day workshop might provide the most valuable setting for a genuine exchange of ideas. She may have heard from other

Filipinas working on Dole's banana plantation in the Philippines that workshops provide spaces where women can get to know each other informally, speak openly, compare experiences, and build their own collective understandings of the gendered, inequitable world and of their capacity to change that world.

The first to arrive is Iris Munguia, who flies in from Honduras. Iris has become prominent in the international politics of bananas, but she remains connected to the *bananeras*, the women who worked long hours beside her in the banana plantation's damp, pesticide-filled cleaning sheds. Landing in Manila soon after her, on a flight from Dhaka, is Chobi Mahmud. This is her first trip outside Bangladesh. In the wake of the deadly garment factory fires and building collapse, international nongovernmental organizations have been talking directly to the surviving women, like Chobi. They have paid Chobi's airfare to Manila so she could share her experiences with women from other countries. For Lucky Chhetri, it takes several plane changes to travel from Katmandu to Manila. But she and her entrepreneurial sisters are used to making things happen. If one can learn to scale the Himalayas, one can get to the Philippines.

Fortunately, Ray Acheson was still in New York when Theresa's unexpected invitation arrived. She was across the street from UN headquarters, strategizing with other feminists—from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the International Action Network on Small Arms Women's Network—about how to make sure that the historic gender-violence provision in the new international Arms Trade Treaty would be implemented. They already were hearing rumors of a concerted backlash. Ray had gotten to know several Filipinas active in UN Women, but she never thought she would meet them in their home country. Much closer is Takazato Suzuyo. Flights between Naha and Manila are frequent because so many Filipinas come to Okinawa to work in entertainment businesses around the American military bases there. Some of the Filipinas have told Takazato that they had trained in Manila to be singers, assured that they would be hired as legitimate entertainers when they came to Okinawa. Instead, they told her, upon arrival they had been

forced by their bosses to provide sexual services to American military men.<sup>1</sup> Theresa had heard through her new friends in the domestic workers' group that women who were immigrants, as she had been in Qatar, now did their cleaning and child care work without having to live in their employers' homes. These women's experiences of international domestic work seemed to have been quite different from hers. So she invited Rosa to take part. Rosa perhaps had become active in the growing California domestic workers' movement, but she surprised Theresa by suggesting that one of Rosa's middle-class employers, Laurie, come too. Rosa explained that, while she and Laurie lived different political lives, this white American woman also might have experiences of living the "double day" to contribute. Rosa and Laurie arrive together on a flight from San Diego.

There were myriad nationalist movements from which Theresa might have chosen a woman participant. She decided to invite from Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas. Although she grew up in Algeria and, as a young woman, fought in the Algerian nationalist movement against French colonialists, Marie-Aimée had felt that she had to go into exile in order to pursue her feminist goals. Her fellow members in Women Living Under Muslim Laws urged her to accept Theresa's invitation.

Before she sent out her workshop invitations, Theresa had talked to local domestic-worker activists about whether to invite a woman married to a diplomat. It seemed as though such a woman's experiences would be too distant from those of a banana worker and the mountain guide. But one of Theresa's new activist friends had cleaned the house of a diplomat and his family stationed in Manila and said the wife seemed frustrated at not being able to pursue her own career as a biologist and was dissatisfied with the constant rounds of social events she was expected to attend. So in the end, Theresa invited Yoko, the wife of the Japanese embassy's first political officer. She asked that only her first name be used so as not to make any waves for her husband, who was on the verge of being promoted to ambassador. Yoko had been posted in Manila for two years and already

had raised diplomatic eyebrows when she had invited a group of local Filipina feminists to her home for tea and conversation.

One might imagine that Theresa was a bit nervous when everyone finally was gathered, but she could see that some of the other women were, too, and that put her at ease. She welcomed her nine guests, Iris, Chobi, Lucky, Ray, Takazato, Rosa, Laurie, Marie-Aimée, and Yoko. It did not take much prompting for most of the women to start talking. They began by asking each other about their families. That is always the place to start. Were they raising children on their own? Were they caring for elderly parents? They passed around photos and their smartphones, showing pictures of their children, friends, and extended family members to each other. Then the conversation became more political. Was there a male partner or father who had been reluctant to “allow” them to come to Manila? Who was caring for the children and doing the housework while they were away? Could they afford to lose five days of pay, even low pay?

As they become more relaxed, they start trading stories, especially stories about what people had said upon hearing that the women were invited to take part in a feminist workshop. Many of their male friends, and even some of their female coworkers, were puzzled; some of the men actually laughed. The least understanding called feminists rude, sexist names. But sharing their stories helped take the sting out of these recent memories. It also led the women to talk candidly about how sexism works, how ridicule can be silencing, and how hard it is sometimes for a woman to find her voice when the topic is deemed to be “politics” or “international policy.”

One might imagine these ten women talking knowingly about things that affected their sense of genuine security—for instance, governments’ immigration policies, the lack of publicly funded child care, the subtleties of racism, stereotypes that place some women on pedestals and others in the gutter, militarism’s nurturing of fear and distorted notions of security, corporations’ escalating production demands, and unaccountable labor contractors. Together, these women have a wealth of information about global brands, remittances, international debt, nationalist agendas,

military bases, development slogans, human trafficking, and environmental hazards, all garnered from their everyday experiences. Yet these topics are not the ones they start with. They start with their most personal relationships, but not because they are naive, parochial, or apolitical. They start there because they know that the one who does the unpaid housework and the feminized caring is integral to the production of blue jeans and bananas, to the promotion of tourism, to the mobilization of nationalist movements, and to the operation of militaries and diplomacy. They know, too, that the way power operates within families is crucial to how power operates in their communities, in their social movements, in their political parties, in their governments, and within international agencies and alliances.

One of the simplest and most disturbing feminist insights crafted in recent decades is that “the personal is political.” It is a profound theoretical statement that can be transferred to a T-shirt or bumper sticker. Asserting that “the personal is political” is disturbing, intentionally disturbing, because it means that relationships we once imagined were (and many of our friends and colleagues still prefer to think are) private or merely social are in fact infused with power. Furthermore, those allegedly private, personal relationships are infused with power that is unequal and backed up by public authority.

But the assertion that “the personal is political” is like a palindrome, one of those phrases that can be read backward as well as forward. Read as “the political is personal,” the assertion suggests that politics is not shaped merely by what happens in legislative debates, voting booths, political party strategy sessions, court rooms, or war rooms. While men who dominate public life in so many countries have told women to stay in the proverbial kitchen (not travel to workshops in Manila, not organize, not theorize), those same men have used their myriad forms of public power to construct private relationships in ways that have bolstered their own masculinized political control. Without these deliberate gendered maneuvers, men’s hold over political life might be far less secure.

Without these gendered maneuvers, moreover, most men's seeming "expertise" in politics would look less impressive. A 2013 cross-national survey of citizens' political knowledge found that in virtually every one of the ten countries studied, "women know less about politics than men regardless of how advanced a country is in terms of gender equality."<sup>2</sup> The authors of the study speculated that this gender gap in political information might be due to the fact that few women play prominent roles in news journalism and elite political life, which discourages many women viewers and readers from seeing how current news accounts are relevant to themselves. While this possible explanation for the country-by-country political information gaps appears feasible, a British feminist journalist analyzing the same ten-country study offered an additional explanation: perhaps the researchers' definitions and measures of what counts as "politics" were too narrow.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps what many women do pay attention to, and do store information about, is encompassed by a broader, some might say more realistic, map of politics—for instance, the availability of affordable child care, the condition of public parks, the accessibility of public transport, the readiness of police to treat a woman with respect when she brings a rape charge, the government's willingness to use sexualized pictures of local women to lure foreign tourists, and the impunity with which employers abuse women on the job. That is, perhaps if the map of what is counted as political were redrawn by feminist-informed cartographers, the gap between women's and men's political knowledge would shrink dramatically.

Explaining why any country has the kind of politics it does should motivate us to be curious about how public life is constructed out of struggles to define masculinity and femininity. Accepting that the "political is personal" prompts one to investigate the politics of marriage, the cheapening of women's labor, ideologies of masculinity, sexually transmitted diseases, and homophobia—not as marginal issues but as matters central to the state. Doing this kind of research becomes just as serious as studying military weaponry or taxation policy. In fact, insofar as

the political *is* personal, the latter categories cannot be fully understood without taking into account the former.

To make sense of international politics, we have to read power backward and forward. Power relations between countries and their governments involve more than troop maneuvers and diplomatic emails. Read forward, “the personal is international” insofar as ideas about what it means to be a “respectable” woman or an “honorable” man have been shaped by colonizing policies, international trade strategies, and military doctrines. Today it has almost become a cliché to say that the world is shrinking, that state boundaries are porous: think of KFC opening in Shanghai, sushi eaten in Santiago, Cézannes hanging on walls in Doha, a Korean pop star drawing crowds in New York, and Russian weaponry propping up a Syrian autocrat. We frequently persist, nonetheless, in discussing personal power relationships as if they were contained by sovereign states. We frequently consider violence against women without investigating how the global trade in Internet pornography operates, or how companies offering sex tours and mail-order brides conduct their business across national borders. Similarly, we try to explain how women learn to be “feminine” without unraveling the legacies left by colonial officials who used Victorian ideals of feminine domesticity to sustain their empires; or we try to trace what shapes children’s ideas about femininity and masculinity without looking at governments’ foreign investment policies that encourage the global advertising campaigns of such giants as McCann Erickson, BBDO, or Saatchi and Saatchi.

Becoming aware that personal relationships have been internationalized, however, may make one only feel guilty for not having paid enough attention to international affairs. “You should know more about the IMF,” “Don’t switch channels when experts start talking about climate change,” “Find out where Guam is.” While useful, this new international attentiveness by itself is not sufficient. It leaves untouched our conventional presumptions about just what “international politics” is and where it takes place. Coming to realize that the “personal is international” expands the politically attentive audience, but it fails to

transform our understandings of what is happening on the multiple stages of international politics.

The implications of a feminist understanding of international politics are thrown into sharper relief when one reads “the personal is international” the other way around: *the international is personal*. This calls for a radical new imagining of what it takes for governments to ally with each other, to compete with and wage war against each other.

“The international is personal” implies that governments depend on certain kinds of allegedly private relationships in order to conduct their foreign affairs. Governments need more than tax revenues and spy agencies; they also need wives who are willing to provide their diplomatic husbands with unpaid services so those men can develop trusting relationships with other diplomatic husbands. They need not only military hardware but also a steady supply of women’s sexual services, as well as military wives’ gratitude, to convince their male soldiers that they are manly. To operate in the international arena, governments seek other governments’ recognition of their sovereignty; but they also depend on ideas about masculinized dignity and feminized sacrifice to sustain that sense of autonomous nationhood.

Thus the international politics of debt, investment, colonization, decolonization, national security, diplomacy, trade, and military occupation are far more complicated than most conventional experts would have us believe. This may appear paradoxical. Many people, and especially women, are taught that international politics are too complex, too remote, and too tough for the so-called feminine mind to comprehend. If a Hillary Clinton, Angela Merkel, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Michelle Bachelet, or Christine Lagarde enters, it is presumably because she has learned to “think like a man.”

Conventional analyses stop short of investigating an entire area of international relations, an area that feminist-informed researchers in the still-expanding field of gender and international relations are pioneers in exploring: how states depend on particular artificial constructions of the domestic and private spheres to achieve their political goals. If we take

seriously the politics of domestic servants, of women living on or near a military base, or of women who sew Gap and Zara apparel, we discover that international politics are more complicated than nonfeminist analysts imagine.

This is worth saying again: explanations of international politics that are devoid of feminist questioning are too-simple explanations. Such nonfeminist explanations shy away from complexity. They underestimate power.

A feminist investigatory approach exposes a remarkable assortment of the kinds of power it takes to make the complex international political system work the way it currently does. Admittedly, conventional analysts of interstate relations do talk a lot about power. In fact, they put power at the center of their commentaries. These are the sorts of commentaries that are presumed to be most naturally comprehended by manly men; women, especially those women presumed to be conventionally feminine, allegedly do not have an innate taste for either wielding or understanding power. However, feminist-informed explorations of agribusiness plantation prostitution, foreign service corps sexism, and repeated attempts to tame outspoken nationalist women all reveal that, in reality, it takes much *more* power to construct and perpetuate international political relations than we have been led to believe. One result of feminists' insight is that they do not erect false barriers between the fields of "security studies" and "international political economy." Feminists realize that the actual workings of gendered politics routinely blur these artificial fields of investigation.

This is why the ten politically savvy women who might come together for Theresa's imagined Manila workshop start with their domestic lives. It has taken power to deprive women of land titles and pressure them to leave home to work as domestic workers abroad or to stay on banana plantations. It has taken power to keep women marginalized in their countries' diplomatic corps and out of the upper reaches of central banks and finance ministries. It has taken power to exclude women from labor bargaining. It has taken power to keep questions of inequity between local

men and women off the agendas of many nationalist movements in industrialized as well as developing societies. It has taken power to keep diverse women in their separate places for the sake of the smooth running of any military base. It has taken power to ensure that UN treaties do not recognize the rights of sexual minorities. It has taken power to ensure that the UN treaties that do take account of violence against women are not implemented. It has taken power to construct popular cultures—through films, advertising, school curricula, television, books, music, fashion, the Internet—that reinforce, rather than subvert, globally gendered hierarchies.

“The international is personal,” combined with a sustained feminist curiosity about women’s lives and the workings of masculinities, provides a guide to making sense of the WTO, the ILO, the IMF, the Group of Eight, the Group of Twenty, the World Bank, the EU Commission, the Vatican, the Qatar emirate, the Chinese Politburo, the UN Security Council, the International Crimes Court, the African Union, and the Arab League. “The international is personal” is a starting point for making sense of Gap, Apple, Disney, Foxconn, Chiquita Banana, Deutsche Bank, and H&M, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross, CARE, OXFAM, and Human Rights Watch. To make realistic sense of international politics, we need thorough, feminist-informed gender analyses of each of these organizations—and more.

One can do a feminist-informed gender analysis of anything. And each will make us smarter about how this world works, or fails to work.

Taking seriously the assertion that “the international is personal” means that women—in all their diversity—must be made visible, analytically visible, in our investigations of every one of these organizations, and in the relationships between these organizations. If it is true that cooperative as well as hostile relations between governments, corporations, and international organizations rely on constructions of women as symbols, women as providers of emotional support, women as both unpaid and low-paid workers, women as voters, and women as token participants, then it does not make sense to continue analyzing international politics as if

women were a mere afterthought. It does not make sense to collect ungendered data on refugees, private security personnel, earthquake victims, militia members, corporate executives, factory owners, journalists, or peace negotiators. It does not make sense to treat women as if they made eye-catching photo images but do not need to be interviewed.

International policy-making circles may at times look like men's clubs, but international politics as a whole has required women to behave in certain ways. When enough women have refused to behave in those prescribed ways, relations between governments and between governments and corporations have had to change.

That is, women are not just the objects of power, not merely passive puppets or unthinking victims. As we have seen, women of different classes and different ethnic groups have made their own calculations in order to cope with or benefit from the current struggles between states. These calculations result in whole countries becoming related to one another, often in hierarchical terms. In search of adventure, the physical and intellectual excitement typically reserved for men, some affluent women have helped turn other women into exotic landscapes. In pursuit of meaningful paid careers, some women have settled in their governments' colonies or hired women from former colonies. Out of a desire to appear fashionable and bolster their sometimes shaky self-confidence, many women have become the prime consumers of products made by women working for low wages in dangerous factories. And in an effort to measure the progress they have made toward emancipation in their own societies, some women have helped legitimize international global pyramids of "civilization" and "modernity."

Therefore, when asking "Where are the women?"—and following up with "How did they get there?" "Who benefits from their being there?" and "What do they themselves think about being there?"—one should be prepared for complex answers.

Acting out of a new awareness that women, especially in poorer countries, need to be made visible—and audible—on the international stage, one can risk painting over the important differences between

women. The widening economic class differences between Chinese, for instance, are alarming even Beijing's male political elite. Those gaping inequalities are sharpening the differences between rural and urban women, between women married to politically connected businessmen and women working on the assembly lines in those men's factories. Noting inequalities among women is not just a comparative statement—for instance, noting that urban girls are more likely to reach secondary school than rural girls, or that affluent women are more likely to have access to the Internet than working-class women do. It is a comparative statement with relational consequences. Women's diverse experiences of social class—as well as of race and ethnicity—can translate into often surprising differences in understandings of femininity, in marital economics, in relationships with particular men, and in encounters with the state. In the United States, China, India, Turkey, South Africa, Vietnam, Mexico, Brazil, Malaysia, Iraq, and Egypt, these widening material and political inequalities between affluent women, middle-class women, urban poor women, and rural poor women, especially when exacerbated by racism and ethnocentrism, present daunting challenges for any women who are working to create and sustain a vibrant national or transnational women's movement.

Creating transnational women's banana workers' groups, launching the International Domestic Workers' Network, building a transnational alliance to lobby for a gender-conscious arms-trade treaty, organizing a transnational network of women living near overseas American military bases, creating unions for women garment workers, sustaining a transnational network of feminists living under patriarchal religious laws, building a UN-focused alliance that can take on the "unholy alliance"—not one of these efforts has been easy. And every day there are those who act to defend their local or global stake in having diverse women lose trust in each other, withdraw support from each other. One might make a list of those patriarchal stakeholders, those people who have come to rely on women's fragmentation. Not all the people on the list will be corporate moguls and political autocrats.

Male officials who make foreign policy might prefer to think of themselves as dealing with high finance or military strategy, but in reality they have self-consciously designed immigration, tourism, labor, foreign service, cultural, and military-base policies in order to divide and control women. They rarely admit it, but they have acted as though their government's or organization's place in world affairs has hinged on how women behaved.

Uncovering these efforts has exposed men *as men*. International politics have relied not only on the manipulation of femininity's multiple meanings but also on the manipulation of ideas about masculinities. Ideas about adventure, modernity, civilization, progress, expertise, rationality, stability, growth, risk, trust, and security have been legitimized by certain kinds of masculinized values, systems, and behavior. That is one of the reasons that each of these ideas has become so potent.

Frequently, male government officials and company executives seek to control women in order to optimize their influence over other men: men as husbands, voters, migrant workers, soldiers, diplomats, intelligence operatives, plantation and factory managers, editors, and bankers. Thus, understanding the international workings of masculinity is important to making feminist sense of international politics. Men's sense of their own manhood has derived from their perceptions both of other men's masculinity and of the femininities of women of different races and social classes. Thus a caveat: one cannot make adequate sense of the international politics of masculinity by avoiding paying close attention to women and femininity. Ideas about masculinities—the full array of masculinities—have been crafted out of ideas about, myths about, and uncertainties about femininities and about actual women. To conduct a reliable investigation of masculinity, one must take women seriously.

Climate change, capitalist globalization, the new arms race, and widening gaps between rich and poor—it is tempting to plunge into the discussion of any of these contemporary issues without bothering to ask, “Where are the women?” In fact, the more urgent the issue—“New York will soon be under water!” “China's military build up is going to set off a

world war!”—the more reasonable it seems to *not* ask “Where are the women?” In patriarchal hands, “urgency” is the enemy of feminist investigation.

The previous chapters suggest, however, that these urgent issues demand a gendered analysis precisely because they are urgent, because they call for the fullest, most realistic understandings. As feminist environmental researchers and activists already are revealing, the causes of climate change, for example, and not just its effects, can be realistically tracked only if one exposes the workings of ideas about manliness and femininity and the relations between women and men, each fostered by the deliberate uses of political power. So too can the causes of the new arms race, exploitive globalization, and the widening gaps between rich and poor.

Theresa, Chobi, Takazato, Iris, and the other workshop participants are now, we can imagine, deep into their discussions. The deeper they dig, the more candid they become with each other. They have tried to create an atmosphere of trust, one that encourages each woman to be honest about her worries and puzzles. Together, they are on a journey to understand how banana plantations work, how garment subcontractors perceive women seamstresses, whose security a military base protects, and why women and men who employ domestic workers do not see them as real workers.

Every time the conversation slips into abstractions, one of the women pulls it back to women’s complex everyday realities. This is what making feminist sense of international politics sounds like.