Feminism Meets International Relations

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The Rapid Growth of Gender in International Relations

The cover of a recent introductory text on gender and international relations features a photograph of a woman striking a decidedly confident pose as speaker on a platform, surrounded by other women, and juxtaposed against a battalion of heavily-armed male soldiers in fatigues. The significance of this description is not only that it conveys an overly simplified and literal image of gender (with the picture of women) and international relations (armed soldiers), but that this image graces the cover of an *introductory* text focused solely on gender and international relations.[1] The inclusion of gender and international relations not only in but also *as* mainstream texts can be considered a mark of the extent to which this sub-field has become a part of mainstream discourse.[2]

Another mark of the arrival of feminism to international politics is the abundance of articles in mainstream international relations journals, such as *Foreign Affairs*, *International Organization*, and indeed in this journal, *SAIS Review*. At the same time, monographs and edited volumes have proliferated in the past twelve to thirteen years since the publication in 1988 of what is considered to be the first volume in the field.[3] The International Studies Association has a section on Feminist Theory and Gender Studies and its 2000 Annual Congress featured panels focusing specifically on

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gender and international relations and on other topics that were presented from a feminist perspective, such as the role of the internet in international relations.

In just over a decade, gender and international relations, or, as it is also called, feminist international relations, has situated itself in the discipline of international relations at many different levels: from reassessing mainstream theoretical approaches to international relations, to advocating alternative perspectives and conceptualizations of international relations, to inserting women into the international relations discourse. Given the recent exponential growth in the theories of feminist international relations, and what appears to be increased interest in the field, one might venture to say that it is in the process of becoming fully established as an accepted and legitimate sub-field of international relations throughout the academy.

The term *gender*, as defined within contemporary discourse, refers to the complex social construction of men's and women's identities. One's gender reflects not simply or necessarily even one's biological characteristics, but rather culturally specific notions of men's and women's behaviors, particularly in relation to each other. Fundamental in the discourse on gender is the notion of power and the power dynamics between genders. A feminist approach, then, aims to reveal the gendered dimensions of theories, structures, and actions; in the context of international relations, this amounts to an epistemological approach of interrogating international relations theory and, in so doing, placing and/or bringing to light women's and gender issues in foreign policy and in the broader international arena. As Marysia Zalewski put it quite simply, this approach asks two main questions: "What work is gender doing?" and "Where are the women?"[4] The ultimate result—or at least the objective—is to bring to the study and practice of international relations a more critical and grounded understanding of the world and the way it works, as well and particularly to better understand the gender dynamics that create inequities of power between men and women.

The Genesis of Feminist International Relations

The emergence of a feminist approach in the field of international relations can be traced to different sources. First is the international feminist movement of the early 1970s, both in the academy and in the field of women and development as marked by the first United

Nations Conference on Women in 1975 and the UN Decade for Women 1975-85.[5] The emergence and growth of the Women in Development movement (WID), which has evolved into the Gender and Development movement (GAD), initiated a process of academic and policy research that, by the end of the Decade, led to the understanding that women's lives cannot be understood apart from a gender approach that looks at the power relationships between men and women. Further, it created awareness that these gendered power relationships affect and are affected by global economic and political processes that are themselves gendered.

A second factor in the emergence of gender and international relations as a field was the end of the Cold War. The shift of issues and priorities from the militaristic and ideological confines of the East-West divide opened a space in which other international relations issues and approaches could be explored and considered. Gender is but one of the "new" elements of this trend, which also includes considerations of the environment, the drug trade, economic globalization, demographic issues, and ethnicity.[6]

Another development that has augured well for feminist work in international relations is the fact that as the subject matter of international relations changes in the post-Cold War era, and as issues of human rights, the environment, migration, and democratization move to the fore, women's issues can no longer be ignored. Consider as an example of this third development the issuance in 1995 of new guidelines on gender by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, recognizing that women suffer persecution and human rights violations different from those suffered by men.[7] This was issued in response to requests for asylum by women fleeing various forms of gender-related oppression, such as genital mutilation, domestic violence, and forced marriage. Thus, not only has international relations expanded to comprise new issues, but women and gender feature prominently in these new issues.

A fourth way of considering the beginnings of feminist international relations is as a matter of natural progression—that feminist incursions into international relations are merely the final crumbling of this last bastion of the social sciences. International relations theory, itself a relatively new discipline, comprises various aspects of social science theory that have been interrogated by feminist approaches since the early 1970s. Yet only in the late 1980s did it become subject to feminist inquiry. This is most likely because

of the dominance of men and a male perspective in the field.[8] Take, for example, the role of the state, a principal actor in international relations. The state is one of the most important subjects of feminist study, where it has long been argued that the foundations of the state are based on a patriarchal and gendered sexual division of labor that subordinates women.[9] As Kathleen Staudt phrased it: "Women had little or no hand in the process of state formation and consolidation. Yet male control over women—specifically, over their labor, sexuality, and reproduction—was central to laws and policies that governed the gender realm."[10]

The fifth rationale behind the growth of feminist approaches to international relations is the increasing presence of women as political actors in the international arena. This could be considered an outcome of the aforementioned factors. As women's societal and gender roles continue to be redefined, and as women participate more in the public and political spheres, their presence as actors in the international arena is inevitable. Recent research suggests that while a "hegemonic masculinism" still pervades the field of international relations, more women in the field allow not only the evolution of norms and behaviors that are typically characterized as "feminine," but also a discourse freer of gendered restrictions in general.[11] While it cannot be said that there is equal, or even near equal, representation of women to men in governmental and foreign policy decision-making positions, the number of women has increased significantly. For example, the proportion of ministries run by female ministers world-wide doubled from 3.4 percent in 1987 to 6.8 percent in 1996; in 1997, fifteen countries had achieved a representation of 20 to 30 percent women at the ministerial level.[12]

Furthermore, international women's organizations and feminist groups have been a part of the growth of the international nongovernmental sector, which has been facilitated by rapid developments in communications and information technology. These groups work on many of the "new" international relations issues, such as the environment and refugees, and have proven their ability to mobilize at the global level, as demonstrated by the massive gathering at the nongovernmental organization (NGO) conference parallel to the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.[13]

A Brief Review of Representative Literature

These developments have coalesced into what is a legitimate and coherent sub-field in international relations. A review of the main texts that represent the feminist international relations discourse to date shows two trends. These texts correspond to theoretical issues in international relations and to more "material" foreign policy issues. At both levels, writers point to gender issues and the absence of women's lives and experiences. Beyond stating the obvious, the analyses have found that, rather than a gender-neutral discipline as some claim, the theoretical foundations of international relations are male-defined and constructed around male-female dichotomies that define female as "other." Joan Wallach Scott, a leading feminist theorist, locates gender and its power dynamics in international relations theory and practice, arguing that the power relations inherent in international structure and politics are legitimized in terms of relations between men and women, and that the legitimizing of war has been carried out in gendered terms.[14]

Writers such as J. Ann Tickner, Rebecca Grant, and Christine Sylvester have turned to the theoretical foundations of international relations to understand the absence of women's and gender issues.[15] They argue that these issues shape and are shaped by international forces, although thus far they have been seldom, if ever, considered. Using a "gender lens," these writers have broken down the discipline into its largely social sciences components, and then built them back into what is now known as international relations. They have discovered by viewing each component individually and as they are brought together, that such a process has resulted in a study entrenched in gender bias. As such, feminist understandings of the state, of war, and of security also differ widely from the androcentric understandings that shape mainstream international relations. Fred Halliday, Rebecca Grant, and Kathleen Newland have suggested areas of inquiry that arise out of the gender bias inherent in international relations theory.[16] Halliday delineates three main areas for feminist inquiry in

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international relations: the gender-specific consequences of international processes, women as actors on the international scene, and gender components of foreign policy issues. Grant and Newland propose that feminist concerns in international relations include migration issues, the gendered international sexual division of labor, women and development, and women's rights as human rights.

Cynthia Enloe, one of the most prominent scholars in the field of feminist international relations, argues that gendered stereotypes of masculinity and femininity provide the framework for the maintenance and operation of the international system.[17] Her empirical work on U.S. foreign policy attempts to show how women—in their roles as diplomats' wives, prostitutes at overseas military bases, secretaries in UN missions, and migrants who work as domestic servants to middle-class North Americans—shape the international system in fundamental ways, because they provide the means for the conduct of "official" international relations. The point is not that these are the only women actors in international relations, but that accounting for the social construct of gender is essential to a complete understanding of the workings of foreign policy. Enloe's second work looks at the militarization processes of the Cold War and elaborates on Scott's argument that militarization, security, and war are based and dependent upon gender dynamics.[18]

A third stream in the literature falls under the broader definition of international relations, looking at non-state actors—what might be appropriately labelled international feminism. Christine Sylvester's feminist analysis of international relations theory brings her to the conclusion that feminist international relations has different understandings of cooperation and reciprocity.[19] Further, feminist international relations refutes the basic Realist tenet that the international system is fundamentally anarchical. She suggests that a feminist international relations is more aptly understood as "relations international"—beyond inter-state relations to "inter-people" relations, such as that manifested by the extensive transnational networks of international feminist and women's organizations.

As Sylvester's work suggests, the main difference between the international feminist literature and the feminist international relations literature is the much broader scope of the former.[20] International feminists address topics and issues of an international nature, as well as inter-state issues, while feminist international relations is more restricted to state/government-level actions and

processes. Another difference is the weight that is given to feminism as a perspective and as a focus. Tickner, for example, starts with "established" international relations from a feminist perspective. International feminists tend to begin with feminism and feminist theory, and proceed to apply an international perspective. Like Sylvester, writers such as Nalini Persram have concluded that a feminist international relations is better understood as a critical international feminist theory of politics.[21]

Most recent—perhaps unimaginable even five years ago—is the perspective put forward by a book entitled *The "Man" Question in International Relations*.[22] It is novel in that it interrogates international relations theory to locate masculinities, masculine hegemony, and men as actors. While feminist work in international relations begins from the precept that it is a male-dominant discipline and practice, this approach analyzes not only the discourse as it regards women, but the way in which power relations between men and women shape and are shaped by the international relations theory and practice.[23]

Gender and International Political Economy

The field of gender and international political economy is related to the development of feminist international relations. This area of study can be traced more directly to the WID and GAD movements, which began as questions about women's role in development and the impact of development policies on gender dynamics in general and women in particular. The main issues under consideration in the field of feminist international political economy are the gender dimensions of economic globalization, neoliberal adjustment, and the politics of development.[24] There is also a consistent focus on interrogating the state as a locus of male power, a reproducer of gender hierarchies, and analyzing its bureaucratic barriers to gender equality.[25] This approach has found particularly fertile ground in the Third World, where international relations is primarily composed of economic issues like trade, development aid, and poverty, and has been supplemented by new developments in feminist theorizing in economics.

How Far Can Feminist International Relations Go?

The knowledge that international political and economic forces

influence women's lives and gender issues, and that women's lives and gender issues fundamentally shape international political and economic forces is not necessarily new. What *is* new is that this perspective is now considered in the mainstream study and practice of international relations. Although it is significant that this subfield appears to have made remarkable gains in the academy, much remains to be done in terms of theorizing and empirical research, particularly in terms of inquiries into whether the field has made any impact beyond the ivory tower. Indeed, the most important question to be answered is: has foreign policy or international economic policy changed at all because of the theoretical and empirical work done by those using feminist approaches to these subjects?

It is important to remember that there can never be a truly singular voice of feminist foreign policy simply because of the diversity of views within feminism itself. In terms of significant feminist influence over policy, the prospects are not entirely optimistic if one considers the field's forbearers (the WID/GAD movements), which, despite decades of organization and attempts at changing development policy have seen results that do not approach the magnitude of their efforts. Nevertheless, just as the U.S. feminist movement of the 1960s has had effects on American society and politics that were not immediately recognizable and not always quantifiable, there will be progress—even if slow—toward making the field of international relations more realistic, more inclusive, and more effective in addressing the world's problems and challenges.

Notes:

[1] Jill Steans, *Gender and International Relations: An Introduction* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

[2] Some examples: Darryl Jarvis, *International Relations and the Challenge of Postmodernism: Defending the Discipline* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), and Scott Burchill, Andrew Linklater, Richard Devtak, Matthew Patterson, and Jaqui True, eds., *Theories of International Relations* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), which both have sections on feminism. There is also a section on gender and feminist international relations in a recent volume by Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[3] These were the papers presented at the 1988 Symposium held at the London School of Economics, published as a special edition of *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* 17, 3, and later as a text, Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland eds., *Gender and International Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

[4] Marysia Zalweski, "Well, What is the Feminist Perspective on Bosnia?," *International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (1995): pp. 339-56.

[5] Diana Thorburn, "Gender, Regionalism and Caribbean Development: An Examination of CARICOM Policy" (M.Sc. thesis, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 1997).

[6] This approach has been labeled the "third debate" in international relations theory. See, for example, Michael Klare, "Redefining Security: The New Global Schisms," *Current History* 95 (1996): pp. 353-8.
[7] Judy Mann, "A Desperate Woman is Denied Asylum," *Washington Post*, 2 February 2000, p. C15.
[8] Jessica Byron and Diana Thorburn, "Gender and International Relations: A Global Perspective and Issues for the Caribbean," *Feminist Review* 59 (1998): pp. 211-32.
[9] Rebecca Grant, "Sources of Gender Bias in International Relations Theory," in Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, eds., *Gender and International Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) pp. 8-26.
[10] Kathleen Staudt, "Gender Politics in Bureaucracy: Theoretical Issues in Comparative Perspective," in Kathleen Staudt, ed., *Women, International Development and Politics: The Bureaucratic Mire* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997) pp. 3-34.
[11] Jeanelle Van Glaanen Weygel, "Gender Identity and International Relations: A Study of Women's Participation in International Negotiations" (M.Sc. thesis. University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 1999).
[12] United Nations, *Women 2000: Women and Decision-Making* (New York: United Nations, 1997).
[13] The Beijing conference was a governmental level conference, as are all UN conferences. Nongovernmental women's organizations therefore have mobilized and held parallel meetings at UN Women's Conferences since the first one, which took place in Mexico City in 1975, often with much larger turnouts than the official gatherings. The objectives of the nongovernmental groups are to give voice to alternative views—essentially, anything that does not make it to the governments' negotiating table—such as radical feminist developmental proposals, drama presentations, and art expositions. This parallel discussion also aims to provide critical analysis of the governmental discussions; indeed, the proceedings of the NGO meeting in Mexico City contained critiques of the WID project that governments and international organizations involved in WID only acknowledged ten years later.
[14] Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," in Aruna Rao, ed., *Women's Studies International: Nairobi and Beyond* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1988) pp.13-37.
[15] J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Rebecca Grant, "Sources of Gender Bias in International Relations Theory," in Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, eds., *Gender and International Relations*. Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[16] Fred Halliday, "Hidden from International Relations: Women and the International Arena," in Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, eds., *Gender and International Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) pp. 1-7 and pp. 158-169.
[17] Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
[18] Scott, "Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," in Aruna Rao, ed., *Women's Studies International: Nairobi and Beyond.* A similar argument is made in Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
[19] Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[20] For example, see Georgina Ashworth, ed., *A Diplomacy of the Oppressed: New Directions in International Feminism* (London: Zed Books, 1995).

[21] Nalini Persram, "Politicizing the Féminine, Globalizing the Feminist," *Alternatives* 19 (1994): pp. 275-313.
[22] Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart, eds., *The "Man" Question in International Relations* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998).
[23] Feminist questions of men and masculinity are not new and are controversial. One of the principal concerns with such an approach is the return of men to the focal point of analysis within a dialectic whose purported objective is to place women at the center.
[24] For example see: Isabella Bakker, ed., *The Strategic Silence: Gender and Economic Policy* (London: Zed Books, 1994), and Marianne Marchand, "Reconceptualising 'Gender and Development' in an Era of Globalisation," *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 25, no. 3 (1995): pp. 577-603.
[25] See, for example, Kathleen Staudt ed., *Women, International Development and Politics: The Bureaucratic Mire* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).