

Gender and Private International Law (GaP) Transdisciplinary Research Project: Report on the kick-off event, October 25th at the Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law

As announced earlier on this blog, the Gender and Private International Law (GaP) kick-off event took place on October 25th at the Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law in Hamburg.

This event, organized by Ivana Isailovic and Ralf Michaels, was a stimulating occasion for scholars from both Gender studies and Private and Public international law to meet and share approaches and views.

During a first session, Ivana Isailovic presented the field of Gender studies and its various theories such as liberal feminism and radical feminism. Each of these theories challenges the structures and representations of men and women in law, and helps us view differently norms and decisions. For example, whereas liberal feminism has always pushed for the law to reform itself in order to achieve formal equality, and therefore focused on rights allocation and on the concepts of equality and autonomy, radical feminism insists on the idea of a legal system deeply shaped by men-dominated power structures, making it impossible for women to gain autonomy by using those legal tools.

Ivana Isailovic insisted on the fact that, as a field, Gender studies has expanded in different directions. As a result, it is extremely diverse and self-critical. Recent transnational feminism studies establish links between gender, colonialism and global capitalism. They are critical toward earliest feminist theories and their hegemonic feminist solidarity perception based on Western liberal paradigms.

After presenting those theories, Ivana Isailovic asked the participants to think about the way gender appears in their field and in their legal work, and challenged them to imagine how using this new Gender studies approach could impact their field of research, and maybe lead to different solutions, or different rules. That was quite challenging, especially for private lawyers who became aware, perhaps for the first time, of the influence of gender on their field.

After this first immersion in the world of gender studies, Roxana Banu offered a brief outline of private international law's methodology, in order to raise several questions regarding the promises and limits of an interdisciplinary conversation between Private International Law (PIL) and gender studies. Can PIL's techniques serve as entry points for bringing various insights of gender studies into the analysis of transnational legal matters? Alternatively, could the insights of gender studies fundamentally reform private international law's methodology?

After a short break, a brainstorming session on what PIL and Gender studies could bring to each other took place. Taking surrogacy as an example, participants were asked to view through a gender studies lens the issues raised by transnational surrogacy. This showed that the current conversation leaves aside some aspects which, conversely, a Gender studies approach puts at the fore, notably the autonomy of the surrogate mother and the fact that, under certain conditions, surrogacy could be a rational economic choice.

This first set of questions then prompted a broader philosophical debate about the contours of an interdisciplinary conversation between PIL and Gender studies. Aren't PIL scholars looking at PIL's methodology in its best light while ignoring the gap between its representation and its practice? Would this in turn enable or obfuscate the full potential of gender studies perspectives to critique and reform private international law?

As noted by the organizers, "although private international law has always dealt with question related to gender justice, findings from gender studies have thus far received little attention within PIL". The participants realized that is was also true the other way around: although they were studying international issues, scholars working on gender did not really payed much attention to PIL either.

One could ask why PIL has neglected gender studies for so long. The avowedly a-political self-perception of the discipline on the one hand, and the focus on public

policy and human rights on the other, could explain why gender issues were not examined through a Gender studies lens. However, Gender studies could be a useful reading grid to help PIL become aware of the cultural understanding of gender in a global context. It could also help to understand how PIL's techniques have historically responded to gender issues and explore ways to improve them. Issues like repudiation recognition, polygamous marriage or child abductions could benefit from this lens.

It was announced that a series of events will be organized: reading groups, a full day workshop and a conference planned for the Spring of 2020.

If you want to know more about the project, please contact gender@mpipriv.de.