

# Feminist Approaches to International Relations: 'Good Girls' Only?

Written by Dominika Remžová

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*Feminist approaches to international politics have only been allowed into the discipline of International Relations as 'good girls.'* Several scholars have made an argument along these lines, with Weber's (1994) response to Keohane's (1989) article on contributions by different feminist theories to the study of International Relations (IR) being one of the most cited positions on the issue. Keohane evaluates feminist standpoint as having the greatest potential for supplementing the mainstream (including, but not limited to, neorealist and neoliberal) IR in the short run (hence Weber's categorisation of Keohane's representation of this theory as a 'good girl'), feminist empiricism as having a promise of supplementation in the long run (hence a 'little girl') and feminist post-modernism as having no such promise at all (hence a 'bad girl'). Weber (1994:338) argues that Keohane 'mutilates' the feminist body of literature threatening to overflow the established boundaries of IR; the result being not just a partial representation, but a complete transformation, of the three theories. This can be seen in Keohane's identification of standpoint feminism with his own project of neoliberal institutionalism, despite the former's ontological and epistemological assumptions, as epitomised by Hartsock's (1983) historical materialist strand of the theory, being contrary to the latter's.

When it comes to my own position on the issue (i.e., the kind of feminist approaches that have been *allowed* into the discipline of IR), I see IR as consisting of multiple functionally and/or geographically defined sub-disciplines (hereafter referred to as 'camps,' a term coined by Sylvester in Zalewski 2008). Following from this multifaceted understanding of IR, I argue that both 'good girls' and 'bad girls' *exist* in IR (albeit my definition of these categories differs from Weber's), with some 'camps' being *dominated* by 'good girls' (alongside other positivist approaches) and others by 'bad girls' (alongside other interpretivist, hereafter referred to as post-positivist, approaches).

I focus on the 'camp' of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), which I see as more representative of the *scholarship* and *practice* of IR (hereafter referred to as global IR) than other 'camps.' I use the term global IR as a descriptive term for the multitude of IR scholarships and practices in/from countries across the Global North and the Global South, which should not be confused with the normative project of 'Global IR' proposed by Acharya (2014). When it comes to feminism, I argue that the Foreign Policy Analysis and practice are dominated by 'good girls' in both the Global North and the Global South. Although this essay focuses on the 'camp' of FPA and feminist theories, the core/peripheral positions of 'good girls' and 'bad girls' within FPA can be seen as representative of all positivist and post-positivist approaches within not just the 'camp' itself but global IR.

In terms of structure, the main body of this essay consists of two sections. The first section focuses on IR scholarship, providing details about my own understanding of IR (including its 'camps' and theories) against the background of its disciplinary development. The second section focuses on the practice of IR in relation to the scholarship. Here, I use examples of (both explicit and implicit) feminist foreign policies (FFPs) to illustrate the predominance of 'good girls' in not just foreign policy scholarship but also practice.

### 'Camps' in International Relations

My understanding of IR has been informed by several developments that have occurred since the early debates between mainstream and feminist IR scholars (see the exchanges between Keohane 1989 and Weber 1994 or

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Tickner 1997 and Keohane 1998), which had tended to position all mainstream theories on the positivist end of the IR spectrum (conceptualised as materialist, universalist and problem-solving) and all feminist theories on the post-positivist end (conceptualised as idealist, particularistic and critical). One such development concerns the proliferation of post-colonial and decolonial approaches that have not only criticised the ethnocentric presuppositions within both mainstream and feminist theories, thus transcending the binary oppositions between the two but have expanded the boundaries of IR scholarship whilst becoming dominant in certain 'camps' of the discipline.

IR now consists of several 'camps' (including, but not limited to, International Political Economy, Foreign Policy Analysis, Security Studies, and Area Studies), all of which employ a variety of positivist and post-positivist theories, albeit some are more inclined to employ the former and others the latter. It may thus be more useful to think of IR theories as being at the core/periphery within individual 'camps,' although this is not to deny that positivist theories prevail across the 'camps' (i.e., in global IR). Indeed, my decision to focus on the 'camp' of FPA is due to its representativeness of global IR, which, despite the increasing proliferation of post-positivist theories within certain 'camps' (e.g., Area Studies), continues to be dominated by positivist approaches (and so does the 'camp' of FPA). In fact, the 'camps' that can be seen as dominated by post-positivist (including 'bad girl') theories, remain at the periphery of global IR (Kaczmarek and Ortmann 2021). Foreign policy practice, which is discussed in the second section of this essay, is further demonstrative of the continued power differentials (re. knowledge production and dissemination) between positivist and post-positivist approaches.

When it comes to my categorisation of feminist IR theories, I see some as positivist on both ontological and epistemological fronts (e.g., feminist empiricism and liberal feminism), some as such only in terms of their ontologies (e.g., strands of standpoint and decolonial feminism) and others as post-positivist on both fronts (e.g., post-modern and post-colonial feminism). I refer to all feminist theories that adopt positivist ontologies as 'good girls' and those that adopt post-positivist ontologies as 'bad girls,' making the category of 'little girls' redundant. The distinction I keep is that between post-colonial and decolonial approaches. The former approaches define normative positions of the Global North that, based on a temporal divide between 'colonial' and 'post-colonial,' imply the end of colonisation, whereas the latter refers to normative projects of the Global South that aim to decolonise the 'post-colonial' and challenge the Western-centric knowledge production (Hiraiwa 2021). Decolonial theories thus not only criticise post-colonial theories for reproducing the existing power relations but are closer to the early anti-colonial approaches that aimed to decolonise the 'colonial.'

Based on this distinction, decolonial feminism can be seen as a sub-type of feminist standpoint and post-colonial feminism as that of feminist post-modernism. This is supported by Mohanty (2003:511), a prominent scholar from the Global South (although Mohanty herself avoids the use of binary categories such as the Global North and the Global South), who bases her decolonial approach on the historical materialist strand of standpoint feminism. Moreover, in her criticism of liberal feminism (re. its ethnocentrism) and post-colonial feminism (re. its cultural relativism), Mohanty associates the former with modernism (Mohanty 1988) and the latter with post-modernism (Mohanty 2003). She sees both as hegemonic discourses uncritical of the neoliberal project of the Global North, which her anti-capitalist stance based on the standpoint of women from the Global South aims to challenge (Mohanty 2003:514).

In the next section I discuss the predominance of liberal and decolonial feminist (i.e., 'good girl') approaches over post-colonial (i.e., 'bad girl') approaches in foreign policy practices (as well as scholarships) of countries in both the Global North and the Global South. I argue that post-positivist (i.e., idealist) ontologies of the 'bad girls' prevail only in specific circles of foreign policy scholars in/from the Global North, with scholars and policymakers in/from the Global South seeming to prefer positivist (i.e., materialist) ontologies of the 'good girls,' albeit these are different from those preferred by policymakers in/from the Global North.

## **'Good Girls' in Foreign Policy Analysis and Practice**

Not only has the 'camp' of FPA remained largely unaffected by the post-positivist turn in Social Sciences (including specific 'camps' of IR), but the foreign policy practice itself continues being based on positivist approaches (Achilleos-Saril 2018:35). This can be seen in the prevalence of strategies such as gender mainstreaming, gender balancing and gender budgeting in the implementation of FFPs that have been adopted by an increasing number of countries

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across the world as part of their Women, Peace, and Security agendas. These strategies are based on adding sex (deemed synonymous with gender) as a variable into the mix of foreign policymaking. The goal is gender equality within the constraints of the existing (i.e., neoliberal) power structures, which makes such strategies representative of liberal feminist approaches that treat women as a homogenous category of analysis identifiable prior to any process of analysis (Mohanty 1988:65). This is epitomised by Swedish FFP based on '3Rs' of rights, representation, and resources; Sweden being the first country in the world to adopt (and since abolish) an explicitly feminist foreign policy (Achilleos-Sarll 2018:41).

In an attempt to extend the Swedish formula to all marginalised groups, Germany has based its FFP on a '3R+D' framework of rights, representation, resources, and diversity. The German formula was proposed by the party of the Greens as part of their 2021 election platform advocating for an explicitly 'post-colonial and anti-racist' foreign policy and subsequently adopted by the current government as part of its coalition agreement (Assad and Tausendfreund 2022). The potential for a post-positivist (i.e., 'bad girl') FFP that could transform the existing power structures, however, failed to materialise. Not only did the final FFP guidelines (FFO 2023a) downgrade the intersectional aspects of the proposed framework, privileging sex/gender over sexuality, race, class, and other social categories (Breckenmacher 2023), but the policy remained anchored within the neoliberal logic of the existing international order. This has effectively prevented any discussion (let alone transformation) of the structural causes behind the discriminatory conditions (e.g., sexism, heterosexism, racism, and classism) feminism is (in an emancipatory sense emphasised by Hartsock 1998) meant to tackle.

Feminism of the German FFP was thus conceptualised, in a Keohanean (1989) sense, as being in servitude to the overarching goals of neoliberalism, and nowhere is this more obvious than in Germany's relations with China, which, contrary to the rhetoric of the foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, continues prioritising economic interests of German carmakers over the human rights of Uyghur women. Here, it is important to note that the final FFP guidelines were influenced not only by neoliberal but also neorealist assumptions about the increasingly competitive and violent international system (hence labelled as the 'right kind' of FFP by Tausendfreund 2021), which only reinforces the positivist nature of German FFP.

Whilst there are several differences between Western and non-Western IR, the 'camp' of Foreign Policy Analysis and practice is dominated by positivist theories across all regions of global IR. This can be explained by several factors, including (but not limited to) what Behera (2007) describes as 'disciplinary gate-keeping practices' of Western IR that hold a Gramscian hegemony over knowledge production and dissemination within global IR; the assumption being that Western IR is dominated by positivist theories. Although India has not adopted an explicitly feminist foreign policy, scholars have highlighted several tenets of Indian foreign policy that could be categorised as feminist. Here, the word 'feminist' is deemed synonymous with the word 'anti-colonial,' a development that Jain and Chacko (2009) trace back to the shared ideals (such as that of self-determination) between the Non-Aligned Movement and women's movements. Besides anti-colonialism, these tenets were also framed by a Nehruvian vision of a sovereign Indian state based on a Westphalian model of a modern, liberal nation-state (Behera 2007:354), which further confirms their positivist nature.

Not only did neither of the aforementioned countries (i.e., Sweden, Germany, and India) adopt a post-colonial FFP, but several scholars from the Global South have questioned the emancipatory potential (and thus desirability) of post-colonial FFPs as well as the intersectional approaches associated with them. On one hand, Mohanty (1988:79) criticises the totalising tendencies of liberal (equated with colonial) feminist approaches that emphasise commonality by creating a master narrative based on the image of Western women that subsumes images of 'others,' conceptualised in binary and hierarchical terms to the privileged referent, within it (i.e., an image of a marginalised non-Western woman as an ahistorical object becomes subsumed within that of a privileged Western woman as a subject of feminist counter-history). On the other hand, Mohanty (2003:520) also criticises post-colonial approaches, namely their emphasis on differences that prohibit any connections between cultures and thus a common basis for analysis. According to Mohanty (2003:522-523), the focus should not be on just describing the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, and other social categories, but on analysing 'common differences' (referred to as 'relationality' by Shohat 2001:1271) that can facilitate 'feminist solidarity across borders' (Mohanty 2003:503).

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Further criticising the emancipatory limits of post-colonial intersectionality, Rivera Chávez (2022) refers to Mexico as the first country from the Global South to adopt an explicitly feminist foreign policy, when arguing that intersectionality has itself become a tool of neoliberal ideology that reproduces (rather than challenges) binary and hierarchical categories of difference. The suggestion is to reformulate FFPs in a decolonial (rather than post-colonial) manner (i.e., basing them on materialist ontologies as envisioned by Mohanty 2003:511), which further supports this essay's argument about the 'good girl' nature of current FFPs. Some scholars, such as Narlikar (2022), go as far as advocating for what they term 'inclusive' (rather than feminist) foreign policies that would be neither ethnocentric nor culturally relativist, implying intersectionality based on decolonial (rather than liberal or post-colonial) approaches.

## Concluding remarks

The purpose of this essay has been to answer what kind of feminist approaches have been *allowed* into the discipline of International Relations. Reconceptualising Weber's categories of feminist approaches within a broad understanding of IR as a multifaceted discipline consisting of several sub-disciplines (referred to as 'camps'), this essay argues that both 'good girls' (reconceptualised as feminist approaches with positivist ontologies) and 'bad girls' (reconceptualised as feminist approaches with post-positivist ontologies) *exist* in IR, with some 'camps' *dominated* by the former and others by the latter. At the same time, the essay contends that both the *scholarship* and *practice* of IR as a whole (referred to as global IR) are dominated by 'good girl' (and other positivist) approaches, which has been demonstrated by the 'camp' of Foreign Policy Analysis selected due to its representativeness of global IR.

Particular attention has been paid to the criticism of post-colonial and post-modern (i.e., 'bad girl') feminist approaches, which have seen increasing proliferation within some 'camps' of IR scholarship in/from the Global North (e.g., Area Studies), by scholars in/from the Global South who seem to prefer decolonial and standpoint approaches, at least as far as foreign policies are concerned. Both decolonial and standpoint approaches have been reconceptualised (based on their materialist ontologies) as 'good girls,' which, added to the prevalence of liberal feminism (i.e., another 'good girl') in practice, supports the essay's argument about the predominance of 'good girls' within but also outside the 'camp' of FPA.

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