

# Questions of Gender and International Relations

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THERESE ETTEN, JUN 5 2014

In this essay I will discuss the importance of gender for the study of international relations (IR). I will begin my discussion by introducing the term 'gender,' and what this means in international relations. Furthermore, I will look at the differences between sex and gender, and explain why scholars consider gender to be socially constructed, rather than a biological attribute.

Feminism is the discipline responsible for 'putting gender on the map', and is most concerned with questions of gender in international relations. It is for these reasons that I will take an in depth look at feminism and provide insights into its contributions to the study of international relations. It is also important, then, to discuss why other disciplines, especially the mainstream disciplines, in IR have not taken gender into account. The study of gender associated with feminism accentuates the underlying normative biases embedded in the foundations of conservative IR theory. Feminists very much concern themselves with security studies and the marginalization of women, especially in conflict situations. This emphasis on women begs the question – what about men? Men can equally be victimized in conflict situations. I argue that we need to recognize masculinity in security studies and move away from the stereotyped image of 'man' as the aggressor and 'woman' as the victim. Emphasis must remain on gender; gender must be defined inclusively so that it is not synonymous with women. Feminists argue that neglecting gender creates a narrow conception of security and that it does not account for changing realities in international affairs. Furthermore, they would claim that not understanding gender perpetuates gender hierarchies that value the masculine over the feminine (Ann Tickner, 1992; Hooper, 2001). Romaniuk and Wasylciw (2010) argue that feminists have actually failed to acknowledge and understand the unique circumstances in which males find themselves. Males are negatively affected by gender stereotypes when they become victims of sexual torture. To illustrate my argument I will provide a case study which examines the sexual torture of men in wartime Croatia, since human security discourse is based on highly gendered understandings of who should be secured (Romaniuk and Wasylciw, 2010). I do not propose that we disregard the valuable contributions that feminist theories have made to the study of international relations, but rather that we bring in males without disregarding the important acumens made by the feminist paradigm.

### Understanding 'Gender' in International Relations

The literature on gender covers a wide field and consists of contributions from many disciplines with a variety of interests and methodologies (Hooper, 2001: 20). Emphasis is on the complexity of the concept:

There is no consensus on either the nature or significance of gender identities, how they are produced, or whether they should be reinforced, modified, or abolished, even among feminists, who by no means have a monopoly on gender theory (Hooper, 2001: 20).

Despite disagreements over the specificities of the concept, I will attempt to explain what is generally meant by the term 'gender' and how it relates to the study of international relations. Feminists propose that gender is "a set of socially constructed characteristics describing what men and women ought to be", as opposed to sex, which is biologically determined (Ann Tickener and Sjøberg, 2007: 196). It is said to be culturally shaped and varying across time and place (Ann Tickner, 1992). Gillian Youngs (2004: 77) says, "The concept of gender keeps to the fore the relational nature of categorizations of male and female, and signals the importance of not taking either as given or

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necessarily natural." Ann Oakley (1972) propagated the analytical distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender, which is essential to the study of gender, in her book entitled *Sex, Gender, and Society*. Charlotte Hooper (2001) acknowledges the diversity of opinions around the concept of gender, and proposes that gender theory does (or should) revolve around three dimensions of analysis. These three dimensions are outlined by Hooper (2001: 20) as follows:

- (1) physical embodiment, including the body and the role of reproductive biology;
- (2) institutions and the gendered social processes they encompass, including the family, the economy, the state;
- (3) the discursive dimension of the gendered construction of language and its constitutive role in the gender order.

Furthermore, Hooper (2001) notes that different approaches to gender place different values on each of the three dimensions, however, not rightly so. As I have mentioned, feminism is the approach which has contributed most to the study of gender in IR theory. Despite the extensive literature that is available about feminism and the study of gender, other (especially the 'mainstream') disciplines in IR theory have not considered gender studies as part of their approach. I will now examine the reasons for this neglect of gender.

## Conventional Theories and Gender

Conventional theories of IR do not take the individual into account, but rather focus on the interaction between states. Classical realism, for example, makes assumptions about 'human nature', referring to the nature of 'man'; this is related to the essentialist understanding of the body as 'natural', as opposed to social or political (Shepherd, 2010: 6). Cynthia Enloe (2004) considers the problems of incorporating gender in political discourse, claiming that many people do not take gender seriously. She says that the general attitude is to dismiss it as irrelevant, and concludes that the difficulty for many IR scholars in taking feminist analysis seriously may be due to the fact that they are males, and would have to "consider thoughtfully when and how their own relationships to masculinity are affecting what they choose to deem a 'serious' topic of investigation" (Enloe, 2004: 96). Ann Tickner (1992: 10) notes that, "the central concern of realism, the dominant paradigm in international relations since 1945, has been with issues of war and national security in the post-World War II international system."

Realism's emphasis is on power, autonomy, and rationality; it is closely linked to traditionally masculine characteristics. Therefore, realism is a highly gendered paradigm and ignores the varied human experiences that have the potential of creating new possibilities and ways of thinking about interstate practices (Youngs, 2004). Feminism aims to challenge key concepts such as power, sovereignty, and security because they are framed in terms associated with masculinity (Enloe, 1990). I will now examine the relationship feminism holds with the study of gender.

## Feminism and Gender

Feminists hold divergent approaches to the study of gender which relate to differing aims. The aim of liberal feminists, for example, is to eliminate legal obstacles to overcome women's subordination (Ann Tickner, 2008). Marxist and socialist feminists "look for explanations of women's subordination in the labour market, which offers great rewards and prestige for paid work in the public sphere than for unpaid work in the household" (Ann Tickner, 2008: 264). Moreover, post-colonial and post-structuralist understandings of feminism assert that we cannot generalize about women because they can have different experiences of subordination when we bring in other categories of analysis such as race, class, and gender (Ann Tickner, 2008: 264). However, feminism embraces the idea that international politics has been a male-dominated discipline and that this has resulted from a combination of social processes and structures that have been created and sustained over generations, sometimes coercively (Enloe, 1990; Zalewski, 1998).

The most important point to note is feminists believe that gender is malleable (Zalewski, 2013). Judith Butler used Michel Foucault as a resource "to provide a discursive account of the construction of gender identities that include

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the body in a nonessentialist way” (Youngs, 2004: 30). Foucault has been influential to post-structuralist feminists because he proposes that humans are produced as subjects by the power of discourse, a notion which can be directly related to feminist studies of gender (Foucault, 1980). Furthermore, post-structuralist feminists such as Judith Butler would argue that characteristics such as strength, rationality, and independence are associated with masculinity, while weakness, irrationality, and dependence are associated with femininity based on an understanding of binary oppositions; each term's meaning is dependent upon the other, so, they are not accorded equal value, and one term becomes dominant (Hooper, 2001; Steans, 2013). Feminism's broadened definition of security is aimed at revealing the suffering that women (and children) have endured through death, rape, displacement, etc. These experiences produce women (and children) as victims. However, if gender is to be inclusive and not synonymous for women, we must ask – can men be victims too? I will discuss this question in the next section of this essay by briefly examining the concept of hegemonic masculinity, followed by a case study about male victimization in wartime.

## What About 'Men'?

### *Hegemonic Masculinity*

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is used to refer to a dominant form of masculinity among other, subordinate forms. This concept helps us to explore power dynamics among men and between men and women (Youngs, 2004: 85). The concept is important because it takes into account socio-economic, racial, and other inequalities among men, highlighting that men are not a homogenized group (Youngs, 2004: 85). Ann Tickner refers to hegemonic masculinity as, “a socially constructed cultural ideal that, while it does not correspond to the actual personality of the majority of men, sustains patriarchal authority and legitimizes a patriarchal political and social order” (Ann Tickner, 1992: 6).

Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity is sustained by lesser masculinities such as homosexuality, and by devalued femininities. It is an important concept because characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity are cast onto the behaviour of states; a state's success as an international actor is measured by its power capabilities and its capacity for self-determination (Ann Tickner, 1992: 7). The concept of hegemonic masculinity is especially significant when examining male victims of sexual torture in conflict situations.

### *Case Study: Croatia*

Human-rights discourse in conflict-related sexual violence has a tendency to sustain a “female-victim and male-perpetrator paradigm” (Solangon and Patel, 2012: 424). However, we need to challenge this feminist position because emphasizing women exclusively as victims reinforces harmful constructs of feminine and masculine identities (Solangon and Patel, 2012: 424). Zarkov (2001) says that the perception of man as the offender and woman as the victim is an explicitly gendered narrative of war. Oosterhoff, Zwanikken, and Ketting (2004) have studied sexual torture of men in Croatia. They note that more focus has been given to the sexual torture of women than men but that sexual torture of men is by no means an uncommon phenomenon (Oosterhoff, Zwanikken, and Ketting, 2004: 68). The lack of data on the subject is attributed to the slowness of institutions in the recognition of male victims, and the internalisation of stereotypical gender roles by healthcare workers (Donnelly and Kenyon, 1996). Sexual torture can be used as a means of controlling or terrorising a population (i.e. ethnic minority) during war or peacetime. “In many cases, however, it is organised to further political and military aims” (Oosterhoff, Zwanikken, and Ketting, 2004: 70). Oosterhoff, Zwanikken, and Ketting collected data for their study by collaborating with several associations such as the Medical Centre for Human Rights. Their research showed that male victims had often been sexually tortured in public. They concluded that it would not be possible to calculate or estimate incidences of sexual torture in wartime Croatia since only a small number of survivors are likely to have admitted to having been victims. However, they were able to conclude that sexual torture of men occurred frequently enough to be considered a regular feature of wartime violence (Oosterhoff, Zwanikken, and Ketting, 2004).

### *Discussion*

Sexual violence against men can be interpreted as a display of power, related to hegemonic masculinity, with political

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and military motivations. It strips the victim of his social status as a man (Solangon and Patel, 2012). Romaniuk and Wasylciw (2010) argue that not understanding gender perpetuates gender hierarchies which categorise the feminine as subordinate to the masculine. They call for the inclusion of more male participants in gender discourse; this would further emphasise male and female insecurities to help “denaturalize and dismantle” gender hierarchies, attaining greater security for all (Romaniuk and Wasylciw, 2010: 24).

Thus, in order to complete the shift in transition from the focus on realist conceptions of security to that on human security, the focus must also change from examining how past conceptions of security excluded, or at the very least were detrimental to, women to a new focus on how new gendered conceptions of security result from the victimization and marginalization of men (Romaniuk and Wasylciw, 2010: 32).

This claim is made regards to sexual torture and targeting of men. Romaniuk and Wasylciw (2010: 34) also identify a major shortcoming of gendered security studies, claiming that the stereotype of the masculine as aggressor negatively affects individual men in wartime to a much greater extent than the stereotype of the feminine as passive affects women in the same situations. Natalia Linos (2009: 1550) proposes that it is important to step away from these stereotypes and to recognize gender-based violence against men. Gender-based violence is a security concern, and:

the exclusion of the gender-specific victimization of civilian men and boys from both the discourse and the programmatic realities of this agenda is problematic, serving neither to protect the civilian population nor to promote gender mainstreaming as a policy (Carpenter, 2006: 88).

Many feminists would argue that if we stop talking about women, they will be forgotten. It is for this reason that the emphasis must remain on gender, rather than on men. In order to successfully include gender into IR theory it must be defined inclusively so that it is not synonymous with women (Carpenter, 2006: 99).

## Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that questions of gender are important to the study of international relations but that the concept must be applied in an inclusive manner so as not to discriminate against men, especially with regards to issues of sexual torture of men in conflict situations. I have discussed, in detail, the concept of gender and how it relates to the study of international relations. Furthermore, I have examined why mainstream theories do not account for gender, concluding that this is due to a state-centric focus which does not account for individuals. I have also considered the possibility that male scholars of international relations may find it problematic to examine how their own relationships with masculinity affect their chosen areas of study. Moreover, I have focused on the relationship between gender and feminist theory. I have given examples of different approaches to feminism to highlight the diverse nature of the field. Feminism is concerned with the social construction of gender and how this has produced the feminine as inferior to the masculine. Aiming to challenge these conceptions, feminism attempts to make the marginalized (i.e. women) visible through the study of gender. Finally, hegemonic masculinity is another key concept that is important when trying to explain power dynamics among men and between men and women (Youngs, 2004). This concept is sustained by subordinate forms of masculinities and thus relates to the case study of sexual torture of men in wartime Croatia. Hegemonic masculinity is projected through the aggressors onto subordinate masculinities, effectively feminising the subordinate one. Through the use of the case study I have attempted to illustrate the importance of including men in gender discourse, especially with regards to issues such as sexual violence. I have shown that the exclusion of men as victims is highly problematic and that in order to achieve greater security, which is one of the most important goals of feminist theorists, there is a need for a more inclusive conception of gender than is currently held by the majority of feminists.

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