

Are Men Still Missing? The Marginalisation of Feminism and Gender in IR

Written by Meagan Tyler

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MEAGAN TYLER, JUN 5 2012

International relations (IR) is heavily masculinised in both theory and practice. Globally, men dominate not only the “high politics” of states, nations and war but also how we understand concepts like states, nations and war. The foundational theories of IR, taught to most undergraduate students as the basis of the study of IR, are almost exclusively written by white men. As Jeff Hearn recently wrote here, however, the discipline of IR still largely fails to recognize this basic bias.

This failure is not for lack of evidence exposing the gendered nature of IR. As a number of commenters noted in response to Hearn’s piece, feminists have been writing about gender and IR for decades. Groundbreaking works such as Cynthia Enloe’s *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making feminist sense of international relations* (1989) or Peterson and Runyan’s original *Global Gender Issues* (1993), sought to ask “where are the women in IR?” (to use Jan Pettman’s (1996) phrasing), as well as to reveal the highly masculinised nature of mainstream accounts of IR.

Early empirical attempts to document women’s involvement and experiences in various “forgotten” aspects of IR quickly moved to more broad-ranging critiques of male bias. In particular, this shift involved the recognition that much IR theory assumes a particularly male experience as a universal one and that this marginalizes women and an understanding of gender as an important factor in human relations.

This is not to say that there are innate or immutable differences between men and women but rather that the social construction of gender is critical to almost everything we do, whether that be running a country or doing the household chores.

Important works such as *The “Man” Question in International Relations* (1998) and *Rethinking the Man Question: Sex, gender and violence in international relations* (2008) have continued to emphasise these points in an attempt to highlight how constructions of masculinity continue to influence both the theory and practice of IR today. The issue is not that the work has not been done, it clearly has, but rather that the importance of gender remains so marginalized in the discipline of IR that masculinity tends to be rendered invisible.

Such a statement should hardly be controversial. A brief survey of introductory texts to IR or undergraduate IR programs (not to mention the couple of rather ill-informed and outright hostile responses to Hearn’s piece) clearly show that while feminists may be looking at “the man question” almost nobody else is. There is a significant gap between the existence of gendered theory in IR and the acceptance that it is relevant to virtually all of IR, not just “women’s issues”.

The study of the international political economy (IPE) is a particularly stark illustration of how feminist theories of gender continue to languish outside the overall study of international politics (for more information see: Tyler, 2012).

Take, for example, Cohen’s *International Political Economy: An intellectual history* (2008). The volume only mentions feminism once and that is, rather disparagingly, in the context of critical theories including Marxism and “other schools of radical thought” (p. 62). Indeed, it is sadly often considered radical to try and incorporate the lived

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experiences of half the global population into theories of international trade and politico-economics.

Global Political Economy (2008) edited by Ravenhill, fares a bit better. Feminism does, at least, appear in a chapter titled: "Theoretical Traditions in Global Political Economy". Unfortunately, mirroring the continuing marginalization of feminist theory in IR, "Feminist Political Economy" appears in a text box, separated from the main text in much the same way feminism continues to be separated out from the main game of IR itself.

Thankfully, many recent introductory IR texts, for example: *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and approaches* (Jackson & Sørensen, 2007), *International Relations: The basics* (Elias & Sutch, 2007) and *International Relations: The key concepts* (Griffiths, O'Callaghan & Roach, 2008) do include sections on feminist IR theory and/or gender. Occasionally, there is even a mention of masculinity, albeit generally relegated to just one or two sentences.

This is undoubtedly progress on handing students a copy of Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* (1948) and declaring: "Here's all you need to know about IR!" – a not uncommon practice for an entire generation of politics students some decades ago – but there is still much work to be done.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, many undergraduate IR courses still fail to consider gender and feminist theory at all. When they do, this often consists of the occasional guest lecture on women and gender. Or, if we're very lucky, a specific, usually elective, subject on women. Again, this is an important step, and as long as systemic inequalities between men and women exist, subjects like this have a critical role to play, but it is not the end of the journey.

I have heard plenty of undergraduate students and colleagues alike dismiss the inclusion of a feminist theory of gender as irrelevant to *their* interest in IR. The separation of a gendered perspective out from the rest of IR, as though it can be relegated to an in-set text box, a "special" lecture, or a specific unit of study, contributes to this problem. It also fails to recognize the fundamental criticisms that feminists have made of the IR system and of the academic discipline of IR itself.

A feminist analysis, which recognises the male bias of IR theory, requires turning basic assumptions about traditional IR upside-down. It requires a rejection of the concept of a warlike human nature that invariably leads to anarchy. Indeed, I would argue, it requires a rejection of the idea of a pre-determined "human nature" altogether. It requires a breakdown of the artificial divisions between the public and the private, the personal and the political, the national and the international. Indeed, it often requires a re-evaluation of what constitutes politics altogether.

Thus, when students are introduced to IR, either in classes or in textbooks, they need to be introduced to the concept of feminism as more than just an add-on idea to consider after they have tackled and understood the "real" IR theories of realism and liberal internationalism. Rather it must be understood as a fundamental critique of IR theory and practice as a whole.

This means an acknowledgement that gender, *including* concepts of masculinity, is relevant to *all* of IR. And, furthermore, that teaching or writing about IR without talking about gender means more than just leaving something important out, it means ignoring the entrenched nature of gendered bias.

When standard courses in IR – say on the state, or war, or realism – routinely begin with the recognition that this is a particular and biased point of view stemming from a history of male domination in the theory and practice of IR, then we might be able to say that we have really started to address "the man question". Until then, we must continue to raise concerns about the ever-present, yet simultaneously "missing", men of IR.

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