

Interview with Saara Särmä

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In May 2015 the editors of *Australian Feminist Studies* met with international relations scholar and feminist activist, Saara Särmä, who founded the viral Tumblr site, “Congrats, You Have an All Male Panel”. They talked feminism and activism in Tampere, Finland.

AFS Welcome Saara. The world has come to know Saara Särmä through the viral success of “All Male Panel” on Tumblr. We understand you developed the visual methods that are key to that campaign via your doctoral dissertation which was called “Junk Feminism and Nuclear Wannabes – Collaging Parodies of Iran and North Korea” which you completed at the University of Tampere in 2014. Firstly, we’d like to ask: what is junk feminism, what did your research entail, and how did that project and your experience in the field of international relations inspire “All Male Panel”?

SS My dissertation studied internet parody images that had to do with Iran and North Korea in relation to nuclear proliferation. At first I was interested in just the topic of how can one study nuclear proliferation as a gendered and sexualised thing. Then having played around this for about two years, I think, in 2008 Iran did a missile test, and one of the missiles didn’t take off. They then released an image to the world where that missile was photo-shopped into the image. So after that, when people

discovered that this was a photo-shop, there was a surge of parody images making fun of Iran's failure to launch the missile and also of the really bad photo-shop job, their failure to do the cover up right.

Then I started being interested in how these visual parodies worked, and what they do in global politics. After a while analysing the images, I was running into the problem of not being able to publish the images alongside my analysis because journal publishers are really careful with images where I can't trace the copyright or get permission. That was the practical reason why I ended up making these pieces of art, these collages.

I first made a collage for a guy who defended his doctoral dissertation and then I started doing these for other friends who defended their work. I always did Google searches with the keywords from their dissertations, and then worked that into a collage. While I was doing this for my friends I started thinking, maybe, this works as a methodology for my own work.

Having read Christine Sylvester's work<sup>1</sup> I was interested in how she talks about collage thinking which is both theoretical and thematic and is based on unexpected juxtapositions. In collage thinking we can bring together seemingly incommensurable ideas, theories and themes in creative ways and thus see important connections in the world that would otherwise remain unseen within an academic discipline such as international relations. I had been really enjoying Sylvester's work a lot, so I thought maybe I can do this visually as well. So this is how it turned into a methodology. Of course, it's always interesting for me where can I push the boundaries a little bit, like

what counts as research? This is where the junk feminist idea comes in. I'm interested in the stuff that's normally seen as junk in research, especially in international relations which is serious, manly and where who cares about parodies or everyday internet stuff, who even cares about feminism? Then I started playing around with this idea, I wrote in one of my draft chapters something about internet junk and feminism, and a friend of mine Jemima Repo commented, this is really good: "junk feminism", you should really think more about this; that's how that happened.

AFS How did we get from there to "All Male Panel"? We understand that it started early in 2015 as a folder on your Facebook page initially, and it is now a very popular Tumblr site. What were the formative moments for "All Male Panel"?

SS I had noticed that the University of Turku had a lecture series entitled Politics and Facts with "the best experts in Finland" on the topic. I work with wonderful women who also are experts on this topic, but in this course it was 11 lecturers who were all men. Then I started noticing that there are other events with all male experts, and started collecting them; and, I think, at pretty much the same time Facebook also introduced stickers, so you could comment with an image. So I bought into the idea of commenting with an image, and I just happened to come across this picture of David Hasselhoff as Knight Rider giving a thumbs up somewhere. And I was like, this works with these images and then I used it as a cover photo on the Facebook album and after a while realised I could crop it down to a circle and add it to the images. He just epitomises a particular type of white masculinity so for me; it works

really well that he's the one congratulating these other guys for a job well done, putting together an all male panel.

Then, also, as I said, international relations is a manly field, so I've seen these man panels, or "All Male Panels", whatever you want to call them, and I've seen them a lot. I'd been talking about this with my colleagues internationally. I just got a feeling that something had to be done and I start documenting this, and my way of doing this is always with a twist of humour—which is also a kind of junk feminism for me. That's why David Hasselhoff. I just think it's so funny and apparently other people think it's funny too.

AFS How did it all take off?

SS I had been running the Tumblr site since the end of February and I got a few submissions every now and then and a few people were sharing it. At first my colleagues internationally—feminists, international relations people—were sharing it a little bit, and then, I think, some feminist academic organisations started sharing it. Then I really don't know how BuzzFeed picked it up, I think that is the moment where it really went viral, which is a bit overwhelming. It's also interesting because I'm concerned with how humour works in global politics; so now I have this first-hand experience of being part of it. For me, it's a research project in a way in that I get material out of it, but then I also produce material at the same time. So it's fascinating in many ways.

AFS   Everybody loves the use of David Hasselhoff obviously. Critically the Hoff is a white guy, and you've identified on "All Male Panel" that it's not just a guy thing, often it's a white guy thing. Would you like say more about the way in which your campaign is targeting diversity more generally?

SS     I actually did start another Tumblr at the same time, which is "All White Panels", but that only has three things at the moment. This all came out of a discussion at the International Studies Association Conference this year, which was in New Orleans. The 2015 ISA conference was the most diverse ISA there has ever been because the Programme Chairs were women with strong commitments to postcoloniality and feminism. Then two weeks before the conference, the ISA itself introduced the Sapphire Series<sup>2</sup>, which was all white, which the ISA wanted to be a TED Talk type of thing. This brought on a huge discussion: why now? Why when we have these Programme Chairs who are feminists and who've been putting together wonderful presidential panel series and conference theme panel series and when everything was really diverse, did this happen? And nobody even really thinks about it, the whiteness is so normalised. It's not even like an intentional backlash, but it's something which looks so ridiculous at this particular moment. So there were a lot of discussions before the conference, and when we were all there we had discussions which are the background to this whole Tumblr thing.

AFS   Thinking of "All Male Panels" as a form of feminist activism, why do you think the visual feed is appealing and effective as an intervention?

SS I wish I knew why it works, because that's my academic interest as well, how international politics can work visually. I think there is something in this age, also, and it needs to be quick and visuals just work really quickly. Then there's something more, there's a humorous element too; and I've got a lot of comments that this all male panel issue is so depressing and sad, but it's so funny that you'd rather laugh at these things. So in a way it is very empowering to laugh at something that would otherwise just bring you down. It plays into this everyday survival—given the sometimes very nasty environment that academia can be.

AFS *Australian Feminist Studies* first connected up with you via Twitter, and so we'd like to ask a bit more about the question of feminism and social media. Twitter reported that in the three years to 2015 conversations about feminism on the platform had increased by 300 percent.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the resurgence of feminist activism that we've seen in recent years has been driven by the hashtag. From your perspective, how would you characterise feminism in social media? Is social media now the most powerful tool feminism has for social organising? Are there limits to its effectiveness?

SS I don't know if it's the most powerful, but it is very powerful. I think, for me, being able to connect with you and with a lot of other feminists globally, it's amazing. And also the feedback that I've been getting, I get it from everywhere. We talk a lot in Finland about how research needs to be international and we need to internationalise; but this generally means that either we bring somebody from abroad and count how many days they are here, or we count how many days I spend abroad. It's not really about the international, it's rather about who's been abroad, and who

comes into the country. So it's really about the foreign rather than being international. I think what we are doing should be recognised: that via Twitter and Facebook we are actually doing international work sitting right here in Tampere.

People might not want to take off and leave, or people might not want to come here, but we can still do a lot of work together on a daily basis. I think for that kind of thing Twitter and Facebook are really powerful, and from my own experience I don't know if I ever would have done the kind of work I did in my dissertation without it. I'd never have finished it if I didn't have this international feminist community on Facebook that I can interact with daily rather than just seeing once a year at conferences.

In that way I think this community is ideal. Then, of course, when we build communities there are limits, particular around diversity questions if you follow on Twitter. There were the so-called Twitter Wars where Black feminists have been raising their voices and really challenging mainstream White feminism. Then people get offended, so there are these kinds of dynamics where it's hard for a lot of us with a lot of privilege to listen and take the criticism. We can all learn all the time if we want to.

AFS For many people it may seem quite natural that a calling out or shaming intervention such as "All Male Panel" has been generated by someone in Finland. The Scandinavian and Nordic regions, particularly countries such as Sweden, Norway and Finland, are held up in many parts of the world today as models of gender equality. And yet in February 2015, Gudrun Schyman, head of the Swedish political

party Feminist Initiatives, railed against what she called the Nordic region's "toothless equality policy". In particular, she accused Finnish politicians of being too consensus-driven, and she argued that real progress on a range of issues including, for example, high rates of violence against women can't be made because "key issues are often avoided".<sup>4</sup> You have also made the point that the view from inside the region might be rather different, and there have certainly been Finnish examples on "All Male Panel". Could you tell us more?

SS Yes, I think, in Finland too we like to think of ourselves as being really equal, and then the problem with feminism in public discussion is that we run into the notion that equality has gone too far (as if equality could go too far!). There is this notion that it's all done: we had a woman president and we've had all these women party leaders and ministers. But now, if you look at the government negotiations, it is ten women and forty men or something, and all the party leaders are men again. So it's like we did this, it's done with, why do the feminists complain?

Then, of course, there is the issue of violence against women and other questions like that which are nowhere near solved. I think it gets in the way, this thinking that we're done with feminism. And because we're a small country, we pay attention to what others say about us. If internationally there's a view of Finland as really equal in gender terms, then we can say, if the world thinks that we're equal, why do feminists keep complaining? Feminism then gets read as a struggle for power, and not a struggle for equality: it is women taking over.



AFS Do the same kinds of questions also extend to the academy here? Is academic life and the academic profession in this region characterised by gender equality?

SS In my field in Finland all the professors in international relations are men. Some of the recent hires have been men who've been hired over at least equally qualified women. That's my kind of daily experience where I don't know if I'm dismissed because of my gender or because I do feminist work. It's not the outright sexism that maybe happened back in the day, but now it's more in the form of dismissals: if we have an international visitor giving a talk and there's discussion about what you think about their theoretical model or whatever, the men get asked the questions, even younger men get asked these questions, while there might be equally qualified women standing right there and nobody asks them anything. I worked a lot with a male student, we started our dissertations at the same time, we were at the same phase in our work, and at least three or four times different male professors asked him, so how's your dissertation going, when are you going to be done, we have this project where maybe we have some post doc funding for you. I'm standing right there, and they never asked me anything about my work. Or they tell me, oh, you organised this one seminar really well, good job.

So from that experience I've been maybe angry enough to start doing something. The whole of academia is quite masculine with the nature of competition and the way in which we criticise other people's work. I think a lot of that is really masculine, and cleverness is often associated with nastiness or habitual assholery. So I personally try to think of ways we can maybe do things a little bit differently. How do we create

these sort of circles of niceness that The Thesis Whisperer blog talked about a while back.<sup>5</sup> How do we enact a more caring and accountable academia?

AFS Recently you and writer Rosa Meriläinen founded an organisation called Hattu, which is described as a feminist think tank. The Hattu website proclaims, “whatever your feminist needs are, we will find a solution”.<sup>6</sup> It’s novel in as much as it articulates that people might have unmet feminist needs. What is Hattu? What does it do? What kinds of services does it have to offer?

SS At the moment it’s quite a virtual existence, so it’s on Facebook and there’s a web page. We have organised some events, but now we’ve got funding for the summer from the Kone Foundation and we are actually going to do a networking event for young feminists that we’ve seen on Twitter or Ask.fm (which is a whole new social medium that I don’t even know how to use). What we want to do is just to ask them what it means to be a young feminist and how maybe we can support them. We are interested in supporting women experts and feminist experts, so we see them as future experts. We’re getting to middle age now and we want to know what we can do for these younger people.

We always do everything like “All Male Panel”: with a twist of humour because we have a very similar attitude to life generally. Rosa also has a background in political science, so we will also try to produce some academic stuff out of all that we’re doing.

We say that we can do head-hunting if you have a hard time locating women for your panels, or whatever. Some people have sent us emails, but if those started coming in a lot we have to would start charging. In August we're doing an empowering workshop for professional women, so that's the stuff we want to start doing.

Neither of us is really career driven in that we would be very interested in making a lot of money, we're more interested in how can we get enough money so we can get by. I think, in that way we're not really trying to make a marketable thing out of it. If we don't get enough money from somewhere to get by what kinds of interventions can we do in various different spaces and things? It's not doing feminism as a career, it's living a feminist life. I really like Cynthia Enloe in her latest book, *Seriously! Investigating Crashes and Crises As If Women Mattered?* (2013). She talks about being "gender smart", and I really like the concept of constantly being gender smart in whatever you look at globally, locally or in your everyday life. That's what we want to do: to provide gender smart analyses, anything you can think of we can do it—and it might be funny.

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<sup>1</sup> For example: *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It*. Boulder, Paradigm Publishers. 2009.; 'Whither the International at the End of IR.' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35(3): 551-573. 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Weber: "ISA Sapphire Series is the New White"  
<http://duckofminerva.com/2015/02/isas-sapphire-series-is-blue-the-new-white.html>

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<sup>3</sup> Commemorating International Women's Day on Twitter, March 6, 2015 | By Elaine Filadelfo. <https://blog.twitter.com/2015/commemorating-international-women-s-day-on-twitter>

<sup>4</sup> 'The Nordic countries need more Feminist Initiatives!' NIKK Nordic Information on Gender. February 10, 2015. <http://www.nikk.no/en/news/the-nordic-countries-need-more-feminist-initiatives/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://thesiswhisperer.com/2013/02/13/academic-assholes/>

<sup>6</sup> Feministinen ajatushautomo Hattu. <http://www.hautomohattu.fi/in-english/>