

Review - Gender: The Basics

Written by Caron Gentry

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CARON GENTRY, FEB 18 2014

Gender: The Basics

By: Hilary Lips

London and New York: Routledge, 2014

As a feminist, I will always welcome another way of teaching people about the issue of gender, the concept of gendering and how understanding both gender and gendering helps one make sense of International Relations. Still, I wondered as I started this book, whether the world needed another basic book on gender and if such a book would offer anything of value to a student of International Relations. Luckily, my misgivings were wrong. Hilary Lips has written an introductory text on gender that is very relevant to the study and understanding of International Relations. It is only natural that this book starts with the basics: what is gender and how is it different from biological sex? The initial chapter continues with a thorough engagement of the nature-nurture debate covering- genetics, brain development and socialization, before establishing what the gender hierarchy is. The first chapter concludes with the complexity of gender identity and challenges the oversimplified male-female dichotomous designation. Therefore, the first chapter illustrates that where one enters the nature-nurture more than likely defines how that person conceives of 'proper' and 'idealized' roles for men and women, which impacts how one perceives the rest of the topics of the book (and, arguably, far more).

Disruption of Gender Norms

Lips' command of the literature from a variety of disciplines is impressive—no stone goes unturned in Lips' nuanced discussion of how gender is constructed and how these constructions lead to problematic power dynamics between people. The second chapter continues the foundational work for the rest of the book, by laying out the complexity and nuance of sexism and gender prejudices. By Lips' doing this early in the book, it becomes much more apparent to the reader how sexism and gender-bias operate in the topics of the later chapters. Lips, thankfully, is not shy: she is clear that assumptions about masculinity and femininity are-more-often-than-not damaging and damning. She moves from a discussion of gendered communication styles to how gendered stereotypes affect status—relying upon multiple studies that empirically demonstrate that women who transgress gender norms by simply being high achievers (from politicians to academics) are punished. Women who seek political positions are seen as morally egregious; women who seek academic positions are rated consistently lower by peers and students. All of this amounts to the notion that women who 'disrupt' long standing social norms are threatening. Still. In 2014.

Challenging Gender Inequality

The arguments and examples that Lips uses throughout the book make one thing very clear: it is time for the world, not just particular parts of the world or particular populations, to face up to the implications of gender inequality. Thus, her subsequent chapters cover: relationships and sexualities, the workplace, leadership and public life, gender-related violence, health and ageing. Gender inequality still affects education levels, job opportunities, pay, health care, social benefits and ageing populations. These are *political problems* that involve thinking about how resources are disbursed and how such dispersal is dependent upon the gender hierarchy.

I think it is helpful here to address some trends within feminist International Relations that intersect with Lips' book

Review - Gender: The Basics

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including: leadership and power, gender-related violence, as well as how the gender hierarchy affects the functioning of the discipline of International Relations. After addressing the sexist bias that women face when running for political positions or applying for academic jobs, the resistance to women in leadership should not be shocking. Despite powerful figures elected to the executive such as Golda Meir (Israel), Indira Gandhi (India), Yulia Tymosheko (Ukraine), Margaret Thatcher (United Kingdom), Angela Merkel (Germany), Dilma Rousseff (Brazil), Christina Fernandez de Kirchner (Argentina), Micele Bachelet (Chile), Laura Chinchilla (Costa Rica), Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (Liberia) and Joyce Banda (Malawi), gender equality in the most powerful positions in the world is still lacking. Less than twenty percent of the members of parliament globally are women; only just over eleven percent of states have female presidents or prime ministers (p. 95). Even though parliamentary quotas for women's seats have created some rapid change in representation, these requirements do not necessarily signify social change, due to the embedded perceptions about femininity and power (pp. 96-100). This indicates the operation of the gender hierarchy, as does the problem of gender-related violence.

Literature to be Considered

Several recent popular books (Hudson et. al., 2012 & Kristof & WuDunn, 2009) present the problem of gender violence/violence against women as a problem that happens outside of the West. What a mistake this is. In chapter 6, Lips is clear that gender-related violence is a global issue. It may to happen to varying degrees across the world but there are very few regions or populations, if any, that are free of gender-related violence. This book chapter examines intimate partner violence, rape and sexual assault in peace- and war-time, and pornography, relating all of them to the gender hierarchy. For further reading on this, see the American Political Science Association's Human Rights Section Book of the Year 2013: Jacqui True's *The Political Economy of Violence against Women* (2012).

Furthermore, Lips' book addresses issues that all International Relations students and scholars must be more aware of: gender dynamics and power-processes in the workplace. As a community of well-informed international relations scholars, we should all be aware of the gender dynamics within our field. From the aforementioned sexism within academia, to the perception of different capabilities between men and women (p. 77), we should be investigating how these impact the teaching and producing of International Relations. For more on this I highly recommend reading *Politics and Gender's* special issue on women in the discipline of International Relations (2008, 4[1]).

Lips' book is not necessarily a philosophical treatment of gender, but it is underpinned by a structural understanding of gender. For more on gender structure, there are the classics by Cynthia Enloe (1989), J. Ann Tickner (1992) and Christine Sylvester (2002). Introductions to IR that focus on gender, include V. Spike Peterson and Ann Sisson Runyan (2009), Laura Shepherd (2009) and Jill Stean (2013) and to explore more about the gender structure as a cause of war Laura Sjoberg's (2013) latest book is foundational.

But understanding all of this literature requires a basic understanding from the reader of how gender happens to all of us and how we in turn gender self, others, society, power, and structures. *Gender: the Basics* therefore helps a student make sense of gender from a variety of disciplines and a multiplicity of studies. As a rigorous and informative book, there are multiple applications to and intersections with International Relations than just a 'basic' book on gender.

References

Enloe, C. (1989), *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kristof, N. D. & WuDunn, S. (2009), *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. New York: Knopf.

Hudson, V., Ballif-Spanvill, B., Caprioli, M. & Emmett, C. (2012), *Sex and World Peace*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Review - Gender: The Basics

Written by Caron Gentry

Peterson, V. S. & Runyan, A. S. (2009), *Global Gender Issues in the New Millennium*. Boulder: Westview.

About the author:

Caron E. Gentry is Lecturer within the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. Her work has focused on gender and terrorism for over a decade. Having written on women's involvement in politically violent groups with articles in various journals her publications also include (with Laura Sjoberg) *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (Zed Books, 2007) and a co-edited volume, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism* (University of Georgia Press, 2011). Caron's current book, *Offering Hospitality: Questioning Christian Approaches to War* (Notre Dame, 2013), is a feminist political theology on war. Drawing upon both feminist theory and political theory, Caron is currently pursuing a research agenda that examines women's everyday insecurities in the West and how these impact and are impacted by international security.