

Introducing Feminism in International Relations Theory

Written by Sarah Smith

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SARAH SMITH, JAN 4 2018

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From the outset, feminist theory has challenged women’s near complete absence from traditional IR theory and practice. This absence is visible both in women’s marginalisation from decision-making and in the assumption that the reality of women’s day-to-day lives is not impacted by or important to international relations. Beyond this, feminist contributions to IR can also be understood through their deconstruction of gender – both as socially constructed identities and as a powerful organising logic. This means recognising and then challenging assumptions about masculine and feminine gender roles that dictate what both women and men should or can do in global politics and what counts as important in considerations of international relations. These assumptions in turn shape the process of global politics and the impacts these have on men and women’s lives. Rather than suggest that traditional IR was gender-neutral – that is, that gender and IR were two separate spheres that did not impact on each other – feminist theory has shown that traditional IR is in fact gender-blind. Feminist scholarship therefore takes both women and gender seriously – and in doing so it challenges IR’s foundational concepts and assumptions.

The basics of feminism

If we start with feminism’s first contribution – making women visible – an early contribution of feminist theorists is revealing that women were and are routinely exposed to gendered violence. In making violence against women visible, an international system that tacitly accepted a large amount of violence against women as a normal state of affairs was also exposed. For example, former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s ‘UNiTE’ campaign to end violence against women estimated that up to seven out of ten women will experience violence at some point in their lives – and that approximately 600 million women live in countries where domestic violence is not yet considered a crime. Violence against women is prevalent globally and is not specific to any particular political or economic system. Jacqui True (2012) has demonstrated the links between violence against women in the private sphere (for example, domestic violence) and the kinds of violence women experience in public, in an increasingly globalised workplace and in times of war. In short, nowhere do women share the same economic, political or social rights as men and everywhere there are prevalent forms of gendered violence, whether this be domestic violence in the home or sexual violence in conflict. In looking at violence against women in such a way, it is possible to see a continuum of gendered violence that does not reflect neat and distinct categories of peace, stability and so on. Many societies are thought of as predominantly peaceful or stable despite high levels of violence against a particular portion of the population. It also presents a very different image of violence and insecurity to that viewed through the security agendas of states, which is characteristic of traditional IR viewpoints.

In making women visible, feminism has also highlighted women’s absence from decision-making and institutional structures. For example, in 2015 the World Bank estimated that globally women made up just 22.9% of national parliaments. One of the core assumptions of traditional perspectives that feminism has challenged is the exclusionary focus on areas that are considered ‘high’ politics – for example, sovereignty, the state and military security. The traditional focus on states and relations between them overlooks the fact that men are predominantly in charge of state institutions, dominating power and decision-making structures. It also ignores other areas that both impact global politics and are impacted by it. This is a gendered exclusion as women contribute in essential ways to global

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politics even though they are more likely to populate those areas not considered high politics and their day-to-day lives may be considered peripheral. Traditional perspectives that ignore gender not only overlook the contributions of women and the impact global politics has on them but also perpetually justify this exclusion. If women are outside these domains of power, then their experiences and contributions are not relevant. Feminist theorists have worked to demonstrate that this distinction between private and public is false. In doing so they show that previously excluded areas are central to the functioning of IR, even if they are not acknowledged, and that the exclusion and inclusion of certain areas in traditional IR thinking is based on gendered ideas of what counts and does not count.

This brings us to the second key contribution of feminism – exposing and deconstructing socially constructed gender norms. In making sense of IR in a way that takes both women and gender seriously, feminism has demonstrated the construction of gendered identities that perpetuate normative ideas of what men and women should do. In this regard, it is important to understand the distinction between ‘sex’ as biological and ‘gender’ as socially constructed. Not all gender considerations rest on the analysis of women, nor should they, and gender relates to expectations and identities attached to both men and women. Gender is understood as the socially constructed assumptions that are assigned to either male or female bodies – that is, behaviour that is assumed to be appropriate ‘masculine’ (male) or ‘feminine’ (female) behaviour. Masculinity is often associated with rationality, power, independence and the public sphere. Femininity is often associated with irrationality, in need of protection, domesticity and the private sphere. These socially and politically produced gender identities shape and influence global interactions, and IR as theory – and global politics as practice – also produces such gendered identities in perpetuating assumptions about who should do what and why. These gender identities are also imbued with power, in particular patriarchal power, which subordinates women and feminine gender identities to men and masculine gender identities. What this means is that socially constructed gender identities also determine distributions of power, which impact where women are in global politics. Whereas men can be feminine and women masculine, masculinity is expected for men and femininity of women.

Cynthia Enloe (1989) asked the question ‘where are the women?’, encouraging IR scholars to see the spaces that women inhabit in global politics and demonstrating that women are essential actors in the international system. She focused on deconstructing the distinctions between what is considered international and what is considered personal, showing how global politics impacts on and is shaped by the daily activities of men and women – and in turn how these activities rest on gendered identities. Traditionally, the military and war making have been seen as masculine endeavours, linked with the idea that men are warriors and protectors, that they are legitimate armed actors who fight to protect those in need of protection – women, children and non-fighting men. In practice this has meant that the many ways that women contribute to conflict and experience conflict have been considered peripheral, outside the realm of IR’s considerations. For example, the issue of sexual and gendered violence in conflict has only recently entered the international agenda. Comparatively, the mass rape of women during and after the Second World War was not prosecuted as the occurrence was either considered an unfortunate by-product of war or simply ignored. This has since changed, with the 2002 Rome Statute recognising rape as a war crime. However, this recognition has not led to the curtailment of conflict related sexual violence and this form of violence remains endemic in many conflicts around the world, as does impunity for its occurrence.

In turn, these issues highlight the importance of intersectionality – understanding that IR is shaped not only by gender but also by other identities, such as class, race or ethnicity. Intersectionality refers to where these identities intersect, and in turn how different groups of people are marginalised, suggesting that we must consider each in tandem rather than in isolation. In examining wartime rape, Lori Handrahan (2004, 437) has shown the intersection of gender and ethnic identities, where the enemy’s women become constructed as ‘other’ and violence against them consequently comes to represent the ‘expansion of ethnic territory by the male conqueror.’ This rests on gendered constructions, which occur at the intersections with other forms of identity, such as ethnicity or race. Gendered constructions that see women characterised as protected mean that conquering them – through rape or sexual violence – is representative of power and domination over one’s enemy. Applying feminist theory to the issue of male wartime rape also shows the gendered logics that inform its occurrence, in particular that the rape of male opponents is seen to ‘feminise’ (that is, humiliate, defeat) opponents. This again highlights the contribution of feminism in understanding how gender influences IR and how the feminine is undervalued or devalued.

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As discussed above, feminism has exposed gender violence and women's marginalisation in global politics. However, it also challenges gendered constructions of women as inherently peaceful, as in need of protection or as victims. Feminists see these constructions as further evidence of gender inequality and also as contributing to the exclusion of women from traditional IR perspectives in the first instance. If women are assumed to be victims rather than actors or as peaceful rather than aggressive or as only existing in the domestic or private realm (rather than the public sphere), then their experiences and perspectives on global politics are more easily ignored and justified as marginal. Accounts of women disrupting these gender identities, such as being agents of political violence for example, have challenged these assumptions. This is an important contribution of feminism and one that challenges the construction of gendered identities that do not reflect the diversity of women's engagements with IR and in practice perpetuate women's limited access to power. Therefore, taking feminism seriously is not simply about upending the historical marginalisation of women, it also provides a more complete picture of global politics by taking into account a broader range of actors and actions.

Feminism and peacekeeping

Building peace after conflict is an increasingly central concern of IR scholars – especially as conflicts become broader and more complex. There are also questions regarding how post-conflict societies are to be rebuilt and how best to prevent relapses into conflict. Peacekeeping missions are one way that the international community seeks to institute sustainable peace after conflict and the United Nation's traditional peacekeeping role (understood as acting as an impartial interlocutor or monitor) has broadened considerably. Missions now frequently include a laundry list of state-building roles, including re-establishing police and military forces and building political institutions. Feminist theorists have demonstrated the ways that peacekeeping, as security-seeking behaviour, is shaped by masculine notions of militarised security. Post-conflict situations are generally characterised as the formal cessation of violence between armed combatants, ideally transitioning to a situation where the state has a monopoly on the use of force. It is this shift that peacekeeping missions seek to facilitate, conducting a wide range of tasks such as disarming combatants, facilitating peace deals between various state and non-state groups, monitoring elections and building rule of law capacity in state institutions such as police forces and the military.

However, as feminist IR scholars have shown, violence against women often continues in the post-conflict period at rates commensurate to or even greater than during the conflict period. This includes rape and sexual assault, domestic violence and forced prostitution, as well as those selling sex to alleviate financial insecurity. The dominant approach to keeping peace often obscures these kinds of violence. Issues like gender equality and domestic violence (and human rights) are considered 'soft' issues as opposed to the 'hard' or real issues of military security. This understanding of peace, then, is one in which women's security is not central.

In terms of structural and indirect violence, women are generally excluded from positions of power and decision-making in reconstruction efforts and have limited access to economic resources. Donna Pankhurst (2008) has theorised what she terms a post-conflict backlash against women, one that is chiefly characterised by high rates of violence and restrictions on women's access to political, economic and social resources post-conflict. The restriction of women's access to such resources – such as basic food, housing and education – makes them more susceptible to gendered violence. This often begins with women's exclusion from peace negotiations and deals, which instead focus on elite actors who are predominantly men, often militarised men. In peacekeeping missions, women are also under-represented. In 1993, women made up only 1% of deployed personnel. That figure had only risen to 3% for military and 10% for policy personnel by 2014. As gender inequality has become increasingly acknowledged, those involved in peacekeeping have paid more attention to the causes and consequences of women's insecurity in post-conflict settings.

In October 2000 the UN Security Council devoted an entire session to Women, Peace and Security – adopting Resolution 1325 as a result. This resolution called for a gender perspective to be 'mainstreamed' throughout peace operations and for women to be included in peace agreements and post-conflict decision-making – in addition to the protection of women and girls during conflict. Resolution 1325 calls on all actors to recognise the 'special needs' of women and girls in post-conflict societies, to support local women's peace initiatives, and advocates for the protection of women's human rights in electoral, judiciary and police systems. However, consistent with the

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construction of a gendered understanding of peace discussed above, there remain limitations to the full implementation of Resolution 1325.

A United Nations study by Radhika Coomaraswamy (2015) found that gender in peacekeeping continues to be under-resourced politically and financially, and the gendered elements of post-conflict reconstruction are still marginalised in missions. Women still experience high rates of violence post-conflict, are still excluded from peace processes and still ignored in peace-building policy. This is demonstrated, for example, in national and international attempts to disarm former combatants after conflict and reintegrate them into post-conflict society. This is a post-conflict policy area that feminist scholars have routinely exposed as being highly gendered and exclusionary of women who are former combatants. Megan Mackenzie (2010) has attributed this to constructed gender identities that minimise the idea that women are agents in conflict or involved in war-making, instead constructing them as victims with limited agency. In other words, they are subject to war rather than war's actors.

This means not only that women are excluded from disarmament programmes because of socially produced gender norms but also that they are unable to access the material and economic benefits that may flow from such programmes – or the political and social gains they could make from being recognised as legitimate veterans in post-conflict societies. This example demonstrates the power invested in gendered identities, the ways they can shape policy and how gender inequality is perpetuated via such policy.

Finally, international interventions such as peacekeeping missions also contribute to the continuation of violence post-conflict and are a site in which gendered identities are produced. There have been numerous reports of peacekeepers perpetrating sexual violence against women, girls and boys while on mission. This issue gained much attention in 2015 and into 2016, when a United Nations whistle blower exposed not only reports of sexual abuse of children in the Central African Republic by French peacekeepers but also the United Nations' inaction in the face of these reports. From a feminist perspective, the impunity that peacekeepers enjoy – despite rhetorical commitments to zero tolerance – is a result of gendered security imperatives in which militarised security and the coherence of the institution (whether that be an international organisation or a state) is prioritised over the welfare of the individual.

Conclusion

Feminist research has demonstrated the value in taking women's experiences and contributions seriously and used that as a base to demonstrate how IR rests on, and perpetuates, gendered ideas about who does what, who experiences what – and why – in global politics. Beyond this there is also recognition that women are important agents in political, economic and social processes. Despite its designation, feminism does more than focus on women, or what are considered women's issues. In highlighting both inequality and relations of power, feminism reveals gendered power and what it does in global politics. Being concerned with women's subordination to men, gendered inequality and the construction of gendered identities, feminism has challenged a homogenous concept of 'women' in IR and exposed gendered logics as powerful organising frameworks.

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