

Masculinity in IR: Feminist Interventions

Written by Brett Remkus

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/16/masculinity-in-ir-feminist-interventions/>

BRETT REMKUS, AUG 16 2012

This article was written in response to The 'Missing' Men of International Relations, by Jeff Hearn

From its inception, feminist work within international relations (IR) has been centrally concerned with not only the study of women and femininity but of men and masculinity; emphasizing the pervasiveness of gendered power relations within the practice and study of IR (Sjoberg and Martin 2010). Early works, such as those by Enloe (1989), Cohn (1987), Elshtain (1987), and Peterson (1992), looked at the exclusion of women and women's perspectives, and the resultant androcentrism in the theory and practice of global politics. Recent scholarship (e.g. Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Tickner 2006) has examined masculinity in many areas, including terrorism, insurgency, security, and the economy. Thus, it is puzzling that in a recent article Jeff Hearn pointed to "missing men" as an understudied phenomenon within IR, including gendered IR scholarship.

Masculinity in Feminist IR Scholarship

Feminist scholarship in IR has examined issues surrounding masculinity extensively, particularly in relation to how individuals and other actors become gendered within global politics. Feminists have examined gender (masculinity and femininity) as a constructed linkage between biological sex and associated attributes, such as autonomy and strength or dependence and vulnerability (Tickner 2001). Gendered categories are a form of social knowledge which establish hierarchies, accounting for the valorization of masculine characteristics and the vituperation directed at femininity.

As many scholars have recognized, gender need not overlap with biological sex; actors become gendered whenever masculine or feminine characteristics are ascribed to them. For example, women are often expected to take on masculine roles within the "high politics" of IR, while men facing overlapping systems of social oppression (such as race and class) are gendered as feminine. While some scholars have pointed to this phenomenon as "freeing" women from the "constraints of gender" (Kawakami, White and Langer 2000) this also implicates women in the oppression of other women and some men (Tickner 1993; Enloe 1989: 7). Further, as Sjoberg (2011: 110) points out, gender is not simply an individual or group attribute, meaning "institutions, organizations, and even states" can become gendered. Because "gendering is about the distribution of power and regard based on perceived association with sex-based characteristics," the interaction of gender with these entities has profound effects on how they act and are perceived within IR. Feminist IR has thus moved beyond the study of masculinity as a simplistic social phenomenon existing only in individuals.

Seminal works by feminists on masculinity within IR exemplify these aims. Parpart and Zalewski's (1997; 2008) groundbreaking texts provide the most comprehensive effort to examine men in IR, highlighting the ways in which masculinity reinforces hierarchical gendered relationships in IR. Cohn's (1987) work on expressions of masculinity within communities of defense intellectuals underlines how certain forms of masculinity shaped "nuclear strategic thinking" as a specific form of gendered knowledge, with important effects on US nuclear weapons policy. Weber (1999) explores masculinist (and heterosexist) impulses within the actions of the United States in the Caribbean over the last century, showing processes by which the US state can be seen as a gendered entity. Finally, work such as Peterson and Runyan (2010) examines the re-masculinization of global politics, interrogating how the War on Terror and contemporary neo-liberalism reflect the valorization of masculinity within international politics.

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IR scholarship on masculinity has also been attentive to the need to study diverse masculinities within global politics, providing essential attention to how gendered hierarchies in global politics effect both women and men. Scholars such as Peterson (2003) have shown how feminization of labor not only subordinates women but also men who occupy unprivileged positions within the global economy. Further, recent scholarship shows how masculinity and sexuality are implicated in the gendering of actors within the “War on Terror” (Agathangelou 2008; Puar 2007). While not comprehensive, these works show the wide variety of ways in which gendered work in IR has examined masculinity as an individual and institutional force, easily dispatching the idea that it has not been discussed.

Where Are the Women?

An argument that gendered IR work has not paid enough attention to men runs into a second, larger, problem beyond its inaccuracy; it could easily be seen as continuing what many feminist and gender scholars within IR have complained about over time – that men’s experiences and perspectives have been privileged at the expense of women’s. When prominent IR scholar Stephen Walt (2009) recently published a list of the ten most important books in IR, his list not only included no books that look at gender, but no books by women (or non-white scholars) at all! The list includes a wide array of works, including work that is considered to be rather critical of traditional approaches. This reflects wider trends in a discipline where canonical texts are overwhelmingly authored by white men, and which continues to lag behind the rest of the social sciences on women’s inclusion.

This brings me to Hearn’s closing question of how it is that “IR usually manages not to explicitly attend to gender, including the gendering of men,” and whether this is because of “mere carelessness or something more significant.” Feminist scholarship has already provided an answer, scrutinizing how IR as both an academic discipline and practice is dominated by perspectives based in men’s experiences. As such, feminists politicize what they see as the androcentrism of IR, which they argue has tended to reflect the standpoint of (white, Western) men who dominate the field (Runyan and Peterson 1991). Rather than inattention to gender being a “careless” coincidence, it results from a partial and biased understanding of global politics, which naturalizes masculine perceptions of IR as “objective” knowledge claims, rather than seeing these claims as representing men’s subjective experiences (Zalewski 1999). Feminists critique IR’s masculinist biases by demonstrating how it renders women (and others) silent and makes hegemonic forms of masculinity invisible. Reflexivity – attention to the ways in which one’s social location effects the knowledge claims that one makes – is a key means of doing this by showing how a researcher’s social location affects the questions they chose to ask and how they answer them. Feminist scholars thus insist upon bringing their own experiences (particularly as women) into their research, reflexively discussing how these experiences causes them to evaluate international politics differently from their (male) colleagues (Sylvester 2011; Hyndman 2001), both contesting traditional truth narratives about international politics and pushing the necessity of gendered lens (cf. Tickner 1997).

If androcentric perspectives have biased our examination of international politics, including excluded voices becomes a central element of producing good scholarship (Weldon 2006). Feminist scholarship in IR thus foregrounds women’s excluded voices by privileging the question “where are the women?” This question was put forth by Cynthia Enloe in her seminal work *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* as an attempt to show that examining gender is a fundamental aspect of IR. She pointed to two main areas that this question provides insight about – firstly, the important role women play in “creating and sustaining international politics,” and secondly, “how the conduct of international politics has depended on men’s control of women’s lives” (Enloe 1989: 4). Such a focus allows gendered scholarship to both focus on women’s essential role within global politics, which was often ignored because of androcentric biases about what “mattered” in studies of IR, along with attention to how social power relationships in international politics are formed along gendered lines. It is by focusing on “missing women” rather than men that the masculinized aspects of all international actors becomes clear.

Scholars operating within more traditional IR paradigms have been understandably skeptical about these critiques from feminists. Most scholars see themselves as relatively unbiased, believing their research attempts to approximate some sort of scientific truth about IR. Gendered critiques fundamentally challenge the assumptions of IR scholars to the core, rejecting much of their work as androcentric or masculinist and therefore rejecting its usefulness in understanding the totality of the social world. It should not be surprising that these scholars see feminist work as

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originating from politics of grievance which threaten a legitimate science. However, as the work of Enloe and other scholars demonstrates, foregrounding gender (and especially women and other marginalized voices) provides important empirical insights about global politics, whether one agrees with their political or epistemological claims.

Missing Men?

Feminist scholarship has highlighted a distinct problem in studying gender within IR, which rests not in the problem of “missing men” but rather the elision of women and women’s perspectives in IR. If gendered work often focuses on women, it is partly because the dominance of masculine voices itself makes both masculinity and femininity invisible. Scholars such as Kronsell (2006) have argued that it is by foregrounding women within institutions of hegemonic masculinity that this masculinity becomes visible, rather than through attention to dominant male/masculine voices. Feminist scholars have argued that excessive attention to men and androcentric perspectives is the reason gender is invisible in international politics; instead examining those who are marginalized in gendered hierarchies (who may be women or men) is a powerful means of understanding masculinity and gendered power relations. In other words, attention to men qua men will not generate better understandings of masculinity, especially when existing feminist work has already provided more nuanced discussions of masculinity. Asking “where are the women” – along with providing attention to subaltern masculinities – is how we come to understand masculinity within IR.

As such, an argument that men are “missing” in gendered scholarship elides important debates about which social locations and subjectivities make the critical study of masculinity possible. More attention (even critical attention) to men’s predominant voices in IR risks reproducing the power relations that feminists critique. Hearn’s argument, however, is doubly problematic insofar as it completely ignores the contributions of women to studies of men and masculinity, especially in arguing that “even when IR is seen as gendered, this gendering does not usually extend to the critical gendering of men.” In fact, gendered/feminist scholarship in IR has always extended to discussions of men and masculinity, because of their effects on women within global politics. Since it is largely women within IR who have provided insights about how masculinity is key to understanding global politics more fully, such an oversight can be read as the latest neglect of women’s contribution to IR scholarship.

In closing, I reiterate the importance of Hearn’s call for the study of masculinity within international relations. However, the problem is not centrally one about inattention to masculinity by scholars within IR. Rather, the rejection of feminist/gendered approaches prevents its examination as a significant phenomenon affecting both the nature of our knowledge claims and the reproduction of gendered power relations within scholarship and politics. As such, we must continue prioritizing gender and masculinity as important issues within international politics, while acknowledging the extensive work that has already been done.

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