

Can We Simply “Add Gender” To Other International Relations Theories?

Written by Sana Azad Rasoul

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In seeking to understand the international can we simply “add gender” to other international theories?

“If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?”
(Mary Astell, 1668)

Where are the women? This question has allowed feminist understandings of International Relations to pose a very different image of the way we come to see how IR is produced and reproduced. Can we simply “add gender” to other international theories? This essay will argue that feminist understandings cannot be viewed as mere supplements to the more classical paradigms because of the epistemological and ontological variations at work. This essay will focus on three key areas known to be central to the study of IR, questions of war/security, power and the state. These categories will be used to show the different ways in which feminist scholars have come to understand these concepts in contrast to the more dominant neo-neo synthesis analysis. Whilst this essay appreciates the wide range of scholarship that has come to be called feminism, some of which try to work within existing theories it will nevertheless be argued that taking key arguments from the critical/postpositive branch of feminism we are not simply “adding” something that has been “missing” from the way we come to understand the world. What emerges in feminists work is the urge to step away from many of the assumptions about the world we live in and beyond the obsession of studying inter-state relations by simply asking where are the women? Before these three core concepts can be analysed more fully it is first necessary to briefly outline the broad understanding of IR through a feminist lens in order to grasp just what we mean when we speak of gender.

Looking Through a Feminist Lens: IR revisited

The introduction of feminist theories has questioned the production of power and knowledge of mainstream international theories. For feminists the state and market are gendered and women’s contribution to political and economic life is neither seen as relevant nor important in the study of the international (Gillian, 2004). As such, mainstream theories are preoccupied with the study of the powerful, marginalising those that fall outside the abstract categories of “state”, “anarchy”, “autarky” and “individualism” (Burchill et al 2005).

As a discipline itself, feminists see IR as man-made.

Importantly, feminists state that gender does *not* automatically mean the study of women, nor is it concerned with biological differences, instead it is about both femininity and masculinity and how both these categories are socially constructed through various mechanisms within and beyond the state. From the onset then feminist understandings distinguish themselves from mainstream theories, for instance they do not accept, like liberal theorists do of the distinction between the public/private. In addition, through their “focus on non-state actors... feminist perspectives bring fresh thinking in the post 9/11 decentred and uncertain world” something which marks them from realist understandings of IR. Furthermore, unlike realists feminists are uneasy with accepting the contrast between the chaotic sphere of the international marked by the state of nature and that of the ordered state. As the essay begins to analyse more deeply feminist understandings of the state, power and war these basic principles will be clarified further. On a final note, feminist theories are part of the wider emergence of more critical approaches to understanding IR which include amongst others post-colonialism, green politics, constructivism or those that have

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been placed under the rubric of post-positivism. A part of the problem with seeing gender and indeed feminism as something to be ‘added’ is the methodological bias embedded into how we come to study IR. In Tickners (1997) words for those that see theory building as “sets of logically related, ideally caused propositions, to be empirically tested or falsified in the popperian sense” (1997, 618) feminist understandings tend to be looked down upon.

Gender and the state

The nature of the state for mainstream theories is a crucial part of how we come to perceive the international and it is for this reason that the state is chosen as a unit of analysis to portray the divergence of views between feminists and other mainstream theories. For feminists states appear to be manly and this is reinforced with the sharp public/private distinction whereby the role of family and women in particular are kept out of the public realm, feminists thus assert that the “personal is political”. The state itself becomes a gendered construction. Think of Hobbes portrayal of the state of nature. Current mainstream theories take mans dominance in society as a given and this is reflected in the way we think about the state. Realist’s claim that we live in a world dominated by anarchy and so in order for states to survive they must help themselves and prevent any attack that may threaten its existence. The state then is in constant preparation for war. Feminists claim that assumptions about how states act are all rooted in masculinity. This is because the state is seen as the vehicle through which war is made, but the Hobbesian ‘state of nature’ that realists point to provides only half the picture. Feminists ask how it is that only parts of what constitutes the state of nature is included, they don’t deny that there is conflict and war but there are also forms of inclusion and cooperation which also needs to be reflected. By adding gender feminists are going beyond the injection of the concept into mainstream theories. It is in effect calling for an ontological revisionism, “a recognition that it is necessary to go behind the appearance and examine how differentiated and gendered power constructs the social relations that form that reality” (Gillian 2004, 77).

By revealing the presence of a gendered state feminists are also revealing the ways in which the discipline as a whole becomes gendered as a consequence of this (Gillian 2004, 82). So if we go back to the idea of a state that is divided internally between a public and private sphere feminists argue that when we input gender we are essentially restructuring the methodology of international relations, as Adam Jones notes (1996, 412) “ What if scholars of international political economy standardly factored in women’s contribution in the domestic/reproductive sphere? This would lead to a restructured vision of human beings most basic economic processes and interactions-the material foundation, in international political economy, of the modern state system.” Thus women’s experiences will no longer be confined to an area that is regarded as apolitical and ahistorical by both liberal and realist conceptions. Tickner argues that “through a re-examination of the state, feminists demonstrate how the unequal social relations on which most states are founded both influence their external security-seeking behaviour and are influenced by it” (1997, 628). Thus the state no longer becomes an abstract concept but one very much bound to the inhabitants of it and to the set of relations it embodies.

For instance, Wendy Brown (1992) explores the implications of a male-dominant society in which the very institutions of the state are bound up with notions of manhood. She argues that “To be ‘protected’ by the very power whose violation one fears perpetuates the specific modality of dependence and powerlessness marking much of women’s experiences across widely diverse cultures and aspects” (1992,9). Thus from one feminist scholar to another there is a weariness of seeing the state as vehicle of change since it is an embodiment of masculine modes of power, what Brown (1992) calls the “new man” exerting its control through the police and the military. As a consequence when we dig deeper into the analysis presented by feminists it appears to become a difficult task to “add” gender onto theories such as realism since it requires the deconstruction of the state as a whole. Brown sums this up by arguing that a feminist theory of the state would essentially be “simultaneously articulating, deconstructing, and relating the multiple strands of power compromising masculinity and the state. The fact that neither state power nor male dominance are unitary or systematic means that a feminist theory of the state will be less linear argument that the mapping of an intricate grid of often conflicting strategies, technologies, and discourses of power” (1992, 14).

Having shown that gender cannot just be incorporated into other theories without questioning the fundamental premises underpinning mainstream theories such as realism the essay will now focus on power and questions of war and security to add further weight to the argument that feminist understandings of the international need to be taken seriously in their own right.

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Power, War and Security

Security is also an important, if not the most important subject in the study of IR. Realists view security in primarily political and military terms, a top down approach while feminists take a bottom up approach defining security “in the multidimensional and multilevel terms-as the diminution of all forms of violence, including physical, structural and ecological” (Tickner 1997, 624).

In addition Peterson (1992, 31) states that a “global security crisis exists” and this demands a rigorous re-analysis of security since dominant theories are “unable to authentic politics and/or political community outside of the state, challenges to state sovereignty seem to imply either an embrace of hierarchical empires or a rejection of politics entirely” (1992, 31). Security then needs to be analysed not just in terms of what is going on outside the borders of a sovereign state, but also what occurs inside the state and across boundaries.

In viewing security this way feminists are simultaneously challenging the way conventional theories think of concepts such as power and even on the issue of war as well as pointing to the gendered nature of national security through phenomena’s such as rape and prostitution at US camps. The way war is made, sustained and supported all require the analysis of gender and its manipulation and construction by the state. War then is not just something that happens out there beyond the official borders of the state (a realist claim) but is maintained and allowed through internal mechanisms. Thus to understand war-making feminists look internally as well as externally injecting lived memories into their analysis. Enloe (1993) argues that during the Cold War states had to convince the public of a real danger whereby men were encouraged to confront this danger head on whilst women’s role was simply to allow themselves to be protected. Because mainstream theories shy away from including actors that are not states in their work they miss out on the full picture of what war entails. For instance during the Cold War the support of mothers was vital with regards to enlisting male members of the household as soldiers or how notions of masculinity are produced and reproduced during war time. “ The cold war, then, is best understood as involving not simply a contest between two superpowers, each trying to absorb as many countries as possible into its own orbit, but also a series of contests within each of these societies over the definitions of masculinity and femininity that would sustain or dilute that rivalry” (1993, p.g 19). In Central America the division in labour is marked by sexism which places women as a vital source of cheap labour in the production of crucial resources and so the state-centric views of other theories mask these inequalities over.

Taking the Israel-Palestine conflict as another example, the realist understanding of this would also remain gender blind so that we are left with only a partial account of the conflict. The rise in the rate of female suicide bombers, and women’s contribution to the conflict directly challenge claims that women are more peace prone than men for instance (Frances, 2005). Realist analysis renders this area invisible. Even if we add gender to these mainstream theories it will not solve the flaws discussed above simply because these theories must begin to think of war in terms that go beyond the balance of power and competition between states without regard for agency. This is exactly what feminists bring to the table when they ask where are the women?

The role of power in all of this is crucial and essential. Power; not just in the gendered constructions of state and society but also the role of power in the discipline as a whole is also of concern to feminist scholars. Sylvester (cited in Peterson, 1992) claims that gender is kept of the agenda in such a way that the role of women in international politics has not been adequately studied. This reinforced the gender-blind analysis that creeps into the dominant theories and which obscure more subtle forms of power that go beyond “hard” and “material” forms. Spiegel and Waltz (cited in Peterson 1992, 161) claim that in relations between states power must be maintained over another “just as in households or community conflict...separation from other units if that were possible, would mean less contact and thus led conflict.” Feminists see this statement as hindering clearer analysis by segregating the role of women and men without understanding the constructions of femininity and masculinity. This is because everything feminism comes to be associated with masculinity must always go in the opposite trajectory. If women are governed by their “emotions” men must behave “rationally”, if women are seen as “soft” men must in contrast be “tough.” To overcome this one-dimensional view of how power is produced Tickner (1992, 65) argues that we should understand “power as mutual enablement rather than domination.” It is the study of both masculinity and femininity that allows this to happen.

Reflection: Feminism and its critics

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As with other theories, feminism is not without its critics, Jones (1996) notes that there are limits to a feminist understanding of IR since they are largely embedded in lived experiences of *women* at the expense of men and this critique ties in with the view that gender equates to the study of women. As argued previously feminist understandings already point out that gender implies the study of men *and* women. The reason for a more comprehensive literature on women is not by chance, it is a conscious decision precisely because of the gender blind attributes of IR and the disproportionate marginalisation of women’s experiences. Furthermore Tickner (1997, 615) argues that “gender is not just about woman; it is also about men and masculinity, a point that needs to be emphasised.”

In addition a further critique by Jones (1996, 416) is that there still remains a “strain of feminism that concentrates its efforts on *supplementing* classical frameworks by incorporating the gender variable”. For example he claims that feminist theorists such as Enloe while critical of the way international relations is studied does not question “the business of international relations” since she is looking at the “hallmark concerns of the classical paradigm” (ibid). However Jones fails to appreciate the epistemological differences which render this near impossible, as Carver et al explains “The feminist constructivism regarding gender, which Jones values because it provides room-so he thinks-for an amalgamation with realism, does just the opposite: it challenges much of what realists hold epistemologically dear” (1998, 290).

Others, such as Keohane (1998, 197) attack feminism from a methodological viewpoint, claiming that for feminism and the study of gender to stand as a viable theory they must first “formulate their hypothesis in ways that are testable and falsifiable-with evidence.” However isn’t this just another argument at removing normative questions and the study of lived experiences from social science? The positivist bias is evident in this statement in the aim of holding onto the “scientific quality” of IR.

Conclusion

Walker (cited in Peterson 1992, 180) argues that questions of gender does not just mean “the possibility of adding certain excluded voices to the discipline of IR as it presently conceived. It is, rather, the possibility of challenging the grounds of which the theory of international relations has been constructed.”

This essay has sought to demonstrate this by looking at the state, issues of war/security and power and analysing the differences between mainstream and feminist understandings of these issues so central to IR. What emerges is a theory which to repeat Walker challenges IR and forces us to shed away much of the assumptions embedded in mainstream theories.

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