

Feminist Theory and International Relations: The Feminist Challenge to Realism and Liberalism

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Since the end of the Cold War and the increased interdependence resulting from the globalization process, the field of international relations has faced major challenges to its core theoretical structure. It no longer revolves solely around the realist issues of war and security, but rather, international relations has broadened to include traditionally liberal concerns, such as the international political economy, socioeconomic development, human rights, non-state actors, and civil society. Apart from the two main theories of realism and liberalism, the feminist theory brings new perspectives to the international relations table. This paper will consider the feminist theory in international relations, and what can be learned from this perspective.

The first section will provide some key terms and main ideas in feminist theory, and will share its viewpoint with respect to world politics. The second section will present feminist critiques of existing international relations theory, and discuss how feminist theory explains the shortcomings of realism and liberalism. The paper will conclude by assessing the feminist theory in relation to the frameworks of realist and liberal theories. This section will ask: Does feminist theory have a separate argument strong enough to transform the field of international relations? Or if it is more a subset of other theories, can it still enhance and expand the discourse of international relations in significant ways?

Prior to presenting the main ideas in feminist international relations theory, we need to define two key terms -- 'gender' and 'patriarchy' -- that are central to feminist discussion. 'Gender' is not a synonym for the term 'sex', or the biological difference between men and women, but instead "refers to the complex social construction of men's and women's identities...[and] behaviors...in relation to each other. Fundamental in the discourse on

gender is the notion of power and power dynamics between genders."¹ Simply put, using the concept of gender, feminists analyze relations of power involving men and women, how that power is exerted, and how that interaction has been habitually, historically, and socially implemented over time (though not as a result of inherent or biological differences of either sex).

Lorraine Code helps us to understand the second term critical to feminist theory, 'patriarchy', which she defines as a system in which females are subordinate to men, in terms of power and status, and which is based on the belief that "it is right and proper for men to command and women to obey." Patriarchal roots, she notes, can be found as far back as Aristotle's assertion that women's biological inferiority is akin to her reasoning capabilities; later such systems became perpetuated by "the Judaeo-Christian world as under most other world religions."²

How do feminists use gender and patriarchy to describe the field of international relations (IR)? Overall, feminist theory says that most of the key players in IR, such as diplomats, policymakers, heads of government, and academic professionals, have been, and still are, males who come from patriarchal social and political backgrounds. Thus, discussions within IR remain largely constrained by those who lack consideration of women's roles in world politics (because they have not been trained to value and include the perspective of women). Should IR perpetuate the exclusion of women from its

¹ Diana Thorburn, "Feminism Meets International Relations." *SAIS Review* v20, i2 (Summer-Fall 2000): 2. [Expanded Academic ASAP](#), Infotrac (15 November 2003).

² Lorraine Code. *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), PAGE, [Netlibrary/eBook Collection](#) (29 November 2003).

discipline, along with their potential contributions and additional viewpoints, IR will remain a prime example of patriarchy, in both its practice and accomplishments. Indeed, IR is frequently referred to as the “last bastion of the social sciences,”³ indicating how rigid it remains in reconsidering itself through the ‘gender lens’.

Feminists also apply the terms ‘gender’ and ‘patriarchy’ when analyzing how situations have been shaped to exclude women from the international political arena. For example, Eric M. Blanchard refers to a ‘catch-22’ situation, in which a candidate seeking political office will highly depend on past military service as qualification for the position, putting women at a disadvantage since they generally have less military experience. This significantly limits a woman’s chances to attain a national government position directly involved with international issues of defense and security.⁴ From this example alone, we can understand how the areas of domestic politics, the military, and even the topic of education (which is directly related to this example), are issues with respect to which feminists would argue that gender and patriarchy do not allow women equal access to power positions in world politics.

As with many theories, “feminist theory” reflects a wide range of perspectives generating many internal debates concerning how it should be represented. As Diana Thorburn notes, “there can never be a truly singular voice of feminist foreign policy simply because of the diversity of views within feminism itself.”⁵ However, a brief look at some relevant facets of the discipline can be seen through Lorraine Codes’ summary of two salient

³ Diana Thorburn. “Feminism Meets International Relations.” *SAIS Review* v20, i2 (Summer-Fall 2000): 3. [Expanded Academic ASAP](#), Infotrac (15 November 2003).

⁴ Eric M. Blanchard. “Gender, International Relations, and the Development of Feminist Security Theory.” *Signs* v28, i4 (Summer 2003): 1289. [Expanded Academic ASAP](#), Infotrac (15 November 2003).

⁵ Diana Thorburn. “Feminism Meets International Relations.” *SAIS Review* v20, i2 (Summer-Fall 2000): 1-10. [Expanded Academic ASAP](#), Infotrac (15 November 2003).

areas within feminist IR theory, standpoint feminism and radical feminism.⁶

Standpoint theory considers how “the gendered construction of knowledge...[helps to] understand traditional topics in international relations” and is “alerting us to the idea that gender may be structuring how we think in the international context.”⁷ Author Martin Griffiths classifies feminist scholar J. Ann Tickner as a standpoint feminist.⁸ Before even addressing existing IR theory, Griffiths first argues that the purpose and definition of ‘theory’ is in itself male-centered, because it is “oppressingly normative rather than conjectural and analytic.”⁹ Simply put, the processes of forming and learning theory is constructed around on automatically-accepted ideas of what is standard and normal, rather than first challenging the ‘norm’ and questioning if the ‘standard’ is objective enough. In this case, ‘theory’ lacks female perspective because it is not objectively sought at the onset of formulating ideas.

Tickner argues that IR is gendered to “marginalize women’s voices,” and stresses “that women have knowledge, perspectives and experiences that should be brought to bear on the study of international relations.” For example, Tickner would argue that security, a main topic in IR, should not only be understood as “defending the state from attack,” but should also consider that security for women “might be different because women are more likely to be attacked by men they know, rather than strangers from other states.”¹⁰

In other words, in contrast to traditional IR views that view security as protecting the state from other states, feminists argue the topic of security should

⁶ Lorraine Code. *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 273, [Netlibrary/eBook Collection](#) (29 November 2003).

⁷ Lorraine Code. *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 273, [Netlibrary/eBook Collection](#) (29 November 2003).

⁸ Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1999). [Netlibrary/eBook Collection](#) (29 November 2003).

⁹ Kjell Goldman, “International Relations: An Overview,” in *A New Handbook of Political Science*, edited by Robert E. Goodin and Hans-dieter Klingemann. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 423.

¹⁰ Lorraine Code. *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 273, [Netlibrary/eBook Collection](#) (29 November 2003).

address acts of rape and violence, not only from foreign perpetrators, but from their own fellow citizens as well. Feminists would also add that occurrences of rape increase during times of war, and is even used as a method of ethnic cleansing among the rivalries within their state,¹¹ yet would never enter into typical IR discussions that focus solely on state-to-state interaction, simply because IR discussions traditionally remain focused on states as the key actors. Thus, the topic of security shows how gender consideration, excluded from the very beginning of the discussion, results in policymaking that would be subsequently exclusive of, and likely detrimental to, women. Prior to discussing any IR topic, standpoint feminist IR theory would first challenge those participating in the discussion, and those defining the key terms and issues, by critically asking them if the normative perspectives and working vocabulary are broad enough to effectively accommodate issues affecting women.

In addition to standpoint feminism, Griffiths also presents an explanation of radical feminist theory. "The radical feminist focus[es] on the lives and experiences of women...showing how women's activities are made invisible on the international scene."¹² She describes the writings of feminist Cynthia Enloe, who is famous for the question "where are the women?" One of Enloe's main arguments is that feminists should not only seek to include themselves in the higher realms of policymaking and leadership, but should search for where women have already fulfilled roles to "ensure the international system works smoothly and efficiently", such as "the work done by diplomatic wives and military prostitutes."¹³

Following this method of inquiry leads to consideration of more marginalized issues -- or "low politics" -- in IR, e.g., issues concerning sex

trafficking and migration of labor. Enloe would argue that though such issues may be considered less important than the forefront issues of military and war, they serve to uphold the critical processes of smooth diplomacy and local relations between foreign states, in such areas as military bases in times of war, or at state dinners for foreign diplomats. Radical feminism stresses that women have never really been excluded from the core of international relations, but have simply not been publicly or professionally acknowledged for their past and present contributions to central issues in IR.

This leads to the next question: what are the main topics in IR, and what do feminists have to say about these issues? Theories of realism and liberalism will be considered in presenting feminist critiques of how IR issues are traditionally framed and addressed.

Realism centers its theoretical structure on how the state seeks power and defends its national interests against other competing states within a global anarchy, or where there is the lack of authority higher than the state. States seek security through a balance of power in the international arena, primarily through military means, and resorting to war, if necessary. Realists generally view the state as the key actor in international politics, and de-emphasize -- or, as feminist theory argues, ignore -- the role of the individual.

Much feminist IR theory stems from a critique of realism, whose "socially constructed worldview continues to guide much thought about world politics."¹⁴ First, feminists argue that realists overvalue the role of the state in defining international relations, without questioning how the state itself is internally structured, politically and socially. Feminist theory would consider how the state includes, or excludes, the views of its individual citizens, and how, in turn, the state's domestic views translate into foreign policies.

In challenging the concepts of a state defending its national interests, feminists would ask: who is defining the national interests? If women were included in such discussions, would the national interest be interpreted differently, and if so, how? How would such an outlook change foreign policy?

¹¹ Eric M. Blanchard. "Gender, International Relations, and the Development of Feminist Security Theory." *Signs* v28, i4 (Summer 2003): 1289. [Expanded Academic ASAP](#), Infotrac (15 November 2003).

¹² Lorraine Code. [Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories](#). (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 273, [Netlibrary/eBook Collection](#) (29 November 2003).

¹³ Lorraine Code. [Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories](#). (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 272, [Netlibrary/eBook Collection](#) (29 November 2003).

¹⁴ Charles W. Kegley and Eugene R. Wittkopf. [World Politics: Trend & Transformation](#). (USA: Wadsworth, 2004), 36.

How would the definition of 'security' change? Would military and defense capabilities still be atop the agenda? Would women necessarily be less militaristic in their approach to IR issues?

An example of how gender studies might reflect a state's sociopolitical construction is reflected in a recent empirical study completed by Mark Tessler and Ina Warriner. To discover links between gender, feminism, and international relations within and among societies, Tessler and Warriner based their analysis on survey data from four areas in the Middle East, each quite different from one another socially, politically, and ideologically: Israel, Egypt, Palestine, and Kuwait. Seeing as how the Middle East offers an ideal example of states acting as realist actors, their findings are quite relevant to feminist IR theory. Three points deserve emphasis:

- "women are not more pacific than men in their attitudes toward international conflict"
- "regardless of the sex...[of the survey participant], persons who express greater concern for the status and role of women, and particularly for equality between women and men, are more likely than other[s]...to believe that the international disputes in which their country is involved should be resolved through diplomacy and compromise"
- "the promotion of progressive values...is likely to increase support in the Middle East for peace through diplomacy and compromise."¹⁵

Though the authors note these relationships can be better understood by including other countries in such studies,¹⁶ their analysis shows that first, women are not necessarily pacifists by nature, and second, having key actors in the state system who believe in

¹⁵ Mark Tessler and Ina Warriner, "Gender, Feminism, and Attitudes Toward International Conflict: Exploring Relationships with Survey Data from the Middle East." World Politics 49.2 (1997): 250-281. Project Muse (15 November 2003).

¹⁶ Mark Tessler and Ina Warriner, "Gender, Feminism, and Attitudes Toward International Conflict: Exploring Relationships with Survey Data from the Middle East." World Politics 49.2 (1997): 250-281. Project Muse (15 November 2003).

gender equality can be linked to increased use of diplomacy and compromise in their state's foreign policy.

Another feminist critique of realism concerns how realists define and emphasize power in IR discussions. Feminists would ask: who defines power, who has it, and how is it used? If power is defined by a patriarchal and realist society, which seeks global balances of power, then power is equated with military and economic strength. But how would this change if the discussion included women's viewpoints? Would the indicators of power be measured differently? Would power be seen as leadership in peace agreements, or might it be measured in terms of the ability to achieve transnational cooperation?

In relation to realism, feminist theory is clear: realism is the antithesis to achieving gender equality, both in discussion and practice, and even in its tools of war and security, patriarchy remains the central theme. States are the actors and the individual is of little importance. When the individual is de-emphasized, there is even less acknowledgement of a *female* individual, which effectively excludes feminist discussion.

In contrast to realism, liberalist theory emphasizes the role of the individual over that of the state. Instead of seeing anarchy and "a struggle for power" as a defining feature of world politics, these thinkers emphasize an international "struggle for consensus" as central to explaining international relations.¹⁷ Liberalist tools include free trade, education, and international institutions to protect and promote the economic and civil interests of the individual.

Feminist critiques of liberalism address the economic inequalities inherent to free trade, which disproportionately affect women. Jacqui True argues that "male-centered macroeconomic indicators, such as the Gross National Product" undervalue the work of women.¹⁸ True also reports that "on a world scale,

¹⁷ Charles W. Kegley and Eugene R. Wittkopf. World Politics: Trend & Transformation. (USA: Wadsworth, 2004), 33.

¹⁸ Jacqui True. "Feminism," in Theories of International Relations, edited by Scott Burchill and Andrew Linklater, with Richard Devetak, Matthew Paterson, and Jacqui True. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. (borrowed from UNLV Library, 16 Nov 2003)

women are a disadvantaged group: they own one per cent of the world's property and resources, perform sixty per cent of the labour, [and] are the majority of refugees, illiterate and poor persons." (*Ibid*)

This suggests that the capitalist structure is a patriarchal one, effectively marginalizing the participation and contributions of women in the economy, since much of their work is reflected in unpaid illegal or domestic settings that are not included in economic assessments. Indeed, liberalist institutions such as the WTO and multinational corporations have tended to create free trade agreements that weaken state protections on labor rights¹⁹ and public social funds, which has served to negatively affect the large proportion of women in the labor force. This in turn camouflages issues of female exploitation, such as the gendered division of labor and the increase in sex trafficking worldwide.

Feminists also challenge liberalism's claim that international institutions provide for ways in which women can become more politically and socially acknowledged and empowered. Since the leaders and the processes of formal international organizations come from patriarchal systems, their work can keep women at a disadvantage. Hilary Charlesworth critiques some of the recent formal international conferences, such as the Beijing Declaration and Agenda 21 in Rio. She notes that the wording in the documents shows that while some consensus was achieved in progressing issues critical to women, not enough was achieved to arrive at the real changes proposed by feminists. Charlesworth outlines some of the disappointing results, such as the lack of agreement on the definition of gender, and inability to secure benchmarks for measuring progress.²⁰ Such critiques underscore the challenges of feminist theory, because they indicate that highly publicized and widely supported liberalist women's movements do not necessarily equate with the goal of achieving real gender equality.

¹⁹ Lorraine Code. Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 154, Netlibrary/eBook Collection (29 November 2003).

²⁰ Hilary Charlesworth. "Women as Sherpas: Are Global Summits Useful for Women?" Feminist Studies v22, n3 (31 October 1998): 537. Proquest, Gender Watch (30 October 2003).

In light of these feminist criticisms of realism and liberalism (and the constraints working against their inclusion in IR discussions), we are led to ask: how feminist theory strong enough on its own to be considered separate from realism and liberalism?

This paper has argued that feminist theory should not be taken as a separate theory within IR, if one considers its relationships and discussion with the main IR theories of realism and liberalism. In its clear opposition against the overall realist theory, feminist theory aligns itself with liberalist ideals, especially through its view of the role of the individual and its emphasis on a cooperative world. Despite its criticisms of liberal patriarchal systems, feminist theory still relies heavily on liberalist international organizations and liberal pursuit of civil liberties in order to achieve gender equality. As feminism continues to widen perspectives in IR, its basic argument for international cooperation makes it a sub-category of liberalism,²¹ and helps to strengthen and enhance the liberalist theory.

Certainly, there are strong arguments for the contention that liberalist progress has created disproportionate strife and marginalization for women, and that liberalist institutions themselves are gendered in favor of men. So with this in mind, feminist theory distinguishes itself from liberalist theory. However, in the broader context of liberalist theory, with its emphasis on the individual as the main actor – whether male or female — feminist theory and its critiques have a clear epistemological place within IR when liberalist theory is prevalent; whereas in discussions dominated by realism there is no place for the individual. Additionally, there is room for gender reconstruction of liberalist institutions, especially with the expansion of civil society and when women lead grassroots efforts. Civil society generally provides strong arenas for feminist and liberalist discussion on the importance of the individual, regardless of gender.

Of course, theory is not equivalent to implementation, and if in the future, liberalist global organizations do not reflect a more democratic structure inclusive of women's issues, this may signify what some more radical feminists are already

²¹ Charles W. Kegley and Eugene R. Wittkopf. World Politics: Trend & Transformation. (USA: Wadsworth, 2004), 46.

predicting: that gendered institutions cannot be changed, but must be remade, regardless of shared ideals of cooperation. Still, liberalist processes of interdependence and globalization are fairly recent inclusions in IR discussions and continue to be

challenged in constructive ways by criticism -- liberalist, feminist, or otherwise. There is hope for a growing recognition of the importance of the individual in a cooperative global system.

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