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Dilemmas of feminist engagement with governance and gender reform agendas

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## **Feminist Critical Friends: Dilemmas of Feminist Engagement with Governance and Gender Reform Agendas**

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**Abstract:** This article advances the concept of feminist 'critical friends' to understand the work of gender justice advocates in institutions of global governance. We suggest that this concept neatly captures the aspirations and dilemmas for many such engaged feminist academics and researchers who are 'entangled' with international organisations as well as the feminist bureaucrats, legislators and jurists who work on the inside as 'outsiders within' in efforts to 're-gender' powerful social, economic, military and political institutions. This article sketches out what the concept of feminist critical friendship in the context of global governance might mean, including the small wins and acts against the gendered, institutional, and political odds. Aside from defining what we mean by critical friends, we also outline motivations to develop the concept and why we consider it useful, especially for those interested in better understanding the operation of gender actors and gender rules. The article also considers the question of how to engage in and study critical friendship, before outlining a preliminary typology, defining who we see critical friends to be.

**Key words:** feminist critical friends; feminist institutionalism; co-optation and resistance; institutional change; global governance; governance feminism

### **Key Messages:**

1. Feminist critical friends – who are they and what do they do? This piece examines the 'entangled' relationship between feminist academics and the gender justice insiders.
2. This article offers a productive standpoint for feminist academics wanting to examine and critique those working to re-gender powerful political, economic, military and social institutions.
3. Rather than positing engaged feminism and critical feminism in opposition, we argue that 'critical friends' can be engaged *and* critical.
4. Feminist Critical Friends offers a mid-position between uncompromising critique and overly positive accounts of feminist change.

## Introduction

Governance structures at all levels are significant sites for the promotion of gender equality and gender justice, while also contributing to the (re)production of inequality and injustice. Gender justice advocates have worked as observers and allies within these contexts, working to shift existing gendered rules to advance women's equality. Such advocates have worked on the inside as feminist bureaucrats, legislators and jurists in efforts to 're-gender' powerful social, economic, military and political institutions.

The work of these feminist advocates has been a focus of study for a range of engaged feminist academics and researchers who are interested in understanding where and when particular strategies work, and in assessing the capacity for (and barriers to) gender transformation within international, regional, state and sub-state arenas. These 'engaged' researchers are often also 'entangled' with the work of insider gender advocates in terms of normatively supporting their objectives, while also seeking to maintain an independent and analytical approach in studying the processes of institutional change including the efforts of insider gender advocates. We have previously suggested that the concept of 'critical friend' (Costa and Kallick 1993) neatly captures the aspirations and dilemmas of these researchers and sketched out our understanding of the concept of feminist critical friendship (FCF) (Chappell and Mackay 2015). In this article we advance and refine these ideas. Rather than positing engaged feminism and critical feminism in opposition, we argue that 'critical friends' can be engaged *and* critical. In doing so, we reject some trends of feminist critique – promoting a 'strong co-optation thesis' (Eschle and Maignashca 2018) that appears to foreclose the possibility of feminist resistance, especially to neo-liberalism hegemony from within (see Connell 2014). Instead, our approach is committed to making contextual judgments about 'small wins' (Eyben and Turquet, 2013, after Weick 1984) and 'small acts' (Duncanson 2013) against the gendered, institutional, and political odds, and understanding that such small wins *can* add up to produce transformations in institutional gender in sites of governance. The approach is both mindful of the precarious nature and marginal position of actors, norms and rules that aim to challenge the gendered *status quo from within* and committed to an ethos of offering constructive responses to the challenges, contradictions and failures faced by gender justice insiders that can arise in seeking to shift gendered power relations (see also Holvikivi 2019, 140).

We suggest that the value of feminist critical friendship from a methodological point of view is that it offers researchers a mid-position between uncompromising critique about oppressive (gendered and/or patriarchal) structures and monolithic (neoliberal) logics on the one hand, and overly positive, actor-centric, voluntaristic accounts of gender change on the other. Our intervention seeks also to shift the emphasis found in many analyses about the power of ideology. This is especially so with regard to liberalism/neo-liberalism, to the extent that it is understood to operate through the state and the international order to entrap and co-opt feminist actors who engage with these governance institutions. Instead, we reflect upon the opportunities for feminist agency and strategy in capitalising on ambiguities, 'soft spots' and internal contradictions in ways that open new possibilities and pathways for shifting the gender status quo (for a

nuanced discussion see Eschle and Maiguashca 2018; on the complexities of neoliberalism see Connell 2014).

Feminist critical friendship, we suggest, is an especially valuable standpoint for those undertaking a feminist institutionalist approach in their research – that is, those who seek to identify and account for the effect of gender legacies on institutional design and implementation and the gendered impact of the formal and informal ‘rules of the game’ on policy outcomes (see, for example, see, for example, Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2010; Krook and Mackay 2011; Lowndes 2014; 2019; Waylen 2017). Taking careful note of contextual constraints and incremental shifts in gender practices and outcomes, feminist critical friends seek to avoid overburdening feminist insiders with unrealistic expectations or making overly generalised claims about policy successes or failures. Rather, they pay attention to the position of feminist actors in institutional settings, the pendulum movement back and forward between small wins and losses, and the cumulative effect of these over time. We argue this approach provides for a close and nuanced reading of institutional stasis and change, including the ever-present potential of co-optation, to be sure, alongside the possibility (but never a guarantee) of incremental transformation as actors utilise the ‘productive contradictions’ of the state and of global institutions in a world dominated by neoliberalism (Wood and Litherland 2017 in Eschle and Maiguashca 2018; Connell 2014).

This article is especially concerned with exploring how the researcher is situated in relation to those they research. We are interested in clarifying and reflecting upon the role of feminist academics and researchers. We seek to identify the different positions of researchers vis-à-vis their subjects and to explore the dilemmas and challenges that arise for academics in their efforts to study with sensitivity insider efforts to change the gender *status quo* from within various national, regional and international institutional arenas.

The article progresses in four parts. Part One defines **who** feminist critical friends are. It draws on ideas from radical pedagogy, situates the concept of feminist critical friendship in the broader literature on feminist institutional actors and sets out an initial typology. Part Two defines **what** is the role of feminist critical friends in relation to their subjects. Part Three outlines the reasons **why** we have been motivated to develop the concept and why we consider it useful, especially for those interested in better understanding the operation of gender actors and gender rules. Part Four considers the methods needed – or **how** – to engage in feminist critical friendship. We end by offering some reflections on the potential value of the concept of critical friendship for feminist research.

### **Who are feminist critical friends?**

The origins of critical friendship are in radical pedagogy but the concept has been widely popularised in support of public service and professional reform agendas, particularly but not exclusively in higher and further education.<sup>1</sup> At its simplest, a

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, resources on critical friends on professional educational resources sites such as <http://edglossary.org/critical-friend/>) and <http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/critical-friends/understanding-role/relationship-sponsors/>

critical friend has been defined as ‘a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend’ (Costa and Kallick 1993). A critical friend is typically an external person who supports change processes and programmes of reform. There are multiple definitions, but we can draw out some common features that include:

- External and autonomous person
- Relevant and recognised expertise and knowledge
- Shared goals
- Balances support with critical analysis
- Willingness to play devil’s advocate and challenge assumptions
- Willingness to speak hard truths constructively and make contextual judgements
- Ethos of balancing contradictions of engaged but critical position

(see for example Ehlers and Schneckenberg 2010; JISCinonet 2013)

We suggest *feminist* critical friends share a number of common features with critical friends: relative autonomy; expertise; ‘close distance’; (at least some) shared goals; and a commitment to understanding of contingency and contextual entanglement. In our view, ‘feminist critical friends’ are researchers who may be aligned with the key tenets of the agenda being pursued by feminist actors working from within – such as ‘femocrats’, feminist judges, or politicians - but they stand outside (or are in some sense detached from ) the institutions under review. We agree with Holvikivi that feminist critical friendship should be a ‘dialogic relationship’ (2018, 143). Consequently, feminist researchers have a responsibility in turn ‘to create spaces for gender experts to be critical friends’ in return (2019, 132). However, in an attempt to clarify the distinction between critical friends and their subjects in this paper, we avoid collapsing the two categories, while acknowledging that the ‘critique’ and the ‘friendship’ can operate across the divide, and that no one side of the relationship has an epistemic monopoly.<sup>2</sup>

In developing a typology of whom might constitute a feminist critical friend we offer the following categories and also provide some exemplars. These references are by no means meant to be exhaustive, but simply give an indication of the type of work being undertaken under each category.

a) Feminist **critical friend as engaged academic actor**. These are feminist academic researchers involved, sometimes ‘over the long haul’, in the study of gender reforms in institutions, and the ideas, strategies and practices of feminist insiders. They will have recognised ‘expertise’ as academics. They will share normative commitment to challenging the gender status quo, though may be more sceptical of claims about the transformational potential of certain strategies, such as gender mainstreaming , gender quotas, or gender bias training for example. They may support, provide, share and exchange resources (knowledge, analysis, wider contextual factors) with feminist insiders. They will seek to maintain ‘close distance’ with the institutions under study and the change agents within. From that standpoint, they evaluate progress and chart

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<sup>2</sup> We thank Anonymous Reviewer 3 for this point.

setbacks. Relatively autonomous (especially when tenured), their academic credentials and university affiliations *may* command legitimacy with the wider institution, although doctoral researchers and those academics who are precariously employed are unlikely to enjoy such benefits.

There are many exemplars of this form of critical friendship scholarship. At nation state level, examples include Lee Ann Banaszak's (2010) exploration of the development and policy impact over the long haul of feminist activist networks inside the US federal government, and the 15 year programme of longitudinal national and cross-national work on women's policy machinery led by Amy Mazur and Dorothy McBride (see, for example, McBride and Mazur 2013). At regional level, an illustrative example is provided by Megan Bastick and Claire Duncanson's (2018) careful account of the successes and challenges facing gender advisors in NATO militaries. Thinking about the global level, Louise Chappell's (2016) analysis of insiders working with the gender mandate of the International Criminal Court during its first decade in operation also fits this category, as does Susanne Zwingel's long term engagement with the CEDAW Convention and the work of its Committee (2016).

b) Feminist **critical friend as gender expert/advocate**. These are individual experts or organisations that work in close cooperation with a particular institution or sector on reform agendas. They may have played a pivotal role in the creation of an institution or a gender mandate or policy. They may have considerable gender and sectoral expertise (sometimes more so than institutional insiders). They may support, provide, share and exchange resources (knowledge, analysis, wider contextual factors) with feminist insiders. They are likely to be relatively autonomous, although that may become complicated by turns 'inside' as consultants. They may also hold institutions to account, and provide important two-way links with the wider women's movement.

A good example of this type of critical friend is the organisation *Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice*, based in the Hague. Engaged with the development of the International Criminal Court since its inception, the organisation provides ongoing gender analysis of the court's decisions, internal policies and practices through annual reports and engagement with ICC insiders. A similar example is provided by the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (NGOWG) a coalition of organisations that provides regular expert policy guidance as well as holding the UN Security Council to account for its performance on this agenda. Groups such as the European Women's Lobby play a similar function supporting and critiquing the work of regional bodies, like the European Union. At a domestic level, examples of similar FCF organisations include Fawcett (UK), the Swedish Women's Lobby (Sweden), National Organisation of Women (US) and the Women's National Coalition (South Africa).

At an individual level we would include independent consultant gender experts and trainers, who often combine consultancy with scholarly analysis, for example, consultant-scholar Lucy Ferguson's work on gender knowledge (see Bustelo, Ferguson and Forest 2017). This category also encompasses academic feminists who become embedded in institutional arenas for a period of time to actively and explicitly promote reform agenda. Sarah Child's secondment to the UK House of Commons and her subsequent report on *The Good Parliament* (2016); and Tania Verge's work with the Catalan parliament (2019) co-creating a multi-year gender action plan are both good cases in point.

c) Feminist **critical friend as ‘recovering femocrat’**. These are individuals who have spent substantial periods of their careers inside institutions of governance but who subsequently move into – or return to – academic, quasi-academic roles or consultancy roles and, in so doing, critically reflect on their own experience. They will have complicated relationships with their former colleagues ‘left behind’, and ethical dilemmas about boundaries and institutional knowledge, needing to critically assess when to share or publish information learnt or experienced on ‘the inside’, despite such knowledge bringing greater nuance and sensitivity to understanding the circumstances and constraints in which attempts at feminist policy-development are made.

Marian Sawer’s groundbreaking *Sisters in Suits* (1990) which was the first in-depth study of feminists inside the bureaucracy, of which Sawer was herself a practitioner, is a good example of this type of critical friend. Sawer’s work was followed by US scholar Hester Eisenstein, who worked within the New South Wales public service, and reflected on this in her work on *Inside Agitators* (1996). Not a ‘femocrat’ experience per se, but Natalie Galea’s (2018) ethnography of the construction industry, where she formerly worked as a project manager, clearly brings out these ethical dilemmas and contradictions of insider knowledge and an understanding of the challenges for insiders working to achieve gender transformation. Other notable examples include reflection and trenchant critique by former UN insiders such as Joanne Sandler (2013) and Anne Marie Goetz (Goetz and Jenkins 2016; Goetz 2020).

### **Whose critical friend?**

Feminist engagement with institutions of governance, from local to state to international, requires consideration of two further questions: first, *to whom* are the researchers’ critical friends? and *what* does such friendship entail?

In thinking through the first question, we note that the literature has moved on from debates among researchers about whether feminists *should* work within institutional arenas, generally accepting that ‘improvements in women’s lives rest, for the most part, on engagement with and entrance into institutions’ (Chappell 2006, 158), to turn to the attendant challenges, conflicts and power relationships that come with holding such a position.

Initially, much of the theoretical and empirical work on feminist insiders focussed on the national and local contexts, concerned with their involvement in state bureaucracies, legislatures and legal bodies (Banaszak 2010; Chappell 2002; Eisenstein 1996; Katzenstein 1998; Mackay et al 2003; Sawer 1990; Stetson and Mazur 1995, McBride and Mazur 2010). More recently, the field of view has expanded to focus on the engagement of actors within international organisations of global governance including in UN agencies, the International Criminal Court, the World Bank, the WTO, and a range of development bodies (see Caglar et al 2013; Chappell 2015; Eyben and Turquet 2013; Mackay 2013, 2014b).

As noted by scholars (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Ni Aolain and Valji 2019), there is a tendency in the study of institutions to focus on ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’, treating them as ‘black boxes’, and thus neglecting the internal dynamics and institutional cultures that enable or challenge modes of activity, including change processes. By opening up the ‘black box’ and attempting to analyse the challenges, power relationships, and

potential for agency of those working within sites of governance, feminist researchers have devised a range of descriptors. Drawing on the work of race and gender theorist Patricia Hills Collins (1986), feminist scholars including Hawkesworth (2006) and Roth (2006) apply the term ‘outsiders within’. As Roth argues, ‘outsiders within’ (2006, 158):

...[c]aptures the positionality of those feminists in extra-feminist institutions who organize on the basis of their rights as women and as citizens; within various institutions, they make claims based on being members of the particular institutions/organizations they inhabit. But they do so from a position of societal difference...the experiences of outsiders within are shot through with contradictions; they may experience partial, sometimes only nominal, acceptance by institutions all the while conscious of the provisionality of this acceptance.

Other terms have been used to describe these insider gender justice advocates, depending on institutional contexts. Studies of feminist bureaucratic insiders have applied the term ‘femocrats’ (Eisenstein 1996; Sawyer 1990; Mazur and Stetson 1995), ‘gender policy entrepreneurs’ (Chappell 2006), or ‘tempered radicals’ (Eyben 2013 after Meyerson 2001). Regardless of the characterisation, research has shown that these actors sit in a complex and often uncomfortable position – entering organisations with ‘oppositional knowledge’ and usually only ever enjoying partial acceptance by those powerful actors who maintain the gender *status quo* (Roth 2006, 158). And it is with these actors that feminist critical friendships are principally focussed, formed and sustained.

Following the questions raised by Duncanson and Bastick (2014) in relation to their own work on militaries, FCFs also need to consider whether their friendship extends beyond these ‘Outsiders Within’ to other institutional actors, or indeed to the sites of governance themselves. Is the FCF normatively supportive of the maintenance of the UN system, of NATO militaries, or the ICC, despite their flaws? Or are they just sympathetic to the struggle of those insiders/ outsiders-within trying to shift the gender status quo, for example ,through the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, and strategies such as gender mainstreaming, gender quotas, and gender-sensitive policy and impact analysis? This suggests that FCFs may have a more ambivalent stance than standard critical friends when it comes to the wider institutional field, and may have only some shared goals rather than a wholehearted sense of a common agenda.

In relation to the second question, of what the friendship entails, there are common themes running through the national and international accounts. These include the need to identify and take seriously the (sometimes hidden) ‘micro-political strategies’ (Eyben and Turquet 2013, 301) required to ‘anchor feminist ideas’ (Caglar et al 2013, 284) in organisations and the challenges of and opportunities arising from operating at the margins (Eisenstein 1996, 139; Eyben and Turquet 2013, 411; Roth 2006). Another preoccupation of these analyses is identifying and evaluating the intended and unintended consequences of institutional feminist interventions (Caglar et al 2013, 286; Eyben and Turquet,314). The literature also pays attention to the dilemmas for feminist insiders who are often working to procure the ‘least worst’ outcomes, rather than vacate the field entirely (Eyben and Turquet 2013; see also in national contexts Eisenstein 1996; Katzenstein 1998).



Regardless, a general finding of the existing scholarship on feminist insiders is that transformative gender change rarely arrives through major ruptures, or at ‘critical junctures’; more likely it will be achieved in incremental steps, arising from the daily practice through which institutions are instantiated (Ferguson 2015, Dersnah 2016): a case of chipping away rather than sweeping away. Therefore, it is necessary for feminist critical friends to pay particular attention to everyday practices within complex bureaucracies and understand that ‘politically astute feminist bureaucrats seek to exploit these contradictions rather than resolve them, making small gains as they work towards transformational goals’ (Eyben and Turquet 2013, 7) ‘Small wins’, when added together over time, can add up to a significant institutional shift. Mary Katzenstein’s (1998) important work on feminists within the Catholic Church and US military neatly sums up this process: ‘[l]ess lawbreaking than norm-breaking’ women’s activists working from within ‘challenged, discomforted and provoked, unleashing a wholesale disturbance of long-settled assumptions, rules and practices’ (1998, 7; see also Feree 2003).

Our intervention on feminist critical friendship adds a new layer to this existing scholarship. It seeks to explore and expose the contradictions and entanglements not of the insiders themselves but of the academics and other researchers who seek to understand the position, influence and effects of these ‘tempered radicals’, and their role in wider processes of resistance and change. This approach shares common insights with older work on ‘triangles’- work which described and traced the informal relations amongst policy-makers, academics and civil society in gender equality policy making (for recent revisiting, see Woodward 2015). However, FCF differs in its concern with research dilemmas. This intervention is founded on our sensitivities to: our responsibilities as researchers to these insiders; the benefits and the limits of our investigations; the tools available and best suited for undertaking this research; understanding the boundaries between where academic outsiders and insiders reside.

In considering these issues, we situate ourselves within a feminist methodological position that views the research process itself as a political act. As Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True explain (2013, 136), a feminist methodology is not a distinct set of rules or predefined protocol for research, but a dynamic, power-infused process. We identify with the four aspects Ackerly and True consider central to a feminist approach to research, including an attentiveness to: unequal power relations; relationships; boundaries of inclusion and exclusions and forms of marginalisation; and, situating the researcher in the research process (Ackerly and True 2013, 136; see also Fonow and Cook 1991, 2005). This self-reflection on the position of the researcher is a feature both of feminist methodology and a feminist research ethic (Ackerly and True 2013, 144), and is our primary focus here.

### **Why define a feminist critical friendship position?**

Our desire to develop and clarify the use of the term ‘critical friendship’ for feminist political analysis stems from two motivations: joint frustration with some of the academic critiques that have emerged in recent years concerning feminist insider efforts to engender arenas of national and international governance through strategies such as

gender mainstreaming;<sup>3</sup> and second, the need to develop a methodological standpoint in relation to an emergent feminist institutionalism in which we are both invested.

In relation to the first motivation, we have become increasingly concerned by feminist critiques of feminist insider strategies that are unmediated by attentiveness to institutional context or strategic possibilities. A key example of this work is critique of what has been pejoratively described as ‘governance feminism’, driven by US legal theorist Janet Halley and colleagues (2018). This work focuses on how those feminists entering sites of governance end up in relations of ‘collaboration, compromise, collusion, complicity, and co-option’ (Natalie 2019). As critiqued in a review of this book, the governance feminist approach “can result in the oversimplification of feminist struggles, focusing on visible and measurable outcomes and underestimating every day, imperceptible feminist contributions to social change”.

While many feminist critics identify the dilemmas of institutional ‘resistance’ and ‘compliance’ and the compromises entailed in choosing to operate at the ‘margins’ or in the ‘mainstream’ (see Kouvo and Pearson 2011), they nevertheless offer few clues as to what an empowered or resistant feminism might look like, and fail to offer any solutions to these dilemmas aside from entirely rejecting existing institutional arrangements (see, for example, Nesiah 2011). Dustin Sharp’s points in relation to human rights critics, seems equally apt here: ‘...for some critical scholars, deconstruction has become an end in and of itself, and an exercise in fence-sitting where no discernible position is ever firmly taken’. He goes on: ‘the critique has become largely self-referential, buttressed only with references to critical assertions of other like-minded critical theorists’ (2019, 4).

A further problem is that there is blindness toward the micro-political context in which feminist insiders such as policy entrepreneurs operate, and therefore a lack of attention to the subtle wins and losses that arise from their engagement. Again, to draw upon and paraphrase Sharp’s parallel analysis of human rights critics, we see feminist critics will often ‘stand on a moral high ground of denunciation’ without ever engaging in harder questions of governance—including the ‘nitty gritty of implementation’. Those who ‘deconstruct without offering a discernible vision for change’ (Sharp 2019, 6) often seem oblivious to, or disinterested in, the effect this has on those ‘outsiders within’ working to shift the gender status quo. Certainly, feminist insiders have observed to us they experience some deconstructive critique as destructive and disempowering, presenting them as institutional ‘dupes’ or seduced by power.<sup>4</sup>

The problem with these ‘strong co-optation’ approaches has been carefully laid out in the work of Eschle and Maigusashca (2018). As they argue, ‘the trouble with the strong co-optation thesis is not only its exclusionary and determinist reading of institutional sites of politics, but also its universalisation of particular Northern feminist visions of political possibility’ (2018, 226). Specifically in relation to critiques of ‘governance feminism’ (GF) Natalie et al (2019, 1110-1) suggest:

it is important to say that for feminists who are both scholars and activists, a key question emerging from this work is how the critique of GF is going to be

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<sup>3</sup> For critiques of efforts to engender international law and transitional justice domains see Engle 2005; Halley 2008; Kapur 2013; Nesiah 2011.

<sup>4</sup> In conversation with authors.

used in countries where feminist ideas have not been normalized, and where struggles to attain even basic rights for women are occurring. Decriminalizing abortion in Latin America, for instance, could make the difference between women's lives and their deaths, and is an agenda that only feminists with the tools to influence power can take forward.

Eschle and Maiguashca also caution against relying on the nostalgic lens often applied in critiques, which suggest there was a time where 'purity' in engagement was possible (2018, 225). Not only does this 'purist' point of view work against more realistic yet messier intersectional and decolonial approaches to institutional engagement, it is also apparently uninformed by earlier and ongoing domestic debates around 'femocrats' and state feminism and NGO-isation that have been so important in better understanding the tensions and possibilities of feminist insider/outsider engagement.

In advancing a feminist critical friendship, we are staking a claim for a mid-position: one that accounts for the limitations, shortfalls, missteps and intended and unintended consequences of insider actions and strategies, at the same time as being sympathetic to the need to engage with existing institutional arenas 'however hedged in with caveats and compromises' (Eschle and Maiguashca 2018, 227). Our position, which combines what Eschle and Maiguashca have dubbed more 'nuanced cooptation' and 'resistance' approaches emphasises the importance of understanding the contingencies within which feminist insiders (or outsiders-within) operate, the value and costs of existing at the margins, the significance of small shifts in context that can accumulate over time, and the necessity of compromises to achieve 'the least worst outcomes'.

A second motivation for giving definition to the idea of a feminist critical friend comes from our participation in the cross-national and collaborative project of developing and defining a feminist institutionalism (FI) which requires us to think more clearly about the development of a grounded methodological approach that is compatible with these efforts. Indeed, FI has been identified as providing promising frameworks and tools by feminist political science and IR scholars concerned with the shape and scope of 'resistance' feminism, and the possibilities for contestation in highly institutionalised terrains (Eschle and Maiguashca 2018, 233). Identified as of particular value are FI understandings of institutions as both gendered and involved in gendering (with gendered effects), and the emphasis on both formal and informal 'rules of the game' (see Lowndes 2019). As Ni Aolain and Valji (2019, 61) note, FI provides "a cogent means of determining the role gender plays in shaping institutional dynamics".

Recognising the importance of actors, and their everyday practices in gendered institutions, alerts us as researchers to the need to pay careful attention to how gender and other cross-cutting identities attach to the people who work with the rules and the types of constraints that these impose upon them. It calls for academics to develop a deeper understanding of how gender is performed institutionally to reflect the 'gendered logic of appropriateness' (Chappell 2006), and how, in turn, this gender performance shapes the context in which institutional rules are designed and implemented. Capturing the relationship between gender, actors and institutions requires us as researchers not to accept what we see from the outside at face value, but to undertake deep excavations within institutional settings to better reveal the layers of silence, and points of resistance and opportunity that confront 'outsiders within' that

may not be so obvious at first glance. It is clear from ours and other authors' dialogue with outsiders-within, as well their own accounts (see, for example, Eyben and Turquet 2013; Ferguson 2015) that these actors often experience and practice their work in ways which both support and challenge their institutions, and which identify and creatively exploit institutional ambiguities.

### **How to 'do' research as a feminist critical friend?**

In taking up a position of feminist critical friendship, one which is sensitive to the institutional constraints under which feminist insiders operate, it is important to think carefully about the best methodological tools to use. We do not argue that FCF must follow a particular methodological approach. However, if the objective is to better understand the micro-politics and small wins and losses that are a feature of institutional work, we suggest it is necessary to get as close as possible through interviews and ethnographic methods, in addition to studying core texts. While interviews have been a standard and important qualitative tool in feminist political science, (both structured and semi structured), ethnographic approaches which include observation and shadowing are much less common (although see, for example, Bjarnegård 2013; Chappell 2017). Ethnographic approaches have the benefit of capturing 'the social meanings and ordinary activities of people in their natural settings' (see Loosemore et al 2015). At the same time researchers must be alert to the limitations of ethnographic approaches not least as Louise Chappell and Georgina Waylen (2013, 609) point out, the potential to give 'too much primacy to actors, their practices and beliefs, to the exclusion of the institutional context in which they operate'. Balancing close up, interpretive approaches with textual analysis and quantitative techniques where relevant (see Weldon 2015) is important to understanding the place of 'outsiders-within' institutional arenas.

Comparative analysis – both temporal and geographical - can also be enlightening for understanding the position of actors such as gender justice advocates. Challenges, compromises, processes and outcomes can play out differently in different settings. By paying attention to differences across time and place, we are able to ensure we avoid making blanket assessments of the work of insiders, and learn and share lessons about the combination of factors – including those operating at the micro level - that create the conditions for achieving the small wins (or experiencing the losses) that can make a difference to shifting the gender status quo (see Chappell and Waylen 2013). Scholars from the 'global north' still have much to learn and understand about how insiders operate outside the well-researched governance structures in advanced democracies (Ahikire and Mwiine 2020; Tripp 2015), and by examining cases from 'the global south' we will learn more about the opportunities and constraints, the necessity and compromises, that confront 'tempered radicals' in their daily work.

### *Critical friends or de(con)structive critics?*

It is our view that some of the problems we have identified with some 'strong co-optation' feminist critiques of 'tempered radicals' stems in part from methodological foundations. The governance feminism (GF) critique noted above provides a good case in point here, and it is worth unpacking it a little to understand our differences in approach. In an early articulation of GF Janet Halley (2008) undertook an analysis of feminist legal insiders' efforts to shape the negotiations over the International Criminal

Court's blueprint – the Rome Statute. Analysing these negotiations in the late 1990s, Halley strongly criticised those feminists engaged in the statute design process, working 'inside' as diplomats and civil society actors as well as academics as missing a critical edge, replacing it with governance style of feminism that was 'consolidated in its [radical] feminist ideology and in its goals' (2008, 6). An especially relevant aspect of Halley's account for this discussion is that, in her view, feminist engagement occurred without any *obvious* internal dissent within or between the community of feminist advocates or their academic colleagues (2008, 7). Commenting on this issue, Halley notes:

Whether dissent existed or not is another question; *dissent was not performed*. For anyone accustomed to the strong tendency of feminists to disagree amongst themselves, this express and implied G[overnance]Feminist and feminist consensus is quite breathtaking (emphasis in original 2008, 43).

A foundational problem with Halley's critique relates to her method.<sup>5</sup> Halley makes clear that her detailed analysis of these events were solely based on a textual analysis – documents from the Women's Caucus for Gender Justice who participated in negotiations, as well as published assessments of the process and the outcomes by those involved in the process Women's Caucus actors. As Halley explains:

I decided early on in the research summarized in this Article that I would not interview participants in the processes I describe here: the result, *I thought, would simply have multiplied rather than reduced the interpretive challenges of dealing with the written archive*. So I have made myself entirely dependent on genres of legal writing, ranging from the judicial opinion to the op-ed, for the material on which I base the conclusions of this Article (emphasis added 2008, 23).

Seeking to avoid interpretative challenges is a curious stance for someone who wants to capture conflicts and consensus-building of insiders in the design process. This is especially the case for historically marginalised actors operating in a rule-bound, state-centric international relations system which, as work on feminist insiders has shown (Eisenstein 1996; Eyben and Turquet 2013), may make them cautious about outwardly demonstrating division and debate. Even if we accept that there was indeed a consensus among feminists at Rome, without extensive *post hoc* interviews, or the employment of ethnographic research strategies during the negotiation process, we can never know how strong it was or how it achieved and performed. To flip Halley's argument around, could it not be that the consensus may have appeared 'real', but it was nothing more than 'performance'? Indeed, according to one of the feminist actors involved, Valerie Oosterveld, to the extent that consensus was achieved, both within the members of the Women's Caucus for Gender Justice and with States parties, it came only after exhausting and daily debate and dissent, especially, but not only, in relation to the definition of gender (Oosterveld in McLeod et al 2014). GF critiques are just one set among many of the work of feminist insiders. Critical friends take their critical role seriously, but by engaging in close up, back and forward, timely and historical research, they are also able to better see the shifts, challenges, and 'small wins' that may contribute to shifting the gender status quo.

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<sup>5</sup> Despite its methodological flaws that at best miss the nuances of the position of the actors involved or at worst misrepresent them, Halley's analysis has been lauded as an example of 'meticulous feminist analysis' and re-presented as the accepted 'truth' of Rome Statute negotiations (Kapur 2013, 20).

### *Challenges researching outsiders within*

How do researchers capture the quotidian workings of powerful international organisations, and the strategic dilemmas and micro-politics of gender specialists as outsiders within? Anthropologist Rosalind Eyben uses innovative collaborative action research techniques whereby feminist bureaucrats reflect critically on their own practice as actors inside international development organisations (see Eyben and Turquet 2013). First-person insider testimonies (some of which are surprisingly frank) are combined with Eyben's creative re-imaginings of collective conversations over a period of several years to capture the reflections of those who needed to remain anonymous (Eyben 2013). The study sheds light on the dilemmas, internal dissent and strategic compromises of 'femocrats' in their daily practice and also emphasises that the dialogic relationship called for as a component of feminist critical friendship (Holvikivi 2019) is already part of many researchers' practice.

In the past few years, we have each embarked upon projects researching new international institutions in the fields of global governance and international law (see Chappell 2015; Mackay 2014). This work has entailed intensive engagement with feminist actors and institutional gender reform agendas. In each case, our work has been aimed at understanding the promise and limits of 'new gender rules' and reform processes, the impact of legacies, and the role of actors in instantiating (or challenging) new institutional paths. These follow on from work we have each done at local and national institutional arenas in established democracies, charting feminist change over the long haul, and the relationships and roles of institutional and extra-institutional actors, and the blurred lines between them (see Chappell 2002; Mackay et al 2003). In addition to the analysis of documents and texts, we have employed techniques such as repeat interviewing, participant and non-participant observation, process tracing, story-telling and resonance seminars in order to excavate and address the everyday dynamics of continuity and change. Like Eyben, we have strived to do research *with*, rather than *on* feminist insiders (Eyben and Turquet 2013; see also Pillow 2003).

In applying these techniques across these different research projects, we have encountered a range of methodological and ethical dilemmas that are likely to confront all researchers who take up a position of feminist critical friendship.

One problem relates to *access*. Finding a way into organisations to identify and gain access to the most appropriate interviewees can be difficult, especially where there are powerful gatekeepers. Gatekeepers may not be feminist or sympathetic to the research questions of feminist researchers. The cost of the 'research bargain' may be high, with privileged access granted at the expense of relative autonomy. In the case of one of our projects that has meant considerable delays in securing agreement to publish. Gaining the *trust* of insiders – including feminist insiders – so that they are willing to be interviewed is another challenge, especially for those who have engaged with researchers in the past and feel that their positions have been misrepresented or misunderstood. However, we have found the concept of 'critical friend' helpful in explaining our stance to both feminist and non-feminist institutional actors; it resonates well across that divide. Further, concerns about confidentiality and institutional loyalty can raise the stakes for those who are the subjects of inquiry. *Time* is another potential impediment. Interviews, but especially ethnographic methods, require an extensive time commitment that can be a disincentive for both research participants and academic

researchers. *Institutional churn* can also be a problem. Having spent time developing a close relationship with particular actors, they may move on and no longer hold positions relevant to the study. However, it is also the case that some of the most valuable material can come from reflections of former insiders who are no longer constrained by their professional loyalties.

It is also important to emphasise that the constraints in this research process are not unidirectional. Researchers too face dilemmas; having gained access to and built up trust with feminist insiders, they are likely to develop a sense of loyalty to them and may feel guarded about the presentation of difficult findings, even though they might have been openly disclosed and approved for dissemination by the participants. This is especially the case where certain developments may undermine feminist insider efforts, or create friction within organisations. In contexts where regular internal reporting and resonance activities are a part of the research process, researchers may struggle to find constructive ways to speak hard truths to power and to peers. In such situations, we have found story-telling a creative way to present critical findings. Additionally, just as feminist insiders can face co-option, so too can feminist researchers find selective use of their work may be employed to serve wider institutional agendas. Conversely, the problem of unintended harm may also arise because of researchers revealing certain dilemmas or strategies, but not being adequately aware of local political sensitivities. Indeed, on several occasions, we have had to ask ourselves whether our findings might do harm?

Research imbued with the ethos of feminist critical friendship involves emotional work on both sides. As a researcher, this includes active listening, providing space for feminist insiders to explore their experience and analysis, and also providing a sounding board for pain, anger, and disappointment. At times, we've each felt weighed down by the emotional impact of the stories shared. Interviews, informal conversations and ongoing relationships provide the opportunities for dialogue (Holvikivi 2019) and 'spaces for self-critique and reflexivity' (Ferguson 2015). But insiders may grapple with the impact of pain and confidences shared and disappointment from unrealistic expectations of what research/ers can effect in terms of material change. We suggest that a FCF approach means that researchers accept these emotional costs and dilemmas.

In their work on feminist methods, Ackerly and True (2013, 153) offer a helpful guiding refrain: that is, carry out research 'with a measure of humility, demonstrating awareness of the many challenges, methodological among them, in studying the social and political world, which is always changing and of which we are a part'.

### **Conclusions: Why is feminist critical friendship a promising concept?**

In this paper we have argued that the concept of feminist critical friend has promise for capturing the aspirations and dilemmas for many feminist academics and researchers whose work means they are 'entangled' with institutions and organisations of governance and the feminist bureaucrats, legislators and jurists who work on the inside as 'outsiders within' seeking to unsettle the gender status quo and re-gender powerful social, economic, military and political institutions.

We have sketched out what the concept of feminist critical friendship might mean in the context of governance, particularly at global level. Rather than positing engaged feminism and critical feminism in opposition, we argued that feminist critical friends can be engaged *and* critical. Indeed, as the literature on education reform has highlighted, the concept of critical friendship is seen to embody an ethos of balancing contradictions. This mid-position suggests that critique on its own is unhelpful, especially for those working to shift power relations from within institutions. Rather, that criticism should be coupled with ‘a discernable vision for change’ (Sharp 2019, 6) to open up dialogue and help guide practice.

We think there are a number of reasons why the concept of feminist critical friendship is a promising framework to develop for understanding the dilemmas of feminist researchers engaging with gender reforms and gender expertise in global and local institutions.

First, it is **reflexive**, in that it places academic feminist researchers (back) in the frame as producers of situated knowledge and recognizes the generative impact of academic feminism. Second, it **brings actors back in**, in that it pays attention to institutional and extra-institutional actors in programmes of change. It offers a corrective to ‘strong cooptation’ approaches which are overly deterministic and treated as an end in themselves. Third, it posits a **relationship between peers**, in that it takes the middle ground in the debates about the virtues of ‘researching up’ versus ‘researching down’. The concept denotes a horizontal relationship of peers. Feminist critical friendship is a relational concept and implies relations (of trust, some shared goals and understanding) between researchers and institutional actors. In its most common usage, it is associated with the building of communities of practice and promoting collaborative learning in further and higher education. Along with Holvikivi, we argue this aspect could be usefully developed as part of feminist strategies to develop communities of feminist practice and collaborative learning across scales and sectors.

Fourth, it is **change oriented**; feminist critical friendship is aimed at supporting organisational actors to effect change, at the same time as recognizing that sometimes change, including transformations, can come in small, incremental steps. This is in contrast to much work in feminist international relations addressing feminist cooptation versus empowerment or resistance, which offers few clues as to strategies for advancement and reform. Fifth, it is a position **committed to contingency, complexity and contradictions**. For example, it recognises the dilemmas but also the productive tensions of engagement, for example, of the **capacity to be critical and engaged**, to operate at close distance, and that actors will simultaneously experience elements of institutional co-option and agency; and the boundedness of reform agenda. Sixth, it is **careful and contextual**, in that it recognises the political, professional and emotional work of feminist insiders and their bounded agency; and that it uses the legitimacy of situated academics to speak hard truths with care and responsibility.

There is an appetite for and a growing literature on scholars trying to find the middle ground between dichotomies such as cooptation and resistance. Critical feminist friendship provides one path for exploring institutions and the interaction between them across the global, national and local contexts. Such an approach is more important than ever given the reassertion of ‘muscular authoritarianism’, the decline of liberal democracy, and attacks on the global rule-based order. As such feminists may need to



widen their critical lens to include not only the shortcomings of (neo) liberalism, including the liberal peacebuilding paradigm and the liberal political model, but also the dangers thrown up by trends of 'illiberal drift' and rising human rights abuses (Goetz and Jenkins 2019, 2). Recognising feminist insiders' macro- and micro-interventions across all levels of governance, whilst excavating and acknowledging the limitations, contestations and contradictions of their efforts, is a considered position and one that seems highly relevant to the turbulent times in which we live.

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