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Chapter · January 2020

DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-74336-3_207-1

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Feminist International Relations (IR) Theory



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Keywords

Security studies · International relations · Gender · Feminist theories · Critical security studies · Feminist security studies

Introduction

Feminist theorists have contributed to international relations (IR) studies by re-assessing the roles that gender and women play in the international arena. They have explicitly noted gender biases in IR. By using various methodologies, including nontraditional avenues of inquiry, feminist IR re-defines the concepts of power, sovereignty, hegemony, and security. Feminist IR also helps unravel the means by which hegemonic masculinity has become embedded in IR politics. This short essay explores the ways feminist concepts and methodologies allow us to view IR not only from an abstract philosophical and historical point of view but also from the point of view of those who experience IR politics but are usually missing from its mainstream body of knowledge.

Feminist IR vs. “Mainstream IR”

Whereas security is traditionally understood to be at the top of the state’s list of priorities, and securitization is perceived as the domain of extraordinary measures defined by perceived threats to the state, critical, gendered, and feminist analyses focus on alternative meanings of security. One of their leading questions is, “Who is being secured”? (Harel-Shalev 2017). A major goal of feminist IR (Cohn 2013; Eager, 2014; Tickner 1997) is to understand and redress gender inequalities that often remain hidden or ignored in traditional and male-centric international theory. Feminist IR theories note that one of the real challenges in conceptualizing war, insecurity, and conflict lies in analyzing these phenomena as a subset of the social relations of experience and exposing the power relations within patriarchal structures (Enloe 2000; Kronsell 2012). Moreover, scholars in the field of feminist IR hold that war, security, and conflicts cannot be fully comprehended unless they are studied through the prism of how people have experienced them in a myriad of ways, not solely by what are considered to be mainstream IR theories and methods (Enloe 2000; Sjoberg 2013; Sylvester 2012; Tickner 2006).

Feminist IR embraces a range of approaches, which explore gender as a site of power and social interactions. The intellectual origins of feminist

IR are rooted in distinctive traditions of feminist theory. Furthermore, “looking through gendered lenses at any given phenomenon in global politics does not just tell us one thing. Instead, substantively and methodologically, it has wide gaze with many explorations and observations” (Sjoberg 2013, p. 285). Indeed, Feminist IR Theory has various strands, with some commonalities, and most strands of feminist scholarship draw from critical work on gender identities and sexualities. While this short piece cannot encompass the breadth of work in feminist IR since the 1990s, but it will present a few main directions that are prevalent in feminist studies and IR theory and its commonalities.

In her groundbreaking book, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, Cynthia Enloe (2014) asks where are the women in international politics? Enloe challenges us to look at women in the international arena and identify where are they and how they got there. What are the political powers that determine the location of women within the international political arena? Enloe’s work explores military bases, diplomacy, and global corporations, searching for the roles and the stories of women in these realms. For example, she investigates how the location of military bases and their operation affect the women associated with them. There are women who live on the base, work on the base and around the base. After locating them, Enloe analyzes their roles, especially their gendered roles within and outside these bases. Regardless of whether they are women soldiers, military wives, prostitutes, or entertainment workers, they all affect and are affected by the base’s location and the policies within and outside the base.

By looking at locations not generally associated with women, Enloe stresses that issues that are regarded as private matters such as the relationship between an officer and his wife, sexual harassment within the bases, and the policing of civilian women by soldiers are all infected with power relations that are a part of international politics, which we must understand as more than national security interests. “The international is personal” (Enloe 2014, p. 351), argues Enloe, which means that governments’ foreign affairs

also rely on the gendered role of women. According to Enloe, feminist insights into these so-called private affairs reveal the powers that keep women in these roles. While Enloe focuses on highlighting the power relations of the international politics that shape women’s lives, feminist IR also challenges basic notions of how we should view IR. Its approach is not merely about women, but a different perspective on analyzing global politics.

Feminist IR demands that when we think of the international realm, we need to go beyond the state level and examine the individual level, the community level, and the people who are affecting and are affected by issues that are within the IR discipline such as security and diplomacy. In particular, we must investigate how women, who are generally ignored by IR, are impacted by these issues. 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.

Feminist IR further criticizes the realist paradigm, which is the dominant approach to IR. Realists view the international realm as an anarchic state. In this state, with the absence of a central authority, each nation decides when and where to use force. Thus, conflict can break at any moment (Waltz 1979). In this anarchic structure, the state is the main actor, which relies on itself and its resources to function and survive. Realism is based on the understanding of human nature as motivated by its desire for power, glory, and self-interests. Feminist IR seeks to broaden these perceptions of the international realm, move away from its masculine association with war and conflict, and offer a feminine alternative to the way we formulate IR.

Ann Tickner is one of the prominent scholars who challenge the realist approach (Tickner 1992, 1997). Tickner argues that one of the reasons IR regards the world as a man’s world is the realist approach. Examining Hans Morgenthau’s principles of political realism, Tickner (1988) claims that Morgenthau’s point of view is incomplete because of its underlying assumptions that human nature is

amoral and beast-like. Morgenthau's adaptation of human nature in a Hobbesian state of nature, which, according to feminist critics, is socially constructed, is partial because it ignores women. Tickner argues that in a world in which nuclear weapons exist, realist depictions of the international realm such as that of Morgenthau could be fatal. She maintains that the feminist perspective could offer an alternative to this view of the world that might ultimately save humanity.

Tickner offers an alternative definition of the realists' perceptions of power and security. She claims that by understanding these terms from a feminist point of view, we can consider a different course of action rather than the zero-sum result offered by realists. Instead of understanding power as the control of A over B, which is usually associated with masculinity, we can also understand it from another perspective (Tickner 1988). Tickner adopts Hannah Arendt's definition of power, which is the ability to act in concert (Arendt 1969, p. 44). Thus, by expanding our understanding of power not just with regard to control but also as a way of acting together to achieve a mutual goal, we can add another dimension to international relations other than conflict (Tickner 1988).

Tickner also redefines the notion of security or national security (Tickner 1988, 1997). While national security is often understood in terms of the military strength needed to protect the state, Tickner suggests that we need to look at security beyond the terms of weapons and war, because this definition is too narrow for the post-Cold War era. She maintains that we can also understand security in terms of having basic material needs, which are more associated with women. Environmental threats are also an issue of national security as well as an issue of concern to many women's movements. We can thus define security in much broader terms, and approach solutions to these insecurities and threats from a cooperative rather than a conflictual point of view. Such an approach provides an alternative to violent resolutions. As Tickner notes, the feminist perspective does not reject IR ontologies of security or power, but rather expands them. However, different ontologies also demand different epistemologies.

In her response to accusations that feminist IR lacks theory and deals only with observations or critiques, Tickner (1997) argues that from an epistemological point of view, traditional IR aligns with positivism that seeks a unity of methods and precise observations of what can we consider as facts. This approach is rooted in the belief that social science is like natural science, implying the need for empiricist methods. In contrast, feminist IR is largely identified as a postpositivist approach that is based on historical hermeneutic or philosophical traditions, which allows it to seek answers that traditional IR methodologies cannot provide. Thus, criticism, for example, is one of the core elements of feminist IR because it exposes gender biases in IR.

Feminist scholars have highlighted the gender biases that Tickner notes in a variety of IR related issues and especially in the field of security studies, which are associated with masculinity. War, for example, is one issue where women are ignored or portrayed as those who need protection. Jean Bethke Elshtain (1985) argues that long standing traditions depict men as violent and women as nonviolent. These socially constructed images of men and women during wartime are not "real" and aim to portray women as noncombatants and men as warriors. Elshtain claims that these conceptions have become the basis for different feminist observations about war, the way we experience it and who takes part in it.

Christine Sylvester (2012) challenges the IR point of view of war, asking us to regard it not from a conventional security point of view, but rather from the viewpoint of those who experience war. She argues that IR ignores a fundamental part of war, which is "injuring human bodies and destroying normal patterns of social relations" (p. 484). To understand war comprehensively, claims Sylvester, we must take into consideration the experiences of those who are affected by it. Going back to Tickner's argument about the epistemology of feminist IR, Sylvester also asserts that in order to conduct research into war as an experience, we need appropriate methods, including interviews and discourse analysis, which is sometimes combined with other methods. To understand war and be able to help those affected

by it, we must move beyond the theoretical and philosophical investigation of it and consider more complex security issues resulting from the experiences of war (Sylvester 2012).

Sylvester's notion of the experience of war leads feminist IR scholarship to investigate war beyond traditional warzones. Her perspectives have been adopted and implemented in various studies. For example, by exploring minority women's experiences in conflict situations, Harel-Shalev (2017) demonstrates how women are not considered a side in the conflict, and their interests are not taken into account. This study also presents how a gendered analysis would lead us to a different conclusion about the estimation of what conflict has been solved by a war, how and for whom. Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah (2016) claim that the narratives of women soldiers serving in combat and combat-support roles in the military may challenge both the conventional definitions of war and the binary conceptualization of warfare as a gendered act in which soldiers (usually men) actively protect allegedly passive women (usually civilians). Moreover, the narrative of women soldiers can teach us much more than about the important (and often ignored) experiences of women. It can also shape and reshape gendered assumptions about power, protection, and hegemony.

IR scholars have criticized the feminist methodologies that Tickner, Sylvester and others adopted. Robert Keohane (1989), for example, welcomes the feminist perspective of concepts such as power or sovereignty. However, he argues that in order to assess the questions and hypotheses raised by feminist scholars, these theories must also use positivist methodologies that will allow researchers to evaluate them and create measurable questions. Keohane (1998) also argues that the view of feminist scholars such as Ann Tickner of traditional IR versus feminist IR methodologies is limited by dichotomous points of view: "International relations theory is portrayed as problem-solving, positivist, and asocial; feminist theory as critical, post-positivist, and sociological" (Keohane 1998, p. 194). These dichotomies, according to Keohane, are not found

in reality, and none of these extreme categories is an ideal point of view for analyzing IR politics.

In response to Keohane, Annick Wibben (2004) argues that Keohane does not fully understand the value of the observation "on the object of study itself" (p. 101) and the context in which different parameters of IR are being studied. Wibben claims that scholars, such as Keohane, who denounce relativism and the methods that allow studying IR through a feminist lens "treat [s] Feminist IR as a subject to be studied, not a way to explore IR" (p. 103). Women and gender are not something that we need to "add to IR and stir," but an approach that constantly challenges the way we understand IR. Therefore, multiple methodologies are necessary for studying security and insecurity in global politics (Stern 2005).

Gender norms and assumptions usually define a particular form of masculinity as the norm. Feminist IR theories further challenge this approach and seek to avoid a binary framing of events. Feminist IR theory attempts to decompose the polarities between good and bad, active and passive, warriors and victims, and even between victimhood and agency. Feminist theories in IR create definitions related to women, gender, and war, while taking into account hegemonic masculinities. As Tickner and Sjoberg (2013) state, feminist theorists in IR are also committed to determining how gender is manifested in global politics. Feminist IR studies claim that assumptions about gender shape events in global politics. Therefore, gender-blind analyses of global politics and security may be misleading and false. Gendered processes may vary across intersections of race, nationality, and other signifiers of identity and social location. Therefore, feminist perspectives combine these factors in their analyses. Such analyses have shed light on important, overlooked links between citizenship, rights, security, and gender. In doing so, feminist IR has reintroduced these silenced and marginalized voices.

One of the leading scholars of feminist IR, Cynthia Enloe, asks academics to look for what she terms "silences" in international relations (Enloe 2014). She advises scholars to seek questions that are thus far unidentified and unasked in international relations and to investigate issues

that conventional commentators typically leave unexplored. These spaces of query often remain unexplored because they are not considered interesting or sufficiently important. In these silences, she notes, you will often find politics. This is, indeed, one of the starting points of feminist IR theories (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2019).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Gender Equality and Inequality](#)
- ▶ [Human Security](#)

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