

Gender Matters in International Relations

Written by Laura J. Shepherd

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LAURA J. SHEPHERD, FEB 20 2010

Imagine you're in a restaurant. You've ordered your meal, but you'd like to wash your hands before you eat. You ask a member of staff the way to the bathrooms (or restrooms, toilets, cloakrooms – whatever is the culturally acceptable term) and you are directed through a single outer door, to be confronted by a pair of doors. On each door there is a sign, bearing an image rather than a word.



Image by Mobelgrad.

Which door do you go through? Can you make sense of those signs? If so, then you have a theory of gender. You have a theory, or an understanding, of what the signs signify and of their social importance, because in order to make sense of the signs you have to accept that there are two types of people and that each type of person is represented by one or the other figure in the sign. The chances are good that you know automatically which door you'd go through. But think for a moment about your silhouette today: do you most closely resemble the figure on the left or the figure on the right? We don't go through whichever door we go through because we look like the figures on the signs, we go through the doors because we understand what the signs mean. They may bear no relevance to the way we look, today or ever, but they order the way we behave in the world.

This is not, however, an article about how to avoid embarrassment when dining out. So what has the issue of where you wash your hands got to do with International Relations (IR)? I would suggest that the political salience (that is, importance) of identity, particularly gender identity, should not be underestimated in the study and practice of international relations. There is a range of ways to conceptualise 'gender' (to think about how our gendered bodies come to have meaning in socio-political situations) and to conceive of the relationship between sex and gender: essentialist accounts, constructivist accounts and poststructural accounts are perhaps the most commonly identified.[2] Typically, feminist IR scholars working within any of these frameworks ask different questions about different aspects of gender and global politics and use different methods to go about answering the questions they pose. This makes it difficult to provide an overview of gender and global politics in one short article. However, ideas about appropriate and inappropriate gendered behaviours are wide-ranging, influential and sometimes unconscious, but because they affect (and effect) how we behave in the world, they are of interest to the scholar of global politics, as global politics is practised and studied by gendered individuals. Whether the issue at hand is security,[3] global governance,[4] nuclear proliferation,[5] peacebuilding[6] or international law,[7] feminist scholars have written extensively about (how) gender matters in global politics and, further, argued that paying analytical attention to gender allows us a range of insights that 'gender-blind' approaches do not access.

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Most introductory IR texts include a chapter on gender and/or feminism[8] and anyone seeking an overview of feminist IR would be well advised to read these. However, to conclude this short article, I will provide two examples of feminist insights to illustrate the claims made above. First, feminists have critiqued the fact that the internal logic of a realist IR framework demands that security refers to the 'national', which is assumed to be congruent with the state.[9] Nations – or rather, the people comprising the nations – do not tend to feature further in conventional theorizing of IR. International Relations as a discipline, narrowly conceived, is not concerned with activities that occur within the state, as is evidenced in the act of naming: IR is self-consciously concerned with relations *inter* (between) states. Minimally, feminist IR seeks to correct this disciplinary myopia. While classical realism theorises the political actor, in order to construct the state as actor, the now dominant neo-realism abstracts the human subject from its disciplinary musings, leading to the infamous 'black box' model of the state. Feminist IR challenges this assumption, arguing that individuals, as human subjects in all their messy complexity, are an integral part of international relations and, further, that international relations are constituted by and constitutive of other types of relations: power relations and gender relations.[10] In studying the peace camps at Greenham Common, for example, feminist scholars challenged the notion that state negotiations between the United Kingdom and the United States over the location of nuclear armaments were simply a matter of military security and diplomacy. The individuals at Greenham, who were exercising agency through the use of their bodies in protest against the fact that nuclear 'security' didn't make them feel secure, 'subverted the security-based strategic vision of international relations by showing ... acts of everyday insecurity'.[11]

By cutting the fences, dancing on the missile silos, challenging charges of trespassing in court, the Greenham women managed to transform the very meaning of a base and of public security. A military base easily penetrated by a group of non-violent women was no longer a military base.[12]

The very articulation of 'acts of everyday insecurity' challenges conventional logic as represented within the conceptualisation of 'national security', and demands that the relationship between individuals and the state be examined and problematised.

Politicising the everyday, or rather, demanding that the everyday be recognized as political, is a central priority of feminist IR, exemplified in the work of Cynthia Enloe. In the early 1980s, Enloe began asking the questions for which she has become rightly acknowledged as a key figure in feminist IR, including *Does Khaki Become You?* (1983) and 'where are the women?'.[13] The groundbreaking analysis of the gendered politics of militarism presented in *Khaki* laid the foundations for a generation of feminist scholarship engaged in unpicking the complex tangle of industrial development, economics, masculinism and mythology that characterises militarisation. Inspired by her own curiosity about the roles played by women and the functions performed by gender in the militarisation of civilian life, Enloe explores prostitution, marriage, welfare and war-making with an eye to the representation (both political and symbolic) of women. In *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Enloe puts her 'feminist curiosity' to work,[14] providing the reader with a series of vignettes that function to complicate easy readings of everyday situations, from the beaches central to tourist industry to the diplomatic wives stationed on military bases. All these activities, she argues, constitute international relations, and she concludes that 'the personal is international'.[15] This fundamental insight underpins much contemporary feminist IR scholarship, as it seeks to understand just how the presumed 'personal' realm of gendered bodies and the relationships between them is inextricably intertwined with the 'international' realm of high politics.

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[2] For a full discussion of these divisions see Laura J. Shepherd, 'Sex or Gender? Bodies in World Politics and Why Gender Matters' in Laura J. Shepherd (ed.) *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to*

Gender Matters in International Relations

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International Relations (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

[3] See, for example, Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Security, Discourse as Practice*, (London, Zed, 2008); Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed, 2007); Sandra Whitworth, *Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping* (London and Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

[4] See, for example, Penny Griffin, *Gendering the World Bank: Neoliberalism and the Gendered Foundations of Global Governance* (Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Shirin Rai, *The Gender Politics of Development: Essays in Hope and Despair* (London: Zed, 2008); Shirin Rai and Georgina Waylen (eds), *Global Governance: Feminist Perspectives* (Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[5] See, for example, Carol Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals' *Signs* 12(4), 687-718 (1987); Carol Cohn and Sara Ruddick, 'A feminist ethical perspective on weapons of mass destruction' in Sohail H. Hashmi (ed.) *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Carol Cohn with Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick, 'The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction', commissioned by the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, available at <http://www.genderandsecurity.umb.edu/Cohn%20WMD%20Commision%20paper%20NO38.pdf> (2006).

[6] See, for example, H. Afshar and D. Eade (eds) *Development, Women and War: Feminist Perspectives*, (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2004); Elisabeth Porter, 'Women, Political Decision-Making, and Peace-Building', *Global Change, Peace and Security*, 15(3), 245 – 262, (2003); Caroline Sweetman (ed.), *Gender, Peacebuilding and Reconstruction*, (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2005).

[7] See, for example, Charlesworth, Hilary, Chinkin, Christine and Wright, Shelley, 'Feminist Approaches to International Law', *American Journal of International Law*, 85(4), 613-645 (1991); Hilary Charlesworth, and Christine Chinkin, *The Boundaries of International Law: A Feminist Analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Kelly D. Askin, 'Prosecuting Wartime Rape and Other Gender-Related Crimes under International Law: Extraordinary Advances, Enduring Obstacles' *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 21, 288-349, (2003).

[8] See, for example, J. Ann Tickner, 'Gender in World Politics', in John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (eds) *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 4th edn, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007); J. Ann Tickner and Laura Sjoberg, 'Feminism' in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds.) 2007, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jacqui True, 'Feminism' in Scott Burchill et al. *Theories of International Relations*, 4th edn, (Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[9] V. Spike Peterson, 'Security and Sovereign States: What is at Stake in Taking Feminism Seriously?', in V.Spike Peterson (ed.) *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory*, (London and Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992); J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Katrina Lee-Koo 'Confronting a Disciplinary Blindness: Women, War and Rape in the International Politics of Security' *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 37(3), 525-536 (2002).

[10] Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6; see also Cynthia Enloe, 'Margins, Silences and Bottom Rungs: How to Overcome the Underestimation of Power in International Relations', in Ken Booth, Steve Smith and Marysia Zalewski (eds) *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[11] Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations*, 193.

[12] Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* 2nd edn (London and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 79.

Gender Matters in International Relations

Written by Laura J. Shepherd

[13] In Enloe, *Bananas Beaches and Bases*, op. cit. Note 12.

[14] Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*, (London and Berkeley, CA, 2004), 3-4 ; see also Cynthia Enloe, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Plymouth and Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

[15] Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 195.