

# The Importance of Women in International Relations Theory and World Politics

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## **Introduction**

This paper sets out to determine the role of women in international relations theory and global politics. The reason these two themes have been chosen in this paper is because the former informs and describes the latter, and women's perspectives need to be clearly expressed in both aspects. Male scholars and politicians have overlooked various issues in their agenda's leaving a gap of unattended global concerns that require immediate attention; women have been seen to address these overlooked concerns, thus becoming an important element in international relations theory and global politics.

Throughout history, the claim has been made that women and men are fundamentally different from one another. Very often this notion of difference has been used to support the claim that women are inferior to men. Claims about women's inferiority alert us to the deeper issues of power that are necessarily encountered when one begins to interrogate the meaning of gender. The Greek philosopher Aristotle held that the masculine was an active, creative force, while the feminine was passive (Steans, 2013). Since the establishment of equality on civil rights made by the women's suffrage movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, women have increased their presence in the international political arena (Sneider, 2010).

Gender issues have been on the research agenda of history, law, and philosophy since the 1970s; however, it has only come to the fore of International Relations two decades ago when feminist theorists entered the field. Gender has largely been confused merely as a synonym for sex. However, within sociology, gender takes on a meaning that is more than just biological differences between male and female sexes. In this alternative view, gender is viewed as a field itself. Gender issues and its resolution play a huge role in the development of this field and the understanding of social structure and cultural interpretation (Scott, 1986). Thus from this

information, gender can be defined as the patterning of difference and domination through distinctions between women and men. It is employed to underline the social and relational nature of these differences beyond the biological context. To put it in another term, we may consider gender as nurture while sex as nature. Whereas sex represented the essential and unchanging physical differences in human reproduction, gender represented the social construction of identities and roles that divide society into men and women (Acker, 1992).

There are various arguments supporting the notion of international relations being a gendered discipline. It is true that women have been emerging as actors in the political landscape over the years and many have become generals, ambassadors, middle-level officials in foreign ministries and even Prime ministers (Grant, 1991). It is important for more female scholars to increase their presence in the field of international relations, furthermore, to increase their participation in global politics by providing credible solutions to global problems that are overlooked by their male counterparts. Especially those issues pertaining to women and healthcare, these issues can be brought forth to female politicians who better than most understand the quandary faced by women all over the world.

## **Background Information**

The field of international relations, much like global politics, has been deeply embedded in the Western tradition of making man as the political actor. This shows that international relations theory may well actually be gender bias or even *androcentric*. Looking from another perspective it may seem to suggest that this term was intentionally made to be universal for both male and female. However, the emphasis on males as citizens and political actors, as seen in several classic works of political thought such as Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Niccolo Machiaveli's *The Prince*, has completely disregarded the role of women. International relations has adopted these examples without investigating the gender bias in them, thus duplicating the pattern of gender bias (Zailani, 2014).

To elaborate further, Hobbes implies to the reader that only society a society of male actors confers qualities of justice, law, order and so forth in human relations. This work has been adopted in international relations theory without acknowledging the fact that the only gender role under discussion in this work is the male one. Women were rendered invisible and have no role

in the formation of laws in the society that replaces the anarchic state of nature. The adoption of Hobbes' work into international relations has caused this gender bias to extend into international relations theory (Zailani, 2014).

This usage of a male archetype of the individual may have arisen from the works of Aristotle, who regarded women as physically weaker and therefore intellectually inferior to the male. Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated in his 1762 work, *Emile or, On Education* that "woman's reign is a reign of gentleness, tact and kindness... She should reign in the home as a minister reigns in the state, by contriving to be ordered to do what she wants". This situation of power for women seems ambiguous, but what is not is Rousseau's further claim that although women possess power in this setting, they lack its understanding of which can only be attained by men. Hobbes and Rousseau's image of humankind, which are one of the many foundations of international relations theory prove that women are somewhat excluded in the political society and thus are uninvolved in international relations theory, being confined to a role that prohibits contribution to the development of a society represented by man (Zailani, 2014).

Another argument supporting International Relations as a gendered discipline is the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity (Jones, 1996). The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first introduced by sociologist R.W. Connell concerning the dominance of men over women and how it came to be. The gender bias in the foundations of international relations theory may have contributed to hegemonic masculinity in international relations. The creation of a masculine concept that has been culturally associated with men is also associated with power (Hooper, 2001). Robert Jervis in his book *Realism, game theory and cooperation* (1988) argued that only another state, in other words, man, can subjugate another state to counter anarchy and this has originated since Thucydides' Grecian era (Grant, 1991). This concept of domination or control of man over man fits perfectly with Hans Morgenthau's definition of power (Morgenthau, 1967).

In modern times, the associations between military service, masculinity and citizenship have been closely tied. Being a soldier has historically been an important practice constitutive of masculinity (Connell, 1987; Bourke, 1999). Military combat of war in the pursuit of power (or control over anarchy or dominance over another state) has deep roots in international relations. War has been deemed central to the discipline itself. The association of military combat with masculinity may have arisen from the ideology of gender differences that 'men take life while

women give it' (Segal, 1987). This ideology has been fundamental to modern warfare and reinforces the masculinity of soldiering and the historic exclusion of women from combat (Elshtain, 1987). This explains why in many cultures politics and thus international relations have been deemed as a masculine sphere of life (Enloe, 1990). Thus this masculine perspective in international relations contributes to the proposed argument of it being a gendered discipline.

Besides that, the actual involvement of women in international relations can also be taken to prove International Relations as a gendered discipline. The involvement of women in state and state relations, which can be viewed as poor (Enloe, 1990) may be purely due to the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity and gender bias in the field. Taking history into account, women were first allowed to vote in 1918 and this actually sparked a debate on how far they should be integrated into the arena of foreign affairs via the Diplomatic Service and the League of Nations (now the United Nations). This was swiftly answered in 1919 when Article 7 of the covenant of League of Nations was ratified to stipulate positions in the League to be opened to both male and female. The question remained however on the role of women in international affairs.

Such questions can only arise because of pre-existing assumptions regarding gender roles. While some sides may argue that it was actually women's lack of experience in the international scene which was the concern in question, it has to be kept in mind that this lack of experience was actually because of the fact that women were not given the chance to build such an experience in the first place (Miller, 1991).

Moreover, when women do get the chance to participate in politics, it became necessary for them to adopt so-called masculine attributes to gain acceptance in the political world and be seen as powerful (Hooper, 2001). It seems as if a no-win situation applies to women who are politically successful. This is because as argued by Peterson and Runyan (1993), they are either accused of propping up the status quo by supporting masculine agendas or, if they appear to act "like women" or represent "soft issues", they are accused of reinforcing the female gender stereotype rather than challenge the politics of gender. As there is a need to behave in "a masculine way" to succeed in politics, it is difficult to not view international relations as a gendered discipline.

Considering the arguments and evidence supporting the fact that international relations was conceptualized by men and has deep roots with the philosophies of war and masculinity which

requires adoption of masculine behaviors to succeed in the field, a conclusion can be made that international relations is, from a feminist perspective, in fact a gendered discipline; the same could be said about global politics. The family romance in international relations between man, the state and war may never be destroyed. However, the theory of feminism allows us to look beyond these variables and focus on the gender variable to further the core agenda in international relations regarding the question of war, peace and global politics (Zailani, 2014).

## **The Role of Women in International Relations Theory**

International relations and global politics have been male gendered for many years. Male masculinity has been believed to be an effective tool in dealing with global issues. But just as international relations remains to be dynamic in nature, so should the methods and techniques employed to deal with its dynamism. This is where the role of women comes in; women scholars and politicians all over the world have a different outlook and experience from men and are more than capable of establishing new solutions to tackling the world's problems that are ever changing.

According to Tickner (1992) many male scholars have already noted that, given our current technologies of destruction and the high degree of economic inequality and environmental degradation that now exists, we are desperately in need of changes in the way world politics is conducted; many of them are attempting to prescribe such changes. For the most part, however, these critics have ignored the extent to which the values and assumptions that drive our contemporary international system are intrinsically related to concepts of masculinity; privileging these values constrains the options available to states and their policymakers.

Conventional international relations theory has concentrated on the activities of the great powers at the center of the system. Feminist theories, which speak out of the various experiences of women who are usually on the margins of society and interstate politics can offer us some new insights on the behavior of states and the needs of individuals, particularly those on the peripheries of the international system. Feminist perspectives, constructed out of the experiences of women, can add a new dimension to our understanding of the world economy; since women are frequently the first casualties in times of economic hardship, we might also gain some new insight into the relationship between militarism and structural violence (Tickner, 1992).

However, feminist theories must go beyond injecting women's experiences into different disciplines and attempt to challenge the core concepts of the disciplines themselves. Concepts central to international relations theory and practice, such as power, sovereignty, and security, have been framed in terms that we associate with masculinity. Drawing on feminist theories to examine and critique the meaning of these and other concepts fundamental to international politics could help us to reformulate these concepts in ways that might allow us to see new possibilities for solving our current insecurities (Tickner, 1992).

Tickner (1992) also believes that the militarization of the South, with weapons sold or given by the North, has resulted in a situation whereby the state is often perceived, not as a protector against outside dangers, but as the ultimate threat to the security of its civilian population; nuclear weapons and other modern military technologies continue to pose the threat of mass destruction. She further adds that, these new threats to security demand new solutions quite at odds with the power politics prescriptions of traditional international relations theory.

As the population increases in the South the West can no longer afford to privilege a tradition of scholarship that focuses on the concerns and ambitions of the great powers. Faced with a stubborn gap in living standards between the rich and the poor that some observers doubt can ever be overcome, realist prescriptions of self-help are inappropriate; the health of the global economy depends on the health of all its members. Environmental degradation, a relatively new item on the agenda of international relations, threatens rich and poor alike and appears intransigent to state-centered solutions. Along with the traditional issues of war and peace, the discipline of international relations is increasingly challenged by the necessity of analyzing the realities of economic and ecological interdependence and finding ways of mitigating their negative consequences. The world must also face the reality of how easily these wider security issues, which threaten the survival of the earth and all its inhabitants, disappear from the agenda when military crises escalate (Tickner, 1992). There are a number of current overlooked issues that require immediate attention as seen above, the inability of male scholars to address these issues possess great threat to the survival of the international system. Important issues such as the environment and gender equality are greatly overlooked by international relations scholars; female scholars are needed now more than ever to bring such issues to light.

## **The Role of Women in Global Politics**

The modern global conversation around women's rights and political participation has been taking place for almost 40 years. Beginning in 1975 with the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), it has continued with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and led most recently to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. Through the conferences, declarations and action plans, a consensus has emerged that: women should be able to play an equal role in politics; temporary special measures, such as quotas, are an effective means to increasing women's political roles; and quota legislation is insufficient on its own to achieve the full and equal participation of women in politics (Markham, 2013). But women have gained little ground in political leadership around the world, with men still in about 80 percent of key elected and appointed positions, according to the World Economic Forum's annual Global Gender Gap Report (Rupp, 2012).

While women lawmakers are not a homogenous group with the same perspectives and interests, they do tend to see "women's" issues as those that directly affect women either for biological or social reasons more broadly as social issues, possibly as a result of the role that women have traditionally played as mothers and caregivers in their communities (O'Connor n.d.). In addition, women see government as a tool to help serve underrepresented or minority groups (Camissa & Reingold, 2004).

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union survey, female parliamentarians tend to prioritize social issues such as childcare, equal pay, parental leave and pensions; physical concerns such as reproductive rights, physical safety and gender-based violence; and development matters such as poverty alleviation and service delivery. In places such as Rwanda and South Africa, an increase in the number of female lawmakers led to legislation related to land inheritance and reproductive rights. Only five years after the women's suffrage movement achieved the rights of women to vote and run for office in Kuwait, newly elected female legislators introduced new labor laws that would give working mothers mandatory nursing breaks and provide onsite childcare for companies with more than 200 employees (Markham, 2013).

A study from Stockholm University showed an increase in the budget for education expenditures as the number of women in the Swedish Parliament increased. As more women reach leadership

positions within their political parties, these parties tend to prioritize issues that impact health, education and other quality of life issues. Strong evidence suggests that as more women are elected to office, policy-making that reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities also increases (Markham, 2013).

Given this attention to a broader range of policy issues, it is not surprising that when women are empowered as political leaders, countries often experience higher standards of living with positive developments in education, infrastructure and health, and concrete steps to help make democracy deliver. Using data from 19 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), researchers found that an increase in the number of women legislators results in an increase in total educational spending (Chen, 2008).

In addition to bringing a gender perspective to policy-making, women's leadership and conflict resolution styles often embody democratic ideals in that women have tended to work in a less hierarchical, more participatory and more collaborative way than male colleagues (Rosenthal, 2001). Women are also more likely to work across party lines, even in highly partisan environments. Since assuming 56 percent of the seats in the Rwandan parliament in 2008, women have been responsible for forming the first cross-party caucus to work on controversial issues such as land rights and food security. They have also formed the only tripartite partnership among civil society and executive and legislative bodies to coordinate responsive legislation and ensure that basic services are delivered (Powley, 2003).

Around the world, women lawmakers are often perceived as more honest and more responsive than their male counterparts, qualities that encourage confidence in democratic and representative institutions. In a study of 31 democratic countries, the presence of more women in legislatures is positively correlated with enhanced perceptions of government legitimacy among both men and women (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005).

Research also shows that women tend to be deeply committed to peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction and have a unique and powerful perspective to bring to the negotiating table. Women often suffer disproportionately during armed conflict and often advocate most strongly for stabilization, reconstruction and the prevention of further conflict (WomenWarPeace). Peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction and governance have a better

chance of long-term success when women are involved (Chinkin, 2003). Furthermore, establishing sustainable peace requires transforming power relationships, including achieving more equitable gender relations (Strickland & Duvvury, 2003).

From a gender point of view, men are the chief perpetrators and negotiators of war and peace in contemporary conflicts, but women are among those who suffer most and are ill-represented at peace mediation and settlement. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, or as it is simply known, UN Women, helps show that integrating feminism in conflict resolution offers new approaches towards reconciliation, fair social policies and inclusive peace strategies (Ivanov, 2012).

In terms of security, there are three key avenues along which the role of women is essential: security sector reform, peace building and re-integration and transitional justice. Looking at these from the perspective of gender critique offers some interesting solutions, such as ensuring the security of girls and women, and introducing gender-based checks on police and military power. In respect to conflicts, women are among the most vulnerable groups. Kidnappings, sexual crimes, and violent attacks are the most common and underreported offences against women in a conflict setting, and a look at the statistics can substantiate that picture; for instance, less than 3% of signatories on peace treaties are women. The question then transforms into what role women have in managing and settling conflicts (Ivanov, 2012).

Ivanov (2012) further describes how the role of women should be emphasized in security sector reform, peace-building and re-integrations and transitional justice. His aim is to show that the role of women in these sectors is critical in addressing the negative issues faced by women on a global scale. Security-sector reform (SSR) involves demilitarization, the strengthening of rule of law and establishing civilian control over security capacities. SSR is often a long process, and a sustained effort to incorporate gender perspectives coherently throughout all aspects of security reforms is needed. This means working with police, military and justice institutions to gain recognition of crimes against women, gain ground on equal opportunity and essentially empower women to contribute to good ideas and practices related to security. Feminism offers a gender-based viewpoint on SSR that codifies tolerance, openness in crime investigations, and, by extension, a civil debate on the use of force in the first place.

Peacebuilding and re-integration refers to two key aspects: the demobilization and re-integration of female combatants. The fundamental point here is that women in conflict act not only as soldiers, but they also have a wide variety of support roles some willingly participate, but most are forced when livelihoods are destroyed by war and conflict. The main approaches focus on bringing openness and tribune to the roles and issues women face in conflict in order to overcome stigma, include them in the wider peace-building negotiations in critical areas, such as the Middle East or the Sudans, and create effective opportunities for a fair chance at a life free of fear and insecurity. In essence, women's voices add another wrinkle and viewpoint to any peace-building initiative and helps make any resolution less male-focused.

Transitional justice is a fairly new policy area and it focuses on bridging enemies of a conflict in order to make a society move forward. Measures include truth reconciliation commissions, criminal trials, SSR, and the wider involvement of the international community in finding a new balance of peace in a post-conflict society. Feminism's virtue in this respect is that it can encourage unconditional conversation between all stakeholders, and especially women, who are involved in every way in a conflict, from logistics to fighting and taking care of the wounded; their roles are not recognized in male-dominated discussions. For UN Women, the priorities focus on ensuring women access to these processes so they are not left outside of the new status quo and received the aforementioned chances at a secure, dignified life.

## **Conclusion**

The dynamic change in international relations and global politics has brought about the need for new approaches in dealing with global security and other issues such as gender-inequality, global poverty and environmental degradation. The traditional realism approach that has been used in global politics for a long period of time does not possess the malleability to deal with the problems present in the global system. Realism operates on a self-help notion that does not give way to cooperation between states; prescribing to this school of thought may leave the world vulnerable to the ever changing global threats such as terrorism that require states in the international system to work together in a common goal against such threats.

The role of women in international relations theory and global politics is important because they give attention to those issues overlooked in our patriarchal system. Female scholars such as Ann

Tickner give attention to the current technologies of destruction and the high degree of economic inequality and environmental degradation that now exists while conventional international relations theory has concentrated on the activities of the great powers at the center of the system.

Female scholars speak for marginalized individuals in the global system, they also give attention to a wide range of policy issues as opposed to the male attention on security. Their thought provoking contributions stimulate the problem solving apparatus that enhances new ideas and solutions to global issues. Female scholars shake the male oriented foundation of thought that has operated in a masculine manner for many years to produce new outcomes on how the world works from the perspective of women. This injection of new ideas moves the world a step closer in attaining its goals in areas such as global security, health, education, poverty, minority representation, gender-inequality, gender violence and other issues.

International relations theory and global politics go hand in hand in that; the former helps explain and describe the latter. Because of this, a female perspective in both subject matters is very critical because they play an important role in both; they operate as the heralds of issues that have been long ignored by the patriarchal international system. With all this in mind, it is clear that women are essential to the international society. Feminist perspectives can bring better ways of thinking, acting and policy-making. UN Women effectively centralizes these efforts, but more still needs to be done. As such, spreading the word is the first step to a better world.

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