

# Why Do We Need a Gender Analysis in International Political Economy?

Written by Francesca Melhuish

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FRANCESCA MELHUIH, FEB 23 2016

It is always worth asking, 'where are the women?' Answering this question reveals the dependence of most political and economic systems not just on women, but on certain kinds of relations between women and men (Enloe, 1989: 133, also quoted in Bedford & Rai, 2010: 2; Rai & Waylen, 2014: 1).

The 'Enloe question' quoted above is a good starting point for discussing why we need a gender analysis in International Political Economy (IPE) as it highlights both that women are central to the operation of the global political economy and that gendered hierarchies exist within that economy. Indeed, it is the focus of this essay to move past an essentialized analysis of gender as biology to demonstrate the gendered hierarchies of subordination that are uncovered when the study of the global political economy is approached using gender as a critical 'lens' (Pearson & Jackson, 1998: 2; Peterson, 2005: 500; Griffin, 2007: 729).

The essay therefore begins by considering the politics of knowledge production. In this section it is argued that a gender analysis is important for IPE in order to challenge the hegemony of 'masculinist', 'economistic' methods that restrict what is 'thinkable' by many IPE scholars. A gendered approach is advocated that broadens the scope of enquiry and favours collaboration with critical and postcolonial IPE theories to achieve a more situated and historicized approach.

The next section discusses the realities of hegemonic masculinities in relation to global restructuring to reveal how a gendered IPE analysis is essential for highlighting the masculinised nature of markets such as finance, the invisibility of social reproduction and the discipline of workers in the 'feminized' labour force. Here masculinity is viewed as a structure of power rather than necessarily a feature of biology (Hooper, 2000: 62).

The essay concludes that a gender analysis is fundamental to IPE because it demonstrates the centrality of the differential valorisation of the masculine and the feminine to the functioning of the global political economy, and thus creates opportunities for political activism and resistance. However, the expression of 'difference' in the study of gender remains fraught with difficulties.

In the future, gendered IPE should be more conscious of the dangers of creating its own orthodoxy but should not become paralysed by a struggle to avoid universalism, resist "tactical essentialism" and refrain from problematic depictions of men and certain groups of women as the 'Other' (Keyman, 1995; Pearson & Jackson, 1998: 6-8). It is suggested that further collaboration with complementary IPE theories, particularly postcolonial theory, could assist in resolving this problem and achieving a more nuanced approach (Keyman, 1995).

### The Politics of Knowledge Production

A core reason for requiring a gender analysis in IPE is to challenge knowledge hegemonies in the discipline, particularly demonstrated by the persistence of the Liberal approach of the 'American school' (Gills, 2001: 237; Agathangelou & Zalewski, 2005: 308; Peterson, 2005: 501; Cohen, 2007; Griffin, 2007: 723; Elias, 2011: 101-104). 'Economistic', quantitative methods dominate much of the mainstream IPE literature associated with this school

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(Peterson, 2005: 501; Agathangelou & Zalewski, 2005: 312; Griffin, 2007: 722). This leads to an ontological focus on the interaction between states and markets and the activities of 'rational economic man', the 'sovereign subject' whose masculinised motives are reduced to little more than 'self-interest' (Keyman, 1995: 81; Benería, 1999: 65; Waylen, 2000: 17-18; Peterson, 2003; Agathangelou & Zalewski, 2005: 310; Griffin, 2007: 722; Bedford & Rai, 2010: 4).

This focus is at the expense of acknowledging both that women are important agents in the global political economy and that gendered hierarchies exist within that economy (Cook & Roberts, 2000: 4; Peterson, 2003; 2005; Waylen, 2006: 148; Elias, 2011;2013; Rai & Waylen, 2014: 5). For example, mainstream IPE fails to take account of the political economy of social reproduction and the household, the limited participation of women in certain markets and their active exploitation in others, and the construction of gendered identities for the purpose of subordination and exclusion (Peterson, 2003: 2; Waylen, 2006: 145). Further, it arguably lacks the methodological tools to do so (Peterson, 2003: 2; Waylen, 2006: 145).

Where IPE does take account of the social construction of hierarchies, an emphasis on class as an exclusionary structure obscures the reality that such structures are also gendered (Davis, 1997; Elias, 2011: 104). Indeed, although critical IPE and gendered IPE share pluralist and qualitative epistemological and methodological bases, compatible with a social-relational investigative approach, there has been little collaboration between the two perspectives (Steans, 1999: 114; Peterson, 2003; 2005; Waylen, 2006: 146; Griffin, 2007: 725; Elias, 2011: 101-104).

One explanation for this might be that critical theorists fear competition on the margins of the IPE discipline (Griffin, 2007: 725). Furthermore, it is argued that gendered IPE faces a "credibility deficit" (Griffin, 2007: 725). Gender analysis can be perceived as scholarship produced by women, about women, for women, and as such is devalorised as 'feminine', 'feminist' and lacking in academic rigour and relevance (Youngs, 2000: 46-49; Agathangelou & Zalewski, 2005: 310; Peterson, 2003; 2005). Much IPE literature from both the mainstream and the fringes of the discipline has therefore been variously described as 'masculinist', 'gender-neutral' or 'gender blind' (Cook & Roberts, 2000: 3; Youngs, 2000: 48; Waylen, 2006: 149-150; Elias, 2011: 102; Rai & Waylen, 2014: 2).

With such a variety of accusations against the extant IPE literature, the question arises, how might we study gender (Peterson, 2005: 499)? One approach has been to consider gender as an 'empirical category' (Peterson, 2005: 500-503). This method involves adding women as a variable to existing theoretical models to investigate the differential experiences of women and men (Peterson, 2005: 501). However, this strategy has been critiqued for taking an essentialist view of gender as biology, unreflexively accepting the existence of gendered hierarchies and amounting to little more than an "add women and stir" approach (Peterson, 2005: 502; Griffin, 2007: 729; Elias, 2013: 157).

It is suggested that it is more fruitful to pursue a methodology of 'analytical gender' (Peterson, 2005: 499). This approach uses gender as a 'lens' for exploring how it "both structures and differentially valorises masculinised and feminised identities" (Pearson & Jackson, 1998: 2; Peterson, 2005: 500; Griffin, 2007: 729). Such analysis points to the co-constitution of agency and structure and asks why characteristics which are constructed as masculine are favoured over those constructed as feminine (Cook & Roberts, 2000: 8; Peterson, 2003; 2005: 500; Waylen, 2006: 162). This moves the debate on from a gender as biology approach as both men and women can suffer (or benefit) from the existence of gendered hierarchies.

However, a gendered approach must be conscious of the dangers of creating its own orthodoxy (Pearson & Jackson, 1998: 5). For example, it is critical to avoid the "editorial effects of standpoint bias" (Allen, 1999: 455). Critiques of white, Western gender scholarship emphasise the importance of resisting universal assertions about "women" as an homogeneous category with homogeneous outcomes in gendered hierarchies (Peterson, 2003: 2; Peterson, 2005: 507-510). The construction of "men" as a singular 'oppositional' category with common characteristics is similarly unhelpful (Baden & Goetz, 1998: 31-32).

However, some also caution against creating geographical divides that reinforce a postcolonial conception of women

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in developing countries as the 'Other' and constitute hierarchies of femininity (Keyman, 1995: 83; Cook and Roberts, 2000: 9; Waylen, 2000: 29). Indeed, Keyman (1995) and Pearson & Jackson (1998: 6-8) highlight an inherent difficulty within gendered IPE: the need to acknowledge the 'difference' both between and within sexes whilst simultaneously rejecting the ideas of biological essentialism and imperialist 'othering' and recognising the political utility of mobilising biological solidarity to further an emancipatory agenda. This difficulty should not be underestimated and is perhaps why academics and activists alike often resort to a "tactical essentialism" to further a political agenda (Pearson & Jackson, 1998: 9; Elias, 2013: 849).

However, despite this critique, the use of gender as an analytical tool implies a theoretical pluralism that is beneficial to the discipline of IPE as a whole. For example, the historicity of gendered IPE has been praised in explaining women's differential attachment to the labour force over time and its association with issues of race and class (Davis, 1997; Youngs, 2000: 46; Waylen, 2006: 147). Further, it is suggested that gender's utility to IPE increases when used in conjunction with complementary theories such as postcolonial theory (Keyman, 1995) to better take account of the "mutually reinforcing dynamics of all forms of oppression" (Allen, 1999: 457).

Therefore, gendered structures are evident in the 'politics of knowledge production', which restrict what is 'thinkable' by many IPE scholars (Allen, 1999: 461; Agathangelou & Zalewski, 2005: 310; Peterson, 2003; 2005: 515).

The next section explores the realities of hegemonic masculinities in relation to global restructuring to further highlight the utility of a gendered approach to studying the global political economy.

## Structural Hierarchies and Global Restructuring

Whilst there is much debate about the origins of global restructuring or globalization, it is evident that its intensity has increased since the closing decades of the twentieth century (Steans, 1999: 124; Marchand & Runyan, 2000: 3-7). Broadly, this shift has been characterised by the movement of manufacturing industry to the developing world, the prevalence of service industries in the developed world, the proliferation of information and communications technologies, and the 'feminization' of the global labour force (Pearson, 1998: 176; Benería, 1999: 61; Peterson, 2003; 2005; Bedford & Rai, 2010: 3).

A gender analysis in IPE is vital for highlighting the extent to which these changes are evidence of, and in large part have been facilitated by, gendered structural hierarchies (Waylen, 2006: 159-164; Elias, 2010: 841; 2011: 106). For example, it is argued that the phenomenon has been accompanied by what *The Economist* newspaper has dubbed the rise of 'Davos man', described distinctively by Benería (1999: 68) as "rational economic man gone global". Nowhere is 'Davos man' more prevalent than in the financial services sector, which valorises dynamic masculinised qualities of strength, objectivity, and risk-taking behaviour (Hooper, 2000: 63-70; Amooore, 2004; Elias & Beasley, 2009: 290).

Indeed, a study of the corporate advertising of any of the big banks, consultancy firms or financial newspapers reveals that the 'performance' of finance is overtly masculine (Hooper, 2000: 64-70; Amooore, 2004: 180). Imagery includes "frontier masculinities", depicting Davos man as a brave explorer/hunter/warrior and the financial markets as a wild beast that needs to be tamed or a new, exotic terrain that is ripe for exploitation (Hooper, 2000: 65-67; Amooore, 2004: 180). Indeed, such imagery also contains colonial connotations and could therefore be described as depicting "hegemonic racialized capitalist masculinities" (Bedford & Rai, 2010: 3; Hooper, 2000: 63-68). Furthermore, it serves to legitimise the behaviours it describes (Elias & Beasley 2009: 286; Elias, 2011: 110).

By contrast, that which is considered feminine is conspicuously absent from the performance of finance (Hooper, 2000: 69). This is particularly illustrative of the existence of gendered hierarchies because it is argued that the masculinised risk-taking qualities described above contributed significantly to the production of the so-called 'global' financial crisis or "crisis of neoliberalism", which had a "disproportionate" impact on women (Bedford & Rai, 2010: 1-2; Rai & Waylen, 2014: 7).

Furthermore, it is ironic because women are now being constructed as the saviours of "global capitalism" (Elias,

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2013). 'Davos woman' has emerged as 'rational economic woman', making the 'business case' for women's empowerment (Elias, 2013: 153, 158). Narratives of girls' education as a 'good investment', and women's 'altruistic' household consumption decisions enable the World Economic Forum to construct "appropriately neoliberal subjectivities" aimed at enhancing economic performance (Elias, 2013: 156, 161-162).

Thus, the discourse of empowerment disguises the essentialised links that are continually being made between women and the household (Elias, 2013: 156). Furthermore, it is problematic because 'Davos woman' is herself a masculinised subjectivity whose privileged position allows her to assume that she is an advocate for all women whilst reinforcing gendered hierarchies (Elias, 2013: 163-164). Indeed it might be the case that she has improved her position in gendered structures thanks to the subordination of other women hired to fill the 'domestic deficit' in the household (Rai & Waylen, 2014: 4; Elias, 2010: 849).

Indeed, another key area where a gender analysis has utility in IPE is in shedding light on the political economy of the household. It is argued that the household is a structure of "gender subordination" (Elias, 2013: 155; Rai & Waylen, 2014: 8) where women face a 'double burden' or 'triple shift' (Elias, 2013: 157, 166; Peterson, 2005: 502). The private sphere of the household is constructed as a feminine domain where working women are also responsible for the 'natural' activities of 'social reproduction', whilst the public sphere of paid work in stable, professional jobs is constructed as masculine (Youngs, 2000: 49; Peterson, 2003: 9; 2005: 502). Indeed, one aspect in which women are said to have suffered more from the recent financial crisis is in the cut back to public services, placing an increased burden on 'social provisioning' by the household (Peterson, 2005: 510; Bedford & Rai, 2010: 8; Elias, 2010: 841).

Furthermore, the terms of exclusion are emphasised by the fact that unpaid work in the household is frequently invisible in national statistics of productive activity (Steans, 1999: 114; Hoskyns & Rai, 2007; Bedford & Rai, 2010: 7). This is despite the fact that social reproduction, considered to include biological reproduction, unpaid caring services and the 'cultural socialization' of cohorts of future workers (Davis, 1997: 109; Allen, 1999: 457; Peterson, 2003: 1, 80-84; 2005: 511; Bedford & Rai, 2010: 7) is fundamental for the operation of the global political economy (Pearson, 1998; Waylen, 2006: 159-164; Elias, 2010: 841; 2011: 106). Indeed, Peterson (2003; 2005) recognises the inseparability of the "reproductive, productive and virtual economies" and the structures of power inherent in them.

A gender analysis in IPE is therefore important for recognising the strategic invisibility of the private sphere for the operation of neoliberal capitalism and moving beyond essentialist claims of women's biological suitability for household work to uncover the historical structures that have made it appear that way (Benería, 1999: 70). For example, Davis (1997: 104-107) points to "norms of domesticity" integral to many religions, such as the discourse of "family values" that implies women should remain in their "proper place".

Indeed, constructions of female subjectivities as "docile but reliable" have been important in disciplining the feminized global labour force, employed predominantly in light industry and the service sector (Benería, 1999: 61; Peterson, 2005: 508-509). Such employment is characterised by low wages, frequently inadequate working conditions and low job security (Pearson, 1998: 177; Rai & Waylen, 2014: 7). Construction of a subordinate female subjectivity is essential in inhibiting the labour force from organizing and thus works actively to keep wages down (Steans, 1999: 117; Peterson, 2005: 509).

An interesting sector to consider here is domestic service, which depends in large part on migrant labour (Cook & Roberts, 2000: 12; Peterson, 2005: 507-509; Elias, 2010). In a study of households in Malaysia, Elias (2010: 848-849) points to the framing of domestic work as outside of the realm of 'real' work as a rhetorical device to limit the socio-economic rights of migrant domestic workers and legitimise their exploitation, such as non-payment. As an increasing number of men are also present in the 'feminized' migrant labour force (Peterson's (2005: 507-508) "feminized others"), such an analysis is germane not only to women.

A gendered IPE analysis is therefore essential in highlighting the asymmetric impact of globalization (Peterson, 2003: 2; Peterson, 2005: 507-510). While restructuring may have been beneficial for some such as 'Davos woman', this has certainly not been the experience of all women, particularly because gendered hierarchies are integral to the

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process of globalization (Peterson, 2003: 2; Peterson, 2005: 507-510; Waylen, 2006: 159-164; Elias, 2010: 841; 2011: 106).

## Conclusion

This essay has attempted to demonstrate both the centrality and the invisibility of women in the operation of the global political economy, and the centrality of that invisibility in constituting and reinforcing gendered structural hierarchies of subordination.

The essay first considered the politics of knowledge production to demonstrate the differential valorisation of the masculine and the feminine that exists within academia itself. The essay then applied the analysis of hegemonic masculinities as a structure of power to investigate their relation to global restructuring. It was demonstrated that a gender analysis is fundamental to the study of IPE in revealing and challenging gendered hierarchies in diverse areas of society such as financial services, and domestic work.

Whilst such an analysis may also have great utility for fuelling political activism and creating opportunities for resistance (Benería, 1999: 78; Marchand & Runyan, 2000), a caveat should be remembered. An inherent tension still exists within a gendered IPE that struggles to express difference and combat universalism whilst resisting essentialist biological assertions and problematic depictions of men and certain groups of women as the 'Other' (Keyman, 1995; Pearson & Jackson, 1998: 6-8).

Whilst this may have led to a "tactical essentialism" by those with a political agenda to pursue, it is argued that greater scholarly collaboration with critical and postcolonial IPE theories can lead to a more nuanced approach that resists the temptation to create a new orthodoxy (Keyman, 1995; Pearson & Jackson, 1998: 6-8). Indeed, this could be a fruitful area for further research.

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