


BOOK REVIEW

***High-Risk Feminism in Colombia: Women's Mobilization in Violent Contexts.* By Julia Margaret Zulver. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022. 194 pp. \$29.95 (paper). ISBN: 9781978827097.**

Luisa Turbino Torres 

Florida Atlantic University, USA

doi:10.1017/S1743923X22000666

For a long time, women and gender have been excluded from mainstream understandings of international processes. Feminist perspectives in international relations (IR) scholarship have existed for some time, but they have been put at the margins of mainstream theoretical traditions: feminist IR scholars were not taken seriously, and there was no significant engagement dialogue with them. The crux of feminist IR is to look at global issues in a particular way and to understand those issues through the prism of gender, rejecting the metanarratives. As argued by Cynthia Enloe (2014, 3), “making useful sense—feminist sense—of international politics requires us to follow diverse women to places that are usually dismissed by conventional foreign affairs experts as merely ‘private,’ ‘domestic,’ ‘local,’ or ‘trivial.’”

In *High-Risk Feminism in Colombia*, Julia Margaret Zulver provides a brilliant analysis of women's lives in conflict and postconflict settings, arguing that the gender continuum of violence does not end with the conflict, even when women are involved in the peace negotiations. Her argument is based on the idea that women's experiences in violent contexts are often not aligned with the traditional, mainstream understanding of armed conflicts. In that sense, Zulver looks at the question of why these women still decide to mobilize and join organizations fighting for gender justice, despite being dangerous to them to do so. Thus, even with many eminent threats and risks in postconflict settings, many women in grassroots organizations choose to act collectively in pursuit of gender justice. Zulver defines this as “high-risk” behavior, which in Colombia is not exclusive to women's or feminist groups—in the context of paramilitary groups seeking social control, any activity that seeks community cohesion and collective action can be considered high risk, taking into account the possible consequences. For women, there is the extra layer of risk of subverting the expected gender roles of being a woman and making demands around gender equality. As argued by Zulver, when women engage with gender justice work, “not only do their feminist goals

challenge armed groups and the militarized masculinities they perform, but they also challenge the status quo" (27). Thus, the main puzzle of the book is why women in Colombia choose to expose themselves to potential harm or even death.

Zulver proposes a high-risk feminism framework to explain how women in Colombia mobilize, particularly exploring the tactics and strategies they use in their struggles for gender justice. In this framework, there are four main pillars: creating collective identity, building social capital, legal framing, and engaging in acts of certification. Each one of these strategies plays a role in allowing them to "mobilize as feminists to defend and secure rights, overcoming significant barriers in the process" (50). In the following chapter, Zulver applies the high-risk framework to the cases, analyzing different groups of women in Colombia and seeking to shed light on the experiences, voices, and opinions of these women, who have often been excluded from previous literature. Using ethnographic methods and a focus on the grassroots level, with women's organizations that do not often get recognized for the work they do, Zulver provides three rich case studies of women's organizations: Turbaco, Usme, and La Soledad.

The result is a beautifully written, detailed, and in-depth account of these women's lives and their backgrounds that also engages with previous literature in different disciplines. Zulver provides an understanding of women's mobilization over time and analyzes each of the causal mechanisms of her high-risk framework at play in each of the cases. Interestingly, one of the cases is a negative case: La Soledad, where women chose not to mobilize despite similar scope conditions to the other cases. With the inclusion of this negative case, Zulver demonstrates the necessity of a charismatic leader "who is able to convince women that there are material and nonmaterial benefits to mobilizing within a domain of losses" (108) in feminist mobilization because it is through the leader that the barrier of fear is overcome by participants.

One of the central ways in which Zulver asks us to rethink what we know about women in conflict is by showing how the women she interviews do not "frame their mobilization in terms of peace" (48). By challenging us to look beyond the idea of women as peace builders, we are also challenged to consider violence as more than conflict-related violence. Another interesting point is Zulver's explanation of her choice to employ the term "feminism," despite many of the research participants not necessarily identifying with the term. Nevertheless, "feminism" is the descriptor for the kind of work that these groups are doing, which profoundly challenges gender power structures and dynamics, even without a direct identification with feminism. This is an extremely relevant point, and Zulver shows how women's resistance sometimes emerges without direct identification with feminism or the study of gender, particularly outside the West. That is not to say that they are not engaged in the practice of gender justice, but it shows that direct identification with the term is not the most important aspect. Zulver shows how research on feminist activism in the Global South must examine women's oppression and resistance on the ground, attentive to the specificities of their local contexts and to the intersections of gender, race, class, and other intersections.

As Zulver argues, while there is extensive literature that examines high-risk collective action, the uniqueness of this book lies in “its application of feminism as a strategy of resistance in the face of high risk” and combining the “use of two existing theories to explain how women move from inaction to action” (29). Zulver’s work is a remarkable example of research about feminist mobilization that is done in a way that recognizes women’s multidimensional and complex oppression, grounded in the local context and historic specificity—while also recognizing and honoring women’s agency and voices.

References

Enloe, Cynthia. 2014. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Luisa Turbino Torres is Assistant Professor of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Political Science at Florida Atlantic University: lturbinotorres@fau.edu