

# How Significant is Feminism's Contribution to IR?

Written by Alexandra Buskie

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ALEXANDRA BUSKIE, MAR 17 2013

### How Significant is the Contribution of Feminism to the Discipline of IR as a Whole?

#### Introduction

An evaluation of the contribution of feminist International Relations (IR) theory to the discipline as a whole is fraught with complexities; not only is feminist discourse a multifaceted branch of competing theories employing separate epistemologies, it is also a somewhat marginalised field within the study of IR. In their different ways, feminist theorists aim to expose gender biases embedded in conventional IR theories, such as realism and liberal institutionalism, and to reconstruct gender-neutral outlooks of international politics. Their findings have transformative implications for key concepts in the discipline. However, feminist IR theory remains on the margins of the discipline, with mainstream IR scholars rarely engaging in productive debate about the questions raised by feminist critiques. While conventional positivist theorists are perplexed with the post-positivist feminist agenda and how it relates to their own research programme, feminists themselves fear cooption and are reluctant to allow their theories to be subsumed by other bodies of thought.

This essay will begin by briefly outlining feminist approaches to IR and how gender relates to the study of international politics. It will then consider how feminist approaches seek to reconstruct IR theory in a more gender-neutral way, examining how the feminist theorist's 'gender lens' can be useful for re-examining fundamental concepts in IR such as the state, power and security. Finally, this essay will examine how mainstream IR theorists have engaged with feminists and how feminists have responded.

This essay will conclude by arguing that feminist IR theory has made a number of different contributions: firstly, liberal feminists have made a significant contribution in practical terms, placing gender firmly on the policy agenda; secondly, post-positivist feminist IR theorists have made an important theoretical contribution to the discipline as a whole, but their success in reconstructing the more conventional theories in IR has been limited by epistemological differences. Despite this obstacle, the feminist approach overall represents a rich analytical tool, improving our knowledge and understanding of the realities of international politics in the post-Cold War environment.

#### Feminist Theory and International Relations

Feminist thought was applied to IR relatively late in comparison to other streams of the social sciences. Theorists began to examine how gender affected international relations theory and practice in the late 1980s, during the 'third debate' between positivists and post-positivists. Like post-positivist critiques of conventional approaches to IR, feminist theorists contend that paradigms like realism, neo-realism and liberal institutionalism, present a partial view rooted in unacknowledged political assumptions that do not tell the whole story of international politics. Conventional theories were censured for failing to explain the collapse of the Soviet Union, the sudden and peaceful end to the Cold War, and the diffuse security threats of the 1990s.

The feminist approach to IR is not a single unitary theory, but a distinct discourse made up of many competing theories. For example, liberal feminists focus on securing equal rights and access to education and the economy for women, while Marxist feminists seek to transform the oppressive socioeconomic structures of capitalist society

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(Steans, 1998, 16-19). Alternatively, standpoint feminists argue that women's knowledge comes from a marginalised perspective that has the potential to provide fuller insights into world politics than those from the core (Brown, 1994, 231). Finally, post-modern feminists reject claims that a theory can tell "one true story" about the human experience (Steans, 1998, 25-26). Post-modern feminists argue that there is no authentic women's experience or standpoint that can be used as a template for understanding the world, and chide liberal feminists for their adherence to the Enlightenment project, their Western middle class bias, and their essentialist views of women (Steans, 1998, 23-27).

Despite the fissiparous nature of feminism in the discipline, all feminist IR scholars are united by a concern with gender: an ideological and socially constructed difference between men and women, as opposed to the biological differences between the sexes (Tickner, 1997; Steans, 1998; Pettman, 2002; Sylvester 2002). Gender both constitutes and is constituted by inequalities in power relations and social structures, and has significant implications for the respective experiences of men and women (Steans, 1998, 10; Tickner, 2008, 265). In their different ways, feminists aim to explain the role of gender in the theory and practice of international relations by locating women in international politics, investigating how they are affected by structures and behaviour in the international system, and exploring ways of reconstructing IR theory in a gender neutral way (Tickner, 2008; Steans 1998; Sylvester, 2002).

Since mainstream IR theorists were not traditionally concerned with gender, the work of early IR feminists sought to unveil the crucial yet unaccounted role of women in conventional spaces of international politics, like the global economy, high politics and war. In her seminal work, Cynthia Enloe (1989) focused on the everyday experiences of women as individuals, demonstrating their importance to the continued running of the state system as plantation workers, consumers, wives of diplomats and of soldiers, and prostitutes surrounding military bases. She asserted that omitting women in theories left IR "with a political analysis that is incomplete, even naive" (Enloe, 1989, 2).

This is best seen via the example of women's experiences of war: in general, war intensifies economic inequalities between men and women and often forces women into unpaid work, such as caring for the injured or sick when hospitals are over-crowded or destroyed (Chew, 2008, 76-77). Women are forced into the sex-trade for subsistence, sometimes being contracted informally by military leaders around bases in order to sustain the morale of soldiers (Enloe, 1989, 81-92; Chew, 2008, 76-77). Non-combatants, meaning women and children, make up 90% of deaths in contemporary wars, and systematic rape has been used as a weapon during wartime, as during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or currently in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Chew, 2008, 75). Seeing war through the eyes of a woman can change the very nature of what constitutes the boundaries of IR, shifting the focus from the causes and costs of inter-state war to the drastic consequences individuals suffer due to militarisation and oppression (Tickner, 1997, 625; Steans, 1998, 102).

## Reconstructing IR – The State, Power and Security

Liberal feminists like Enloe are content to point out women's roles and work towards their inclusion in public life. However, post-positivist and standpoint feminists go further, asking how gender biases and distortions have come to be accepted and unnoticed in the discipline, challenging IR scholars to question the normative foundations of their theories (Tickner, 1997, 619; Sylvester, 1999, 267). In order to deconstruct these partialities, they examine the socially constructed language employed in mainstream theories, particularly realism, highlighting conventionally used dichotomies like objectivity/subjectivity, culture/nature, public/private, and national/international (Steans, 1998, 57; Tickner, 1988, 431). In these groupings, the former represents the masculine value, which we subconsciously judge to be of higher worth than the latter, feminine term (Tickner, 1988, 432). Employing this analysis to scrutinise key IR texts provides remarkable insights into the gendered nature of language and knowledge employed by traditional IR theory, allowing new definitions of well-thumbed concepts like the state, power and security.

The arbitrary distinction between public and private life in Western political thought is decried by feminists as the main culprit for the exclusion of women in international politics. In the minds of influential philosophers like Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke, the term "citizen" referred to a man working in the public realm who defends the state in times of war as a soldier (Pettman, 2002, 7). The distinction acts to conceal the services of women as wives and mothers, work that is crucial to the continued survival of the state, while simultaneously militarising citizenship, constructing women as helpless and in need of the protection of male citizens (Pettman, 2002, 11; Tickner, 2008, 268). Similarly,

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the state itself possesses a blatantly masculine and patriarchal identity: Machiavelli's Prince and Hobbes' Leviathan advance a paternal image of the state as a strong and autonomous entity that serves to protect the people from the chaos and danger of the state of nature (Steans, 1998, 47). Through this gender lens, the theme of control comes to the fore in realist thought, as the "masculine" state comes into being so as to subjugate "feminine" nature and hold power over anarchy (Tickner, 1988, 432).

Such insights into the gendered nature of the state have crucial implications for the way mainstream IR understands concepts like power and security. Realism's preoccupation with control means that prescribes a type of power that facilitates domination: power is A's ability to get B to do what he would not otherwise do (Keohane, 1989, 246; Tickner 1988, 431). In general terms, this causes states to seek security through military might, using military power to deter or coerce other states. However, feminists argue that this is a partial analysis informed solely by a masculine perspective. Hannah Arendt, although not a professed feminist scholar herself but much drawn on by feminists in IR theory, contends that power is the ability to act in concert with others (Tickner, 1988, 434). This kind of thinking shows a distinction between "power over" and "power with", crafting a whole new perspective on power as a collaborative effort rather than an ability to dominate (Steans, 1998, 171; Keohane, 1989, 246). This view of power is particularly pertinent for addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century when economic interdependence is crucial to stability, and security threats like ecological degradation, international crime, and terrorist networks require more than military power to be properly addressed.

Furthermore, feminist critiques of conventional conceptions of power and the identity of the state lead to a re-evaluation of the meaning of security. Realists are occupied by the state security in the international realm, subsequently overlooking security within state boundaries. Feminists disagree with this arbitrary division of national/international, and focus instead on the individual (Sylvester, 1999, 267-268). Women's experiences undermine the argument that the state is the best mechanism for ensuring the safety of the individual and suggest that the state, as currently conceived, and the militarism it often inspires are actually reasons for some forms of insecurity (Tickner, 1997, 625; Enloe, 2002). Unequal gender relations leave women in a vulnerable and exploited position, dependent on men and the state for protection and welfare (Tickner, 1997, 627). Arguments highlighting the negative impact of war on women, or the particular economic hardships women experience, debunk the myth that the state provides adequate security for civilians (Tickner, 2008, 268; Tickner, 2009, 192; Chew, 2008, 76). Feminist discourse thus challenges mainstream understandings of security and opens up a multifaceted definition of security that includes the diminution of all forms of physical, structural and ecological violence (Tickner 1997, 624).

### Engaging with Feminist IR Theory

By focussing on the gender bias embedded in the way IR theorists consider concepts like the state, power and security, feminist thought has the potential to transform the theory and practice of international relations. In practical terms, liberal feminists have been particularly successful in disseminating their arguments in favour of including women in politics, using popular advocacy to get gender on the agenda (Steans, 1998, 162). 'Gender mainstreaming' has become a well-known concept within the United Nations, with some of the most symbolic advances in women's rights emanating from the Security Council in Resolution 1325 (2000) on Gender, Peace and Security, and Resolution 1820 (2008) on the recognition of rape as a weapon of war. Liberal feminist figureheads, like US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, have been instrumental in situating women in policy in the US, and the UK government has identified the prevention of sexual violence in conflict as a main foreign policy objective (McCrummen, 2012; FCO, 2012).

Despite their practical success, liberal feminists have been accused of having a simplistic attitude to women's empowerment, labelled as an "add women and stir" approach (Steans, 1998, 161). They have also been accused of imperialism, particularly in the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where some post-positivist feminists contended that while these wars were couched in the language of women's rights and liberation, in reality this language was used to mask more conventional ends of maintaining military power and guaranteeing Western economic interests in the Middle East (Chew, 2008, 80-81; Ruby, 2002, 149; Craft, 2002, 152).

However, in the realm of theory, conventional scholars in the discipline have been somewhat reluctant to engage with

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feminist arguments (Sylvester 2002, 12; Steans, 2003b). Firstly, there are scholars who dismiss feminist theory, questioning whether feminists are even 'doing' international relations (Tickner, 1997, 615). Traditional IR has developed around a self-contained, rationalist, research agenda, situating questions about states and the state system as the central focus (Steans, 2003b, 431). Conversely, feminists employ an ethnographic approach that underlines the importance of individual experiences and social relations rather than state behaviour and abstraction, thus concentrating on people, places, authorities and activities that are outwith the scope of traditional IR (Sylvester, 1999, 10-12). These epistemological differences mean that mainstream theories are concerned with completely separate questions to feminist theorists, making it seem as though feminist analysis is ill-fitted for the study of IR in the conventional sense (Tickner, 1997, 617-620).

Secondly, and building upon the implications of these epistemological differences, there are scholars who try to discipline feminists into contributing "properly" to what they see as an already given research agenda (Sylvester, 1999, 255). In 1989, Robert Keohane responded very positively to the critiques of feminist standpoint theorists on power and interdependence, inviting an alliance between neoliberal institutionalism and feminist standpoint, while rejecting what he saw were less useful forms of feminist theory, like feminist post-modernists.

Weber (1994) responded by disparaging his engagement, arguing that he was attempting to re-impose boundaries on feminist thought by re-presenting feminist standpoint outwith the overall context of feminist literature. She contended that feminist scholars visualise the whole of feminist literature simultaneously, looking through gender lenses to view international relations from several perspectives at once (Weber, 1994, 339). As such, feminists have a tendency to query the idea of "theory" itself because it creates arbitrary boundaries that force the discipline to ignore issues that are not included in the snapshot of the world that is presented by that theory (Sylvester, 1999, 271). From this angle, Keohane is hijacking feminist ideas by removing parts of the literature he dislikes and moulding those he agrees with to his own theories, thereby bringing feminists into line with conventional IR theories (Weber, 1994, 347). Keohane's encounter with feminists underscores their manifest fear of being co-opted, fundamentally resisting integration into larger bodies of thought within the IR discipline (Tickner, 1997, 620).

Sylvester (1999) identifies two further types of engagement with feminist IR theory. A third group of theorists tip their hat to feminist theories in politically correct footnotes rather than incorporating them into the main text (Sylvester, 1999, 255). Finally, the fourth group of scholars actively engage and incorporate feminist ideas into their writing, such as Brown (1994). Arguably, there exists a fifth group of scholars, who accept gender as a constitutive of identity and an important variant of analysis, and embed gender consciousness into their work without mentioning feminism in particular (see for example, Smith 2004). Sylvester (2002, 11) suggests that feminist literature on gender could have helped develop constructivist thought on identity, but it is not mentioned in key constructivist texts like Wendt's (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*.

## Conclusion

In sum, the contribution of feminist IR theory to the discipline as a whole is difficult to assess. It is clear that liberal feminists continue to make a substantial contribution to the practice of international politics, affecting change in national and international policies. Similarly, it is evident that feminist analysis can transform the way in which IR scholars understand central concepts like the state, power and security, bringing theory closer to reality by refocusing our interest in soft power, interdependence, individual human rights and women's rights.

However, debates between liberal feminists, standpoint feminists and post-positivist feminists suggest that there is an inherent tension between their desire to situate women's voices on the international scene and their goal of deconstructing gender altogether (Sylvester, 1999, 268). Consequently, the feminist approach is somewhat diffuse and difficult to pin down as it is not clear whether they want to completely reconstruct the core of IR or reject the mainstream literature of the discipline and continue to critique from the margins. Overall, however, this division works to keep feminist theory from parodying mainstream literature, with post-modern feminists checking and balancing the tendency in particular of standpoint feminists to claim to speak for all oppressed peoples.

In addition, the epistemological differences between post-positivist feminists and mainstream positivist theorists

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mean that theoretical discussions between the two are fraught with complications. Each is troubled by the other's attempt to broaden or narrow the boundaries of the discipline. Arguably, both discourses suffer from the same hubris: both are intent on gate-keeping for their own respective literature in their own particular ways. Feminists' discomfort with cooption and the need for their theories to be employed in full is equalled by mainstream IR theorists' controlling approach to the feminist research agenda. The result is a shaky relationship in which neither fully understands the other, and neither wants to get very much closer.

Nonetheless, feminist literature makes a very substantial contribution to IR as a whole. Feminist theory as a whole demonstrates the underlying normative biases embedded in the very foundations of conventional IR theory. They also make evident the ways in which mainstream theories are lacking: to be unable to account for half the population of the world is an almost unbelievable oversight. These deep-seated partialities are, once known, difficult to brush aside. In this sense, feminist theory provides a rich analytical tool that will continue to make insightful and transformative contributions to the IR discipline.

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