

Fixing Gender in International Politics

Written by Marysia Zalewski

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MARYSIA ZALEWSKI, AUG 18 2010

Exuberance and excitement: there a palpable sense of both of these in recent developments in gender and international politics. Though I use the word gender, this still tends to end up meaning women; I wonder why this is, especially as scholarly texts distinctly and convincingly explain that gender is not just about women. And though this is surely true, the idea doesn't seem to stick, or at least stick where we want it to.

But to explain the exuberance and excitement: spontaneous applause greeted the UN General Assembly's unanimous vote on 2 July 2010 to create a 'single, powerful body to promote equality for women round the world' with the announcement of a 500 million dollar drive to end global inequality 'at last'.^[1] Money may not be able to buy you love but it might buy us the end of gender – or the parts of gender we don't like. The reasons generally given for the sluggishness of gender change consequent to CEDAW, DEVAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and UNSCRs 1325, 1820, 1888 and 1889 (all variably in the service of ending violence against women and/or promoting gender equality) are manifold, ranging from patriarchal governments, lack of serious resources, inadequate implementation and poor institutional apparatus. Yet with a profound rap of the Assembly president's gavel, we have, once again, a clear sense that 'the world's hitherto unreachable corners of prejudice' may, at last, be exposed and defeated.

Perhaps the capitalist fashioned idea that money can buy you anything, does hold out the best hope for extricating gender (at least, if we recall, the parts of gender we don't like) from the messy material world. 500 million US dollars might be enough to finally fix gender in international politics, fully justifying the accompanying exuberance and excitement. And legislative commitments surely have brought about changes. Women have been granted political rights in various parts of the world in varying degrees. The damage that masculinity does to men is sometimes recognized. And there is an almost universal acceptance that rape is wrong.

Thus it seems we are indeed very serious about gender, at least the UN and (western) governments are. Gender specialists are employed to teach how gender works and gender experts are available to parachute into situations of 'gender emergency'. There is a growing corpus of gender entrepreneurs who promote and sell the need for gender (an easy job currently?). But do we teach children about gender? Or, more appropriately articulated – how do we expect children to learn (differently) about gender? At the most widespread level of education – early schooling – when do gender classes start – age 3, 5, 10? Perhaps the very idea seems too ideological; too prescriptive.

Here's another recent moment of gender exhilaration: Naomi Wolf, something of a celebrity feminist and author of many popular books including the international bestseller *The Beauty Myth*^[2] recently returned to The University of Oxford in England to complete the doctorate she began 25 years ago (having left appalled at the rampant sexism and anti-semitism at the University). In 2010 Wolf finds a miraculous transformation; instead of casual sexism bordering on misogyny, she now finds a 'feminist's dream' come true. She gives examples: the magazine *The Oxford Student* includes a feature on harassment policy, and posters advertising a rape crisis hot line appear in every women's toilet. There's even a 'safety bus' for students to get home safe at night (she does, I think, mean female students, even though young men are generally more likely than women to be embroiled in violent public incidents). A police 'rape' poster is reprinted in the article about Wolf:^[3] about 60% of the poster shows the anxious face of a young white woman the lighting invoking an atmosphere of fear and tension. In the bottom left hand corner of the poster the caption is this: 'Rape – let your hair down not your guard – Alcohol features in two thirds of all rapes'. The magazine's narrative suggests that 'the poster warns women in Oxford to beware'; I initially mis-read this as 'the poster warns

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women to behave': I think I am not wrong in my (mis)reading.



[4]

I am not sure I share Wolf's rapture at the gender changes she describes. But this seems too negative a conclusion; there is surely time for real gender change to happen. Indeed the logic of time is consistently suggestive of this. And maybe this is, at last, *the* time given we know so much about gender now.

But therein lies a problem, as the fecund promise of gender knowledge keeps dissipating. It's not that backlash to feminism, or the incorporation and defacement of feminism's insights explains why gender change is so seemingly out of our grasp. Rather I think that our theoretical imaginations have failed us despite, or perhaps because our theories about gender are so corpulent. We have become fixated on gender, on fixing gender, on mainstreaming gender, on greedily mainlining gender. And the 'we' here includes the UN, governments, policy makers and national and international organizations of many hues. Though my colleagues in US Universities who work on 'gender issues' in the context of international politics tell me they cannot really teach 'feminist IR' – only perhaps in very small optional classes. And as the US is a prime exporter of 'knowledge' around the globe, I think this, and the paradox it screams, matters.

Yet the gender pronouncements, whether from the UN, Naomi Wolf or the Oxford Police service, all carry a weight of certainty about gender and more importantly, how to change how gender works. There is a clear sense that we think we can contain and control gender and make gender do what we want it to if only we tried hard enough – or indisputably demonstrated women's undoubted worth and capabilities (though this has surely been demonstrated time and time and time again). But gender, like violence, is a slippery concept. As soon as we think we have it in our grasp, so to speak, it transpires that we don't. Perhaps disentangling the discursive enmeshment of gender from the material world is a little like trying to extract the ingredients of a cake which has been mixed, baked and served.

That gender is discursively enmeshed in and entangled within the theories and practices of international politics is a position probably held by the majority of Anglo-American feminist IR scholars including myself. Though this is a widely held theoretical stance, serious questions remain about the extent of this discursive entanglement and what kinds of political action can accompany this position. But there is something very wrong with the implied link here; the link or line between what we theoretically or intellectually 'know' and how we can move knowledge along that line into policy or practice or to what people simply 'do' in their everyday lives.

And so I wonder if we've got something wrong about gender. Not that gender doesn't matter: it does. Not that gender doesn't hurt: it does. Not that gender isn't violently woven into the tapestry of international politics: it is. But women have 'resisted patriarchy with unsurpassed cunning, craft and passion for at least 5,000 years' (Johnson 1989:15). And as Johnson muses, 'it seems to me that 5,000 years is long enough to try any method, particularly one that

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doesn't work'.

Our exuberant addiction to gender, or certain ways of thinking about gender has silently, secretly metamorphosed into a theoretical lethargy with stinging practical effects. Gender remains equated with women, in the main, because establishment legislative and political machineries can only accommodate this simple gender model. Not only because it's simple, but because it actually doesn't cost too much by way of gender change. Things don't change in the ways we want them to because the tools to eviscerate the violence of gender instead reinstall gender(ed) violence especially via the deadly hold of heteronormativity.

The UN's commitment to gender change is perhaps more welcome than Wolf's sense that the monitoring and controlling of women's behaviour is the antidote to gender violence. But if the UN has any hope of achieving its ambitions in regard to gender, it needs to abandon its lethal attachment to somnambulant and archaic understanding of heteronormative gender that institutions like the UN thrive on.

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Reference

Johnson. S (1989) *Wildfire: Igniting the she-volution* Albuquerque, NM: Wildfire

[1] As reported in the UK newspaper *The Independent on Sunday*, 4 July 2010, p.4. Also see <http://www.unwomen.org/>

[2] Naomi Wolf (1990) *The Beauty Myth* Doubleday

[3] *The Sunday Times Magazine* (UK), 11 July 2010.

[4] http://www.nightsafe-oxford.org.uk/staying_safe_campaigns.html Accessed 23 July 2010