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Gender and diaspora

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Abstract

This chapter presents an overview of research conducted at the nexus of diaspora and feminist or gender studies. It shows how cross-fertilisation between these fields has led to a wealth of publications and advances both at the conceptual, empirical and methodological levels. The chapter first explores how feminist approaches have been integrated into diaspora studies, and the advances to which this integration has given birth. The second part of the chapter documents how feminist peace perspectives have helped in the understanding of the key role played by gender issues in diasporic settings, for instance women's positions and functions in nationalist projects in the diaspora, the status of women in diasporas, but also how diasporas can be understood as contested sites of patriarchal relations. The final part of the chapter presents an overview of feminist peace approaches to gender identities in diasporic settings, including the study of diasporic masculinities and femininities, and of diasporic sexualities. Overall, the chapter argues that research on gender and diaspora has worked decisively to advance feminist peace, by unveiling the multiple symbolic, structural and discursive patterns of gendered violence existing in diaspora settings.

Introduction

Diaspora is a much debated concept that has long been reserved to the depiction of the historical dispersal of Jewish, Greek, or Armenian communities. The concept of diaspora also used to refer to groups that had left their countries of origin in order to conduct their business activities elsewhere (Bruneau 2004, Dufoix 2003). During the recent decades however, the meaning of the concept has started to evolve and to include communities that had, until then, been called migrants. At the same time, the concept of diaspora has become extremely popular among migrant and refugee groups themselves, as well as in policy-making communities. Among scholars, this widening of the concept has sometimes been received with caution (see for instance Lacoste 1989), and there is a relative consensus in academia on the fact that not all migrants or refugees are part of a diaspora, that not all members of diaspora groups are migrants, and that not all groups of migrants or refugees will eventually become part of a diaspora.

Diasporas are most often studied either through a migration lens, focusing on political, economic, cultural, and social integration in their countries of residence, or a peace and conflict studies lens that explores their roles in the conflicts or peace processes happening in their countries of origin. Many scholars still define diasporas as groups fulfilling a certain number of criteria, such as: a voluntary and/or involuntary dispersion; a collective memory

and myth about the country of origin; a troubled relationship with the country of settlement; a commitment to the homeland's safety and prosperity; the presence of the issue of return, though not necessarily a commitment to do so; and finally a diasporic consciousness and solidarity that can be expressed through the creation of diaspora organisations (e.g., Safran 1991). In parallel, some authors have started to put forward understandings of diaspora as a process, as a form of mobilisation, or a political project, whose performative nature is paramount (e.g., Werbner 2002). These new approaches have helped to challenge representations of diasporas as stable and crystallised groups, whose identities and politics would be defined first and foremost by "long distance nationalism" (Anderson 1993, Glick Schiller 2005).

In spite of the emergence of these new conceptualisations or approaches to diaspora groups, many studies and above all political and policy discourses, however, retain essentialist understandings of diasporas. Diasporas are still often (mis)understood as relatively homogeneous groups, whose culture, politics, and activism would be largely determined by the place they come from. It is, not surprisingly, among feminist scholars that challenges to these essentialist conceptualisations have been the strongest, on the one hand through an application of feminist approaches and concepts to diaspora issues, and on the other hand through research on gender issues in diasporic settings. These inputs from feminist approaches and gender studies have been extremely useful for highlighting the internal complexity of diaspora groups, and their internal power relations. Similarly, some theories developed in diaspora studies have found resonance in gender studies, and diasporas have proven to be fertile grounds for exploring and further strengthening concepts such as hybridity or diversity. In this perspective, this chapter proposes first to explore how feminist approaches, such as intersectional or queer approaches, have been integrated into diaspora studies, and what advances this cross-fertilisation has given birth to. The second part of the chapter documents how feminist peace perspectives have helped in understanding the key role played by gender issues in diasporic settings, for instance women's positions and functions in nationalist projects in the diaspora, the status of women in diasporas, but also how diasporas can be understood as contested sites of patriarchal relations. The final part of the chapter presents an overview of feminist approaches to gender identities in diasporic settings, including the study of diasporic masculinities and femininities, and of diasporic sexualities. Overall, the chapter argues that research on gender and diaspora has worked decisively to advance feminist peace, by unveiling the multiple symbolic, structural and discursive patterns of gendered violence existing in diaspora settings.

Diaspora studies, gender studies, and feminist peace approaches and methodologies: a strong nexus

As noted by James Clifford (1997, p. 258), "diasporic experiences are always gendered. But there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact, to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalising male experiences". Such oversight is perhaps what explains why the integration of gender perspectives and of feminist methodologies in diaspora studies is a rather recent trend. The inclusion of feminist perspectives started during the 1980s, with the publication of various studies focusing on gender issues in diasporic settings, either from a political/historical perspective, or from an ethnographic and cultural one. These publications were then followed by a multiplicity of others in the following decades (see for instance Bottomley 1992,

Gangulay 1992, Brown 1998, Elmhirst 2000, Aitchison, Hopkins, and Kwan 2007, Christou 2011, Leurs 2015). By exploring the internal diversity of diaspora groups, these publications began to challenge the representations of diasporas as homogeneous entities (Nadje 2010). A large part of this research relating to gender issues has been focusing on the exploration of women's roles and status within diasporas, highlighting the specific situations and difficulties faced by women, as compared to men (Gupta 1988, Puwar and Raghuram 2003).

Feminist approaches have been instrumental in pushing these analyses further, notably by unveiling differences and inequalities within diasporas, as well as power relations between and within diaspora groups (Campt and Thomas 2008). Researching these issues entails embracing not only the men/women division, but also factoring in diverging individual and collective positionalities[1]. Gender inequalities are for instance perceptible in how diasporic cultures are reproduced and transmitted, and/or in which cultural elements are considered to be key parts of diasporic cultures (Anthias 1992, Anthias 1998, Rayaprol 1997). As Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk (2005, p. 52) remark, "one aspect of the formation of diaspora relies on a gender division that construes women as vessels of culture and men as vehicles of labour power". The hegemony of certain understandings of diaspora, for instance as a political group mostly defined by its ties to a country of origin, also reveals how internal and gendered power relations determine diaspora discourses and positioning (Campt and Thomas 2008).

If feminist approaches have been so effectively deployed in the field of diaspora studies, it is also because feminist research builds on concepts such as hybridity, diversity, or queerness that are crucial for understanding diasporas too (see for instance Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 2000, Fortier 2003, Gopinath 2005, Wesling 2008, Campt and Thomas 2008, Nadje 2010). One of the main characteristics of the concept of diaspora is indeed its ability to question the social fabric and to explore key dichotomies such as the single and the multiple, order and disorder, diversity and unicity, identity and alterity, or the individual and the collective (Ma Mung 2007, p. 409). Understanding diasporas as fluid, complex and changing allows to unveil diversity and plurality within diaspora groups, and to challenge globalizing narratives regarding experiences in the diaspora. This strongly aligns with feminist peace perspectives, which highlight men's and women's differentiated experiences (Wibben et al. 2019).

Because diasporas are entities that point toward the imbrication of space, society, and movement, they invite us to go beyond the duality between homeland and hostland, and to focus on experiences marked by the ambiguities and vacillation between "here and there" and "now and then", i.e. the spatial and temporal consciousness constitutive of the diaspora experience (Féron and Lefort 2018). Wesling (2008) discusses for instance the similarities between the queer and the diasporic subject. She argues that just like queerness can be perceived as a mobile resistance to limits traditionally imposed on gender, diasporas disrupt national sovereignty and international norms regarding politics. Her approach can be criticised for glossing over the material conditions of forced migration that led to the formation of numerous diaspora groups, and for equating diasporas with movement, when diasporas actually embody a sort of stasis of migration. It could be argued that if diasporas defy nation-states, it is not in their relationship with movement, but in their maintenance of transnational ties, identities, and cultures. But by relying on a feminist approach and on the

[1] Positionalities is used here to refer to how social, economic, cultural and political contexts influence identities in terms of various intersectional factors such as gender, class, race, sexuality, and so on.

concept of queerness, Wesling rightly highlights the disruptive nature of diasporas, which largely explains why governments are often suspicious of them.

Similarly, a growing number of diaspora researchers have adopted an intersectional approach to the groups they study, notably shedding light on the relevance of the intersection of race and gender for understanding diaspora issues (e.g. Bezabeh 2017). Among other foci, some authors analyse differences and tensions between first and second generation migrants, and how these differences are expressed through gender, sexuality, and different understandings of race (see for instance Bauer 2000, Dwyer 2000, Samuel 2010). Lena Sawyer, in her study of diasporic communities in Sweden, shows for instance how "specific enactments of 'race' can also enact heterosexuality and normative masculinities and femininities, and inform how specific individuals choose or choose not to experience, 'respond to', or make their own 'calls' to black and/or African diaspora in the Swedish context" (2008, p. 88). Her study demonstrates how effective adopting an intersectional understanding of power is, in particular, for better understanding how hierarchies and power relations are enacted and negotiated between and within diasporic communities. Researchers like Tina Campt (2005) have also shown how the tendency to reduce diaspora issues to race-related questions could reduce the visibility of other types of violence and of power relations within and between diasporas, related to class, generation, gender, and so on.

Gender, nationalism, and patriarchy in the diaspora

Another strand of diaspora studies where gender and feminist peace approaches, as well as feminist methodologies have made a marked difference pertains to the study of diasporic conceptions of home, nation, community, and citizenship (Anthias 1992, Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992, Salih 2003). Scholars have in particular studied the links between gender and nationalist projects in the diaspora, and how control of women's bodies and sexualities is important in the construction of ethnic and (trans)national communities (Yuval-Davis 1997, Werbner 2002, Al-Ali 2007b). Women have for instance been shown to be crucial actors in the biological reproduction of ethnic groups, in the construction and reproduction of social identities in diasporic settings, and in transnational nationalist projects and processes. This importance can be traced in various practices, such as the "exchange of brides" between different diaspora groups of the same origin but located in different countries, or between diaspora groups and countries of origin (Yuval-Davis 1997, p. 66).

One of the main questions asked by feminist peace scholars pertains to the patriarchal nature of diasporas, and to gender equality within diaspora groups. More specifically, many feminist scholars have tried to determine whether diasporas are sites in which patriarchal relations are reproduced and/or strengthened, or if they can offer to women spaces for challenging and contesting patriarchal norms (see for instance Silvey 2000, Puwar and Raghuram 2003, Osirim 2008, Karim and Nasir 2014, Vatsa 2016). This strand of research has given birth to many publications focusing on the position, power and role of women within diaspora groups. Most of these publications explore how gender roles, identities, and positioning change from the situation in the country of origin to the diasporic setting, and the consequences these changes have on women living in the diaspora. Some of the studies conducted show for instance that when women do not fulfil their "traditional" task to reproduce the nation/ethnic group in a diasporic setting, other diaspora members, and men in particular, perceive the very existence of the diaspora as symbolically jeopardised (Sawyer 2008). Similarly, when diasporic

women engage in resistance against traditional patriarchal practices, they run the risk of being branded as traitors and of being ostracised (Thiara 2003, Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005, pp. 59-60). These studies have also shown that men living in diaspora groups could be empowered in personal spaces because of patriarchal norms embedded in traditions valued in countries of origin, but at the same time disempowered in the wider society because of negative attitudes and stereotypes about non-white masculinities (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005).

As Avtar Brah explains, however, tracing the evolution of gender relations within diaspora groups is inherently complex, because it entails taking into account generational effects as well as the cultural, political, and institutional context:

> "Within each generation the experiences of men and women will also be differently shaped by gender relations. The reconfigurations of these social relations will not be a matter of direct superimposition of patriarchal forms deriving from the country of emigration over those that obtain in the country to which migration has occurred. Rather, both elements will undergo transformations as they articulate in and through specific policies, institutions and modes of signification" (1999, p. 194).

Paul Gilroy (2000, pp. 126-128) has for instance shown how women in the diaspora gain education and awareness of their rights, sometimes leading to positive changes both for themselves, but also for women in their countries of origin. Many women living in the diaspora are also involved in transnational grassroots organisations providing healthcare, education and so on, which benefit both diaspora groups and populations living in countries of origin (Al-Ali 2007a, Hewitt 2011, Godin 2017). Women who are involved in these communal and/or transnational activities can act as role models and lead to an increased questioning of patriarchal models and values. They can also spearhead the emergence of diaspora politics that are not just centred on race or ethnicity, but also on gender and class (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001, pp. 152-153).

But, as Das Gupta (1997) shows in her study about Indian diaspora women living in the United States, women in diaspora groups can also be trapped in patriarchy, because it can be confused with tradition. Indeed, "cultural traditions and the 'reinvention of traditions (…) are often used as ways of legitimising the control and oppression of women" (Yuval-Davis 1997, p. 46). This means that Indian women living abroad, as is the case for women within many other diasporas, sometimes end up with less freedom than their counterparts living in India (Das Gupta 1997, p. 580). For diaspora groups, family is often as much a place where tradition should be preserved, as a site of resistance to racist attitudes and oppression in countries of residence (Gupta 1998). In these instances, gender equality and the fight against patriarchy give way to other imperatives. In fact, as Clifford (1997, p. 259) remarks, much depends on whether women in diaspora groups manage to attain more independence, for instance through employment, and on how the concepts of "home" culture and traditions are spelled out:

> "With men cut off from traditional roles and supports, with women earning independent, if often exploitative, income, new areas of relative independence and control can emerge. (…) At the same time, women in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a 'home' culture and a tradition – selectively. Fundamental values of propriety and religion, speech

and social patterns, and food, body, and dress protocols are preserved and adapted in a network of ongoing connections outside the home country".

In short, as Vatsa (2016) explains, it seems that diasporic settings can offer women some emancipatory avenues, while at the same time maintaining certain patriarchal and suppressive tendencies.

Masculinities, femininities, and sexualities in the diaspora

The past two decades have seen the publication of several studies focusing on diasporic masculinities, and exploring men's status and roles in diasporic settings. Interestingly, these publications have yielded quite similar results to those focusing on women published since the 1980s. This is the case in particular for central feminist peace issues such as the maintenance or questioning of traditional masculinity and femininity models in diasporic settings. This strand of research has notably highlighted the fact that men in diaspora groups are heavily racialised and sexualised. Diasporic masculinities, in particular when related to men from the Global South, are often stereotyped as physically and psychologically violent. These negative representations have long been justifying discriminatory attitudes, as well as more surveillance and control of young diasporic men (Hall and Jefferson 1974, Alexander 2000).

Another strand of research has focused on processes of renegotiation of masculinity and of sexuality in diasporic spaces, especially in societies where orientalist[2] and colonial views of migrant men and masculinities are strong. In her study of Iranian men, Farahani (2009) for instance explores how Iranian men living in the diaspora face and confront orientalist stereotypes in different diasporic spaces, and how the experience of migration influences their practices of masculinity and sexuality. Faharani (2012) also shows that diaspora masculinities are shifting and plural, and result from the interactions of multiple factors such as race, age, class, religion, and so on. Studies of diasporic femininities have, here again, yielded comparable results. They have notably demonstrated how stereotypes about diasporic women and femininities, especially concerning people originating from the Global South, play an important role in the everyday lives of concerned individuals. Several publications have notably studied the objectification of South Asian women, who are often portrayed as exotic, but also as passive and submissive. Brah (1996) shows for instance how South Asian women living in Britain have been objectified through various stereotypes which carry a heavy colonial taint. These publications show that commonly shared representations of diasporic femininities are often largely related to negative stereotypes about cultures in countries of origin, especially when these are perceived to be violent, heavily patriarchal, and misogynist (Puar 1994). These assumptions are particularly strong when it comes to Muslim women wearing a veil, but also concerning practices such as arranged marriages or female genital cuttings.

Research focusing on diasporic sexualities has also highlighted the domination of normative heterosexuality in most political and policy discourses about diaspora groups (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005, p. 62). Further, it has been shown that normative heterosexuality structures, to a certain extent, relations within diaspora groups themselves, justifying aggression towards diasporic sexual minorities, as threats to the image and reputation of the community as a

[2] Following Edward B. Said's (1978) description of patronizing representations of "the East".

whole (Hamon 1994). Even if this has not prevented homosexual or lesbian groups, for instance, from organising within diasporic settings, this strand of research has demonstrated the importance of sexuality in diaspora groups' politics. It is not just that migratory experiences impact sexuality, but also that sexuality is constitutive of migratory processes, especially for non-heterosexual migrants (Farahani 2018, 2010, see also Wekker 2006, Grewal and Kaplan 2001). According to a study conducted by Durham (2004), sexual self-identification in the diaspora is a political project, which itself is tightly connected to race, cultural, and other gender factors. In that sense, the affirmation of a sexual identity can be a way, for both men and women living in the diaspora, to reject orientalist and colonial stereotypes, as well as traditional communal expectations.

Feminist peace scholars have also raised the issue of trafficking in diasporic settings, for instance of sex trafficking particularly targeting Asian and East European women (Kempadzoo 1998). The issue of trafficking of women and children, and especially sex trafficking, has largely been overlooked in classical diaspora studies, and is often ignored by diaspora representatives themselves, probably because it interferes with the image of the diaspora they are working to build (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005, p. 65). Thanks to the work of scholars like Arhin (2016) or Vaittinen (2017), issues related to the international trafficking of women, to forced labour, and to how international labour migrations cannot be understood without taking into account gender and postcolonial perspectives, are fortunately increasingly put in the spotlight.

Conclusion

The nexus between diaspora and feminist studies is rich and complex, and it has led to a multiplicity of publications focusing on gender issues in diasporic settings. It has also helped unveiling the intricacy of diasporic spaces, identities, and politics. Conversely, diaspora is one of the fields where the feminist concept of intersectionality, among others, has been the most effectively fine-tuned and put to work, by exploring, for instance, the intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and religion (Anthias 1998).

More specifically, cross-fertilization between diaspora studies and feminist peace research has been intense. Studying diaspora settings through a gender lens has revealed deeply entrenched patterns of gendered violence within many diaspora groups, and has exposed their everydayness and mundaneness. By demonstrating how power structures and gender relations within diaspora settings are built at a complex intersection of race, class and religion, among other factors, feminist peace approaches have helped improving our understanding of diaspora groups. In parallel, these studies have also shown that diaspora settings can give birth to spaces for feminist resistance and change.

In spite of the wealth and diversity of research that has already been undertaken, multiple avenues for studying this nexus could be further explored or theorised, such as the issue of feminist activism in the diaspora, and of organised resistance to patriarchy and racism in diasporic settings (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005, 58-61). Other avenues for further research include for instance gendered diasporic geographies and spaces (e.g. the dichotomy male/global, feminine/local), gendered dynamics within conflict-generated diaspora groups, as well as the gendered nature of "new" spaces of diaspora engagement, such as the cyberspace.

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