

# International Women's Day Interviews

Written by E-International Relations

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To celebrate International Women's Day this year we asked several of our former interviewees about women and IR: *Do you think the discipline of IR has made important strides to equally incorporate women, both conceptually and institutionally? What could be done better?* Below are responses from Cynthia Enloe, Patricia Owens, Nadje al-Ali, Lisa Tilley, Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, Anne Sisson Runyan, Katarzyna Zysk, and Charlotte Epstein.

**Cynthia Enloe is Research Professor in the Department of International Development, Community, and Environment at Clark University. Read her previous interview with E-International Relations here.**

Window-dressing? How You Can Tell.

Each of us engaged in international politics teaching and research is trying to sharpen our skills so we can distinguish between real change and mere tokenism. Is that government's allegedly new foreign policy doctrine just a change in rhetoric? Is that peace agreement only meant to give each warring side a chance to re-arm?

It's useful, I think, to turn those distinguishing skills to investigating our own academic practices and culture. Given *all* the genuine effort that has been invested over the last 30 years in draining the field of IR of its deep-seated patriarchal assumptions and inclinations, has IR experienced authentic transformation?

Here is what has changed:

- More young women in more countries are choosing to pursue MA and PhD degrees in IR than did three decades ago.
- The Feminist Theory and Gender Section (FTGS) of the International Studies Association (ISA) has become one of the ISA's most intellectually vibrant networks (their annual receptions are where the ISA action is!).
- There are now Women, Gender, Peace and Security research and graduate study centers at leading universities in at least five countries (Sweden, UK, US, Australia, Norway).
- The *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, a transnational, refereed academic journal, already has celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.
- The academic associations for International Politics in the UK, North America and Brazil each now has a women's caucus that keeps their associations wide awake to the persistent workings of sexism.
- Academic presses are commissioning growing numbers of gender-informed international politics monographs and texts.
- Any university/college department of Politics/IR that lacks at least one full-time, tenure-track faculty member specializing in gender and politics now risks looking backward.

This is not nothing. Ask Ann Tickner and Spike Peterson. Ask Jindy Pettman, Marysia Zalewski and Sandy Whitworth. It has taken untold hours and seemingly bottomless wells of stamina to create and to sustain each of these valuable IR innovations. Still, there is a lot of institutional and cultural territory between just-for-show-this-week-only window-dressing and transformative, sustainable institutional change.

## International Women's Day Interviews

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Here is my short list of pieces of evidence that reveal that in 2019 IR as an academic field could slip back into its old patriarchal ways:

- Too many people who attend ISA and British International Studies Association (BISA) conferences still act as though they are missing nothing of intellectual significance by their never attending any FTGS and Gender and IR section sessions.
- Too many university/college faculty leaders in Politics/IR imagine that having hired one faculty member who “does” gender, the department – and they themselves – are intellectually “off the hook.”
- Too many faculty members who teach either the undergraduate or graduate Intro to IR (or IR theory) course think that they are giving a sufficient nod to gender analysis if they devote one week (towards the end of term, easily skimmed if time runs out) to gender approaches to international politics.
- Too many IR faculty members in MA and PhD programs are not capable of serving as useful supervisors to students who want to feature gender analysis in their dissertations.
- Too many IR faculty (and not a few post-grad male students, perhaps) imagine that gender means women, thus eschewing any serious investigations into the workings of masculinization – and, occasionally, de-masculinization – in international politics and in their own academic work.

Over these last 30 years, one of the chief achievements in IR of dozens of people's work is the multiplying numbers of grad students and faculty members now equipped to conduct feminist analyses of their own departments, programs, institutes, journals, conferences and associations. In 2019, window-dressing can be charted and called out for what it is.

That is progress.

**Patricia Owens is Professor and Head of International Relations and Director of the Leverhulme Research Project, Women and the History of International Thought at the University of Sussex. Read her previous interview with E-International Relations here.**

Without doubt, academic IR has made some strides towards incorporating some women into positions of influence, but these are largely white women in the US and Europe. There is still a lack of racial and trans-diversity within IR's women professoriate. In fact, a recent University and College Union report on the career experiences and strategies of UK black female professors found that “Some white female academics were seen to contribute to the exclusion of Black female academics despite an expressed commitment to feminism.” There's no reason to suggest that senior IR women would be exempt from such practices.

In my own current research project on historical women in IR's intellectual and disciplinary history, we've identified a recent tendency to incorporate a small number of contemporary, usually white, feminists into IR's intellectual canon. But, overall, the existing literature suggests that women played no role in IR's disciplinary history nor have thought very deeply about international politics. Results from the initial study can be found here. We desperately need to reconsider these long-held assumptions. We are still at the earliest stages of our collaborative, interdisciplinary project, but there is strong evidence of a landscape of different settings and genres in which historical women thought deeply about relations between empires, nations, and states. Together these form a rich and diverse terrain of international thought and the basis for a revisionist disciplinary history.

**Anne Sisson Runyan is Professor of Political Science and a faculty affiliate in the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Cincinnati (UC). Read her previous interview with E-International Relations here.**

Findings from the most recent study conducted in 2015 on the effects of gender on the professional and personal lives of IR scholars have just been published in the February 2019 issue of *International Studies Perspectives*. Although survey respondents from the membership of ISA were self-selective and response rates were relatively low, the researchers conclude from this latest snapshot that despite some sense by female and male respondents that things have gotten a little bit better (more awareness of the need for gender balance on panels and in citations and

## International Women's Day Interviews

Written by E-International Relations

syllabi, for example), women on the whole still had very different experiences from men in the discipline. While the numbers of women in departments have increased, sexual harassment, professional costs for having children, exclusion of work (particularly in security studies) from journals and citations, and marginalization of feminist work continues to fall disproportionately on women, leading to slow or halted progress towards tenure and prominence and the phenomenon of the "leaky pipeline" in which women are more likely to opt out of the discipline.

A recent study by graduate students at the London School of Economics of IR syllabi used there confirms that even now, works produced by men are far more likely to be assigned than works by women, on the order of five to one. Such students have also questioned why the IR curriculum is so white, and a number of respondents to the 2015 gender survey called for a more intersectional approach that took into account barriers in the discipline based on race, sexuality, non-normative gender identity, and nationality as well as normative gender.

Thus, while there may be more talk about gender balance, the walk is not appreciably occurring beyond adding more women to departments, but without significant institutional, structural, or conceptual changes. The 2019 report on the 2015 gender survey suggests that men in the discipline and in academe more generally need to step up more proactively and with women to change these conditions. This will require not only serious organizing for major institutional changes that incentivize inclusive and equitable practices, but also transformations in what is valued intellectually in the discipline.

**Zeynep Gülşah Çapan is a Lecturer at the Chair for International Relations at the University of Erfurt. Read her previous interview with E-International Relations here.**

I want to start by underlining the important work that has been done with respect to questioning the conceptual cornerstones of the field. I cannot do justice to all the amazing work that has been done here and apologize for the limited references, but the work of Cynthia Enloe, Ann Tickner, Carol Cohn, Spike Peterson, Elisabeth Prügl and L.H.M. Ling, among many others, has been influential in challenging the conceptualizations of the international. That said, even though important strides have been achieved with respect to the incorporation of women conceptually and institutionally, there are still important steps to be taken.

Firstly, with respect to institutional inclusion: even though there are important developments happening, the structural inequalities need to be addressed more. For example, despite initiatives to ensure that all-male panels do not occur, a focus on the issue of panels has the danger of moving away from the structural inequalities. One aspect to question is what happens when a panel ends up being all-male. What usually occurs is that a woman chair is added to the lineup, thus practically having the men talking while the woman is there to keep time and give credence to the participants and organizers that they are being 'diverse'. This does not actually address the structural inequalities but exacerbates them. It exacerbates them because it means that women are then given the burden of 'saving' organizers and colleagues from all-male panels by taking up more roles as chairs and/or discussants, usually in the last minute. Secondly, it ends up disadvantaging women who are more junior. This means that even though as an initial step these attempts at ensuring diversity are important, the structural inequalities need to be addressed. This is also evident in the discussions revolving around evaluation systems. For example, a recent study found bias in student evaluations against women and teachers with non-English speaking backgrounds. These student evaluations are at times requested by hiring committees and adversely affect the chances of women in the job market. The main issues to tackle here, I would argue, would be to address these structural inequalities more directly and forcefully.

Conceptually, as stated, there have been important works that have expanded our understanding of International Relations. A persistent problem in that regard is not that work isn't being done but that work is not being considered as part of 'International Relations' in general. There are two dynamics at work here. Firstly, the division of the field into different clusters has meant that the clusters do not enter into dialogue with each other. As such, what is being done in Feminist IR remains within that cluster and even though it has great importance for the discussions in critical IR (broadly conceived), the different clusters do not enter into dialogue with each other. The second aspect of this dynamic is the absenting of women from what is considered the canon. For example, a recent article published in European Journal of International Relations discusses the gender gap in syllabi in London School of Economics

## International Women's Day Interviews

Written by E-International Relations

whereby 79.2 % of texts are authored by men. A second way in which women are absented from the process of canon formation is the citation gap. The citation gap along with the absence of women in syllabi reproduce the image that women were not part of the 'main debates' of the field. An important project in that regard is the Women and the History of International Thought project (see also Patricia Owens' article on the same study).

To conclude, what I would like to underline is the importance of reframing our questions. The issue is not that women were absent but rather were *absented*, and this process of absenting has been constitutive of the institutions and conceptions within which we navigate. As such, it is not enough to solely incorporate more women if that process of incorporation does not also challenge the structural dynamics and questions the very institutions and conceptualizations.

**Lisa Tilley is Lecturer in Politics and Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. Read her previous interview with E-International Relations here.**

We could begin by asking whether the traditionally masculine and militarised field of International Relations (IR) has done enough to 'allow' women access to its domains by encouraging their equal incorporation. Such a concern for whether 'balance' has been fostered within an existing frame certainly accords with this year's official International Women's Day campaign theme, #BalanceforBetter, which situates 'balance' in itself as the emancipatory target: "The race is on for the gender-balanced boardroom, a gender-balanced government, gender-balanced media coverage, a gender-balance of employees, more gender-balance in wealth, gender-balanced sports coverage..." But where does this take us? Making gender balance within existing institutions (and disciplines) an end in itself is productive of at least two problematic side effects. First of all, it naturalises race and class imbalances – 'gender balanced salaries' as a goal, for example, suggests that male and female casualised cleaners should be paid the same as one another; while male and female executives should have equal earnings. It does not, however, disturb the deeply racialised and unjust disparities between low-paid precarious workers and those at the top of pay-scales. Secondly, gender balance within existing frames does little to dismantle structural racism or patriarchy. Having women in leading roles in the Conservative government has not made the party any less enthusiastic about rolling out austerity policies, under which women, and especially women of colour, disproportionately suffer impoverishment. Now that women run the top three CIA departments for the first time in history – the self-ascribed 'sisterhood' – the Agency will not become any less complicit in interventions under which women and people of colour more broadly will suffer. Fighting for balance in and of itself within existing structures, in reality, is not a fight *for* equality and the end of oppression, but instead a fight for equality to oppress.

To return to IR, the question is not really one of whether women have been properly 'incorporated' but rather one of how women and feminist allies have fought for, and carved out, spaces for their own scholarship. The institutional architecture (conference sections, working groups, research clusters, journals, etc.) of feminist IR has been built from the ground up by those with a commitment to scholarship attuned to the workings of patriarchy. And yet, too much of this architecture remains heavily Western-centric and serves to displace, once again, the experiences and intellectual contributions of women of colour in a way which mirrors patriarchy's displacements of white women's contributions. A properly intersectional IR, which understands gender, race, class and sexuality as inherently relational, would overcome the discipline's persistent problems of silencing and displacement. However, regardless of which scholars are canonised and regardless of whose perspectives are reified in IR journals, there is no denying the fact that women have long constituted 'the international' in multiple ways and in defiance of the masculine and militarised state. From the Conference of the Women of Asia, held in 1949 and led by global South women, to the Via Campesina movement, established in 1993 with Indigenous and rural women in leading roles, there have been myriad anti-colonial, anti-imperial, anti-racist international movements built by, or dominated by women which constitute alternative world-making projects in themselves. In short, women have never waited to be granted incorporation within patriarchal institutional and disciplinary structures. Instead, they have always written, and indeed constituted, 'the international' itself in ways long displaced and ignored by the IR canon.

**Katarzyna Zysk is Professor of International Relations and Contemporary History and Head of Research and Deputy Director at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies at the Norwegian Defence University College. Read her previous interview with E-International Relations here.**

## International Women's Day Interviews

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During 16 years working in academia, I have experienced my share of bias and stiff odds, especially in the early days of my academic career. On the other hand, I have spent most of the time since my PhD in academia in the military educational system, outside of my country of origin, often working with militaries in other countries – a traditionally male-dominated environment. Yet I have become a part of excellent national and international networks and research projects, led by inclusive men and women, focused on expertise and competency rather than gender or ethnicity. Thanks to these opportunities, I have been able to get promoted to full professor, as the first female researcher at the Norwegian Defence University College (NDUC).

My experience working on projects in Europe, the United States and Asian countries, however, is that the way women have been incorporated in academia, both institutionally and conceptually, varies greatly across countries and cultures. I have observed a lot of progress, but the development is also non-linear and improvement cannot be taken for granted. In addition to explicit and implicit bias – the latter being particularly hard to eradicate – there is also a spectrum of structural challenges women face regarding both advancement and recognition in the academia.

One example is that women are often held to a higher standard than men: research shows that men are more often promoted based on their potential, while women are promoted based on what they have achieved. Another is that informal decision-making outside official structures tends to hurt women as they are often excluded from such networks. There is no lack of talent among female researchers, but those in charge are often more comfortable bringing in people like themselves. This leads, however, to a variety of problems: from limited access to positions, to all-male conference panels or projects. Such an approach does not only limit women's opportunities but also undermines the potential of the institutions. Research findings clearly demonstrate that diversity drives better results, leads to greater innovation and creativity – a quality that should be highly prized in general, and in an academic environment in particular.

The ratio of women to men in academia at the lower levels appears to be growing. Yet it remains strikingly unfavourable to women as one moves higher up the ladder of both scientific degrees and administrative positions of power. It is often the structural problems that are adverse to women's advancement in the academic environment. There is thus a need both for more awareness and programmes committed to gender equality, such as the NDCU's equality fund, which contributes to enabling the pursuit of an academic career. Strategies should range from challenging the structures that undermine women's opportunities to breaking habits and questioning expected gender norms.

**Nadje Al-Ali is Professor of Anthropology, Gender and Middle East Studies and Robert Family Professor of International Studies at Brown University. Read her previous interview with E-International Relations [here](#).**

Although having been trained as an anthropologist who has worked in the contexts of gender and Middle East Studies, I have been involved in the discipline of IR through my work on war, conflict, forced migration and gendered mobilization against authoritarianism. As I have just moved from SOAS University of London to Brown University, I am also coming to terms with a shift from an institutional context of gender studies to one of international studies as well as public and international affairs. It is too early for me to assess what this shift entails specifically, but it is clear to me that both my relocation to the US as well as a very different institutional context will impact on the kinds of colleagues I am working with and the work they do: from the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS (where most of my colleagues were women and feminist scholarship was widespread) to the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University (where, I was glad to see, there is a significant number of women but where feminist scholarship is marginal).

There is a growing body of feminist IR scholarship that is changing the way we think about many of the core concepts and themes that are at the centre of IR. While the number of feminist scholars and publications are growing, there is still much gender-blindness within the discipline of IR. In fact, I doubt that what we consider "mainstream IR" as having taken on board the important and powerful interventions of feminist scholars. Here, it is not only male colleagues but also female academics who might reproduce the conventions of the canon in a gender-blind manner and without paying attention to the various ways gender intersects with other power configurations at national,

## International Women's Day Interviews

Written by E-International Relations

regional and international levels. So, I think that more women are involved in shaping the discipline of IR in exciting and creative ways, but that feminist scholarship is still largely ghettoised and not fully integrated into IR.

**Charlotte Epstein is an Associate Professor in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. Read her previous interview with E-International Relations [here](#).**

There's no doubt that progress has been made, even since I was a graduate student; at least in terms of the awareness of the extent to which historically IR first took shape as a white male discipline – and how much poorer it will remain if it fails to properly break beyond its original confine. Progress has come from some commendable individual initiatives, such as the website Women Also Know Stuff, and some real institutional efforts, notably by the International Studies Association. Most of the journal editorial boards on which I have served, and notably the ISA's journals, now have a policy of drawing their author's attention to the gender balance in their citations as part of the review process. It's worth also noting that IR has had a head start compared to other disciplines, like philosophy. This is not insignificant for the discipline concerned with power in the world. However, these individual and even institutional initiatives are fragile, and resistance to inclusion efforts are, unfortunately, still real.

What I find most interesting, however, and where I also I hold my highest hopes, lies in the ways in which the discipline's epistemological structures have been progressively opened up to new ways of thinking and doing research. For me, it's not just a question of 'adding women to IR', but rather the ways in which the discipline itself transforms its mode of enquiry by doing so. This is the only way in which IR will not remain the boring discipline it once was. Here is also where feminist and postcolonial concerns tightly overlap, which I continue to think is the discipline's most productive nexus today.