

Gender Security as a Category of International Politics

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TOM MOYLAN, MAR 12 2013

Gender, Security, and Making It as a Category of Analysis in International Politics

The purpose of this essay is to assert that gender is a relevant category when analysing international politics. Using security as an example to illustrate this point, we will look at a number of areas in which a feminist perspective can contribute to discussion and a deeper understanding of the world. Security is the example that will be used in this essay because, in the words of J. Ann Tickner, security “has been central to the discipline of international relations since its inception in the early twentieth century” and “is also an important issue for feminists who write about international relations” (Tickner 1997, p.623). The essay will cover how a redefinition of security in feminist terms, that reveals gender as a factor at play, can uncover uncomfortable truths about the world in which we live; how the ‘myth of protection’ is a lie used to legitimize war; and finally how discourse in international politics is constructed of dichotomies and how their deconstruction could lead to benefits for the human race. Each of these points will be considered and illustrated using examples in security.

A range of views and literatures will be considered, from liberal feminists operating empirically within the mainstream epistemologies such as Caprioli, to those who look at the construction of femininity and language such as Skjesbæk and Elshtain. Criticism of the use of gender will also be considered throughout the essay alongside feminist responses, such as the exchange between Keohane and Tickner, or Zalewski’s explanation for why feminism has such a hard time in IR theory. When talking about gender in international relations, we are discussing more than biological differences: we are discussing cultures and values inherent in our world, as well as the construction of language. We are also looking at concepts of masculinity and femininity in the sense of them being “negotiated interpretations of what it means to be a man or a woman” (Skjelsbæk 2001, p.47) and how they affect our outlooks.

Redefining Security

Cynthia Enloe, in her interview with Theory Talks, talks about how there are “all kinds of health professionals, all kinds of educators and environmentalists, climate change, sea level rise experts and so on—and they are providing security” (Schouten and Dunham 2012, p.10). So why do we not think of them in that context? Mainstream IR theorists, prominently realists, consider security solely in terms of state security – one that can protect itself and its citizens from an anarchic international system, despite the fact that most wars since 1945 have been fought within states and not across international boundaries (Tickner and Sjoberg 2010, p.203). IR feminists define security more broadly, as the diminution of all forms of violence – including domestic violence, rape, poverty, gender subordination, economic, and ecological destruction (Tickner and Sjoberg 2010, p.203-204). This redefinition of security provides us with very different view of the world and the effects of what are considered ‘security policies’. Several prominent feminist studies have exposed how security of the state can be a direct cause of insecurity for the more vulnerable in society.

One such study is Moon’s *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* in which she shows how the Korean government actively promoted prostitution in areas surrounding US military bases in Korea to encourage the presence of US troops there (Blanchard 2003, p.1295). Another such study is Christine Chin’s *In Service and Servitude* that shows how the Malaysian government used the provision of cheap foreign domestic labor, mainly Filipina and Indonesian women working in terrible conditions, to ease ethnic tensions and garner the support of the

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middle class (Tickner and Sjoberg 2010, p.200). We can see here that by putting on our 'gendered lenses' and looking directly at women's issues, there is a lot more than simple diplomacy or economics going on in these cases. One criticism of these studies is that they are domestic issues that do not fall within the realm of international politics that deals purely with military and interstate matters. Feminists would disagree with this due to their belief that the international and the domestic are inextricably linked, and this separation is detrimental to our understanding; and that their separation could be equated to the public/private dichotomy that allows domestic abuse to carry on without intervention (Blanchard 2003, p.1296). A further reason for mainstream scholars not accepting this definition of security can be read when Tickner cites Walt's 1991 paper in her explanation for the persistence of the traditional view of security and power: "Security specialists believe that military power remains a central element of international politics and that the traditional agenda of security studies is, therefore, expanding rather than shrinking" (Tickner 1997, p.624).

One of the alternative ways of considering insecurity using a gender-sensitive approach is considering economic security. Tickner states that women are disproportionately located at the bottom of the socio-economic scale in all societies due to the gendered division of labor. Women are paid a lower wage due to the assumption that their wage is supplementary, while in actual fact about a third of all households are headed by women (Tickner and Sjoberg 2010, p.205). In combination to women's relegation to certain types of jobs that are considered 'natural' to them (Tickner 1997, p.628), this makes women especially vulnerable economically. Especially in economic terms, regular security analysis approaches fail to uncover the truth in situations. Whereas normally a larger army would be considered protection from the anarchical international system, due to women's particular economic vulnerability, "militaries frequently are seen as antithetical to... women's security—as winners in the competition for resources for social safety nets on which women depend disproportionately to men" (Tickner 1997, p.625). Such things can only be exposed using gender as a category of analysis. Another example that exposes the shortcomings of regular security analysis is the case of economic sanctions against Iraq. Tickner illustrates this in a case study by showing how what is usually considered a 'humane' solution to interstate conflict actually had a profoundly negative and often fatal effect on Iraqi civilians (Tickner and Sjoberg 2010, p.206-209). Gendered approaches can expose the true effects of a 'humane' security policy because "as mothers, family providers, and care-givers, women are particularly penalized by economic sanctions associated with military conflict" (Tickner 1997, p.625).

Deconstructing the Myth of Protection

There is a myth that men fight wars to protect the 'vulnerable people' in society, yet women and children are 90% of casualties in modern war, and 75% of refugees (Tickner and Sjoberg 2010, p. 204). Some feminists claim that this 'myth of protection', the belief that wars are fought to protect women, the elderly and children, is a form of structural violence. Caprioli uses Galtung's description to illustrate what structural violence is:

"Structural violence has four basic components: exploitation which is focused on the division of labor with the benefits being asymmetrically distributed, penetration which necessitates the control by the exploiters over the consciousness of the exploited thus resulting in the acquiescence of the oppressed, fragmentation which means that the exploited are separated from each other, and marginalization with the exploiters as a privileged class with their own rules and form of interaction" (Caprioli 2005, p.164).

The 'myth of protection' is perpetuating all of these four basic components at the same time by keeping women out of the military, controlling the consciousness of women by convincing them they need to be protected, separating women from each other by keeping them in the private/domestic sphere, and marginalizing them due to their apparent lack of contribution to this important part of society. Not only is this narrative a lie in that women contribute to combat and war in a number of different ways, but it is also a lie that armies protect the weak. Women contribute to the war effort by raising their children to participate in it, providing support for their fathers, sons and husbands at war, taking paid and unremunerated work to help with the war effort, participating in combat themselves, and in many other under-acknowledged ways. War is a cultural construction that depends on the myth of protection for legitimacy, which helps us see how certain ways of thinking about security have been legitimated while others are silenced (Tickner and Sjoberg 2010, p.205).

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One of the serious problems in protecting women in times of conflict is that since women's immunity is assumed, belligerents often disregard the effect it has on them (Tickner and Sjoberg 2010, p.204). In reality, due to the fact that they are not 'counted', women and children are among the most vulnerable. Tickner cites Orford's 1996 paper that "tells us that accounts of sexual assault by peacekeepers have emerged in many UN peacekeeping operations" (Tickner 1997, p.627). There is also the fact that women must compete with the military for scant resources that only get harder to access in times of war (Tickner and Sjoberg 2010, p.204). We can already see here that there are ways in that a country's own military or an allied 'peacekeeping' force can contribute to women's insecurity, whether directly through violence or indirectly in competition for resources. One of the contributing factors to this is the masculine monopoly on force. "By circumscribing the possibilities of the female deployment of legitimate force, the masculine state effectively denies the development of what Stiehm calls a 'defender' society, one 'composed of citizens equally liable to experience violence and equally responsible for exercising society's violence'" (Blanchard 2003, p.1297). Due to its monopoly on legitimate force, the state is more willing to let the weak suffer during war and conflict as a 'necessary sacrifice' while diverting resources to the military, the exact opposite of what the 'myth of protection' would have suggested.

The reasons put forward for the masculine monopoly on force are numerous: male bonding, how the state wants to avoid 'wasting wombs', physical nature, natural dispositions. Psychological tests have proven that the phenomenon of the male bonding experience is not an exclusively masculine experience and that similar situations arise in mixed groups (Skjelsbæk 2001, p.52); due to advances in modern warfare, physical strength is of less importance. Blanchard quotes Ruddick in saying that modern warfare "seems to require, as much as physical aggression, a tolerance of boredom or the ability to operate a computer under stress, characteristics that are neither distinctly 'masculine' nor heroic" (Blanchard 2003, p.1299). Each of these reasons can be individually disproven, which again begs the question, if not structural violence, then why are women generally excluded from the military?

The question comes down to two different schools of thought: the essentialist and the constructionist. Essentialism believe that the differences between men and women are biological in nature, and that in this school of thought, "gender identities and differences are perceived as the result of stable underlying factors" (Skjelsbæk 2001, p.49). Constructionism, however, is more skeptical of things that are described in terms of being natural or given. Skjelsbæk quotes Hare-Mustin and Marececk in saying "Whereas positivism asks what are the facts, constructionism asks what are the assumptions; whereas positivism asks what are the answers, constructionism asks what are the questions" (Skjelsbæk 2001, p.50).

Using gendered lenses to look at conflicts in Yugoslavia and El Salvador, we can go a long way in questioning the legitimacy of the essentialist standpoint while illustrating how untrue the 'myth of protection' is. "The essentialist claim is that women will, if given power, naturally seek peaceful solutions to conflicts because this is seen to be part of women's essential nature" (Skjelsbæk 2001, p.52). Skjelsbæk had a number of women interviewed to relate their experiences in conflict. Women from Yugoslavia told stories about their men leaving them behind to go and fight in the war. This exposed them to systematic and deliberate mass rape, motivated in part as an attempt to promote Serbian ethnicity. This disproves the 'myth of protection' and lack of female involvement in war in that it was this very myth that had the men leave and expose their women to systematic rape (Skjelsbæk 2001, p.53-56). In this sense, the women were very much victimized in war. In the case of El Salvador, there was significant female participation in the revolution. Many of these women in their interviews looked back on their years in conflict fondly, as an escape from the 'machismo' society they lived in. One of the direct results of female participation in this conflict was a solidarity among them and a new willingness to leave relationships they did not want to be involved in (Skjelsbæk 2001, p.56-58). Here, by using a gendered analysis approach, we can undermine the essentialist view that women are not suited to war. We can also see through our 'gendered lenses' the proliferation of wartime rape in Yugoslavia proves that the myth that wars are fought to protect the weak and vanquish the wicked is a falsity. Other gendered studies go further to show this as false – one of the more notable focused in the DRC (Baaz and Stern, 2009). One of the limiting factors of this argument is that essentialism and constructionism are both theories in that they choose to view the world in a certain way and neither can be completely disproven.

Dangers of Dichotomy

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According to feminist literature, the world is made up of dichotomies, and these dichotomies are gendered. Those associated with the masculine are positive characteristics in international politics, such as rational, strong, dominant, militarized, and public. The feminine characteristics have negative connotations. These are emotional, weak, subordinate, peaceful, and private. The masculine characteristics considered 'good' lead to a natural disposition towards war and conflict. Caprioli illustrates this in her study that showed that as gender equality rises, the likelihood of internal conflict falls. "Gender equality might have a dual impact in hindering the ability of groups to mobilize the masses in support of insurrection through the use of gendered language and stereotypes and in reducing societal tolerance for violence" (Caprioli 2005, p. 162). In other words, if one considers devalued feminine principles such as peace, empathy, sensitivity to be necessary to building a better world, then the first step towards this is gender equality. This is not necessarily saying that women are naturally predisposed toward peace, but rather language that is considered 'feminine' is, and how negatively a society feels about the feminine determines how they value these traits.

An example in security of how changing these dichotomies could lead to a more peaceful world is that of the domination/subordination concept of power that we have. "Feminist theorists have called for a reconceptualization of power from what has been labelled the traditional sense of 'power over' or 'power as dominance'" (Salla 2001, p.71-72). This traditional sense of power is what leads to situations such as the security dilemma. Several alternative definitions of power have been proposed. Kolb and Coolidge distinguish between 'power over' and 'power with', which encourages understanding and joint action. Brock-Utne refers to power as 'power to' enjoy or perform. Weber defines power as the capacity to get something done (Salla 2001, p.72). None of these conceptions of power depart significantly from the traditionally accepted constructs within which power is defined in IR, and Salla suggests considering Foucault's idea that power is embedded in societal processes. This idea illustrates power as more structural in its roots, as opposed to traditional concepts that consider human agency and will as the roots of power (Salla 2001, p.72-74).

It is difficult to conceive how a reconceptualization of language would effect international politics, and this is one of the major criticisms of this line of argument in using gender analysis on language. Mainstream IR scholars in general reject this as pointless, without scientific basis, and of little interest to the analysis of international politics. However, it must be considered that language is the medium through which we make sense of our world, and its analysis is integral to our understanding of it.

Conclusion

We have now seen that through looking at the world from a gendered perspective, we can gain insights into the outcomes of international politics, such as the true effects of sanctions. We can also dispell misconceptions about our world, such as the 'myth of protection' and civilian immunity from war. The depths of language can be delved into, and hidden meanings and implications retrieved. One of the major problems that mainstream IR theory has with using a gendered approach to international politics is the apparent lack of a convincing scientific methodology, but what is so unique about the gendered approach is that it uncovers hidden secrets through sources such as personal experience that can tell us more about a conflict or a national sentiment than regular statistics and game theory could uncover. This methodological conflict that feminism has with IR is one of the reasons it has a hard time being taken seriously in IR scholarship, but it is also this methodological conflict that makes a gendered approach to IR so insightful.

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