

Studying Gender in International Relations without Feminism?

Written by Nadezhda Trichkova

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Studying Gender in International Relations without Feminism?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/17/studying-gender-in-international-relations-without-feminism/>

NADEZHDA TRICHKOVA, FEB 17 2016

Can We Study Gender in the Discipline of International Relations Without Feminism? Should We?

Although most books in history were written about men, Kimmel contends, they were not about men-as-men, about men as gendered actors (1992, p.162). In addressing this puzzle, Carpenter (2002) and Jones (1996) have both pointed the finger at feminism for its illegitimate appropriation of the category of gender and for imbuing it with the specificities of a female-grounded epistemological and normative voice. Studying gender in IR as a means to identify how gender dynamics interact with international political structures is an analytical approach with the potential to enrich all dimensions of IR inquiry and remap the imbalanced power terrain of the international order. On the other hand, analyzing gender through a feminist lens is an explicitly political project whose objective is to document, explain and/or challenge the domination of male over female bodies and the supremacy of masculinities over femininities as psychological/social constructs (Jones, 1996, p.406). This distinction has often been framed in zero-sum, polemistic terms: a de-emphasis on feminism has been viewed as a necessary precondition for realizing fuller insights on gender. Resultantly, gender has been burdened with “rescue[ing] the field from a faulty *women*” (Wiegman, 2002, p.106), and “supplementing IR with gender by correcting feminist IR” (Carver et.al., 1998, p.297) has been identified as a viable approach to achieve a more solid interpretation of gender dynamics. The alleged deficiency of feminism this essay will focus on, not only for reasons of space constraints but also because its capacity to accommodate gender’s complexity has been woefully underestimated, is feminism’s normative stance. Gender can be easily studied through non-feminist lenses if feminism’s normative content is abandoned altogether or replaced by a specifically non-female agenda (Carpenter, 2002, p.154). Such a move, however, will be rendered not only unnecessary, but also undesirable: the normative layer attached to feminism does not preclude it from producing valuable insights on gender in the entire specter of its complexities. Without a critical normative frame of reference, though, gender risks being reduced to one of the many variables that explain, and ultimately prop, IR’s orthodox core. Hence, gender should not be studied without feminism.

In order to demonstrate this, the essay will first discuss how feminism’s normative outlook is purported to constrain any meaningful attempt to retrieve gender, a potentially powerful analytical category if disassociated from the prescriptive agenda of feminism, from the peripheries of IR inquiry. A small detour will then be taken to illustrate the diversity within feminism and the inherently ‘masculinist’ face of IR, both of which have implications for the adequate assessment of the attacks against feminism and feminism’s relationship to gender. The essay will then engage in a discussion on feminism’s achievement, notably within its post-positivist strands, to attract theoretical curiosity to and illuminate the inherent conceptual value of gender. By contextualizing feminist uses of the category in actual research and demonstrating how they capture gender’s myriad faces, turning away from feminism will be rendered unnecessary. Finally, it will be demonstrated that committing to a feminist-inspired normative framework is crucial to realizing gender’s potential to critically challenge orthodox IR.

The emancipatory agenda of feminism, it has been argued, creates obstacles to a full and meaningful incorporation of gender as an explanatory framework in the study of IR. Because of feminism’s exclusivist claims to gender, masculinity has remained “woefully under-analysed” (Enloe, 2004, p.97) or has been construed as antagonistic to femininity. Feminists who have analyzed *masculinities*, the argument goes, have done so out of commitment to their

Studying Gender in International Relations without Feminism?

Written by Nadezhda Trichkova

own normative agenda. For instance, the realist archetype of masculinity and the bourgeois-rational model of man have been explored to illustrate solely the different modes of oppression against women (Jones, 1996, p.418; Hooper, 2001, p.97-99). Whether men are misogynistic warriors or paternalistic breadwinners is relevant to feminism only insofar as their relationship with women is concerned; problematizing the socialization of male bodies into certain societal roles and establishing the underlying logic of such processes, on the other hand, remains severely under-theorized. Jones dubs this “a new logocentrism,” (1996, p.420) whereby male experiences are shrunk to variables with no intrinsic value whatsoever and serve only to explain the marginalization of the female. By assuming that the subordination and victimization of women is a social and political fact rather than a conjecture worthy of further examination, feminists tend to perpetuate the very gender system imbued with binaries they purport to oppose (Carpenter, 2002, p.156). While females are unquestioningly assigned the roles of victims, males become naturally reduced to aggressors. The term ‘domestic violence,’ for instance, has come to signify merely violence perpetrated by men against women, and whenever rape as a war strategy is discussed, the images invoked are ones of female suffering and of sexually abused female bodies (Carpenter, 2002, p.157; Romaniuk and Wasylciw, 2010, p.26). As these fictitious male/female dichotomies are being continuously reproduced within the exclusionary normative dimensions of feminism, gender loses its explanatory prowess, and the big picture becomes increasingly distorted, with some of its elements being grotesquely magnified, while others – made invisible. Male victimization is thus often obscured: rarely do we associate domestic violence with aggression against men, or think of males as objects of wartime rape (Carpenter, 2002, p.157; Romaniuk and Wasylciw, 2010, p.26). The bias produced by feminism’s normative bent is so strong, Carpenter contends, that whenever “feminists run up against empirical and theoretical difficulties,” (2002, p.158) they would interpret facts selectively and obfuscate certain behaviors that sit uncomfortably with their prescriptive agenda. In line with this argument, Jones (1996, p.424) has criticized Enloe for her blind commitment to feminism’s normative agenda, which has prompted her to prioritize women-specific Gulf War experiences over more salient, at least quantitatively speaking, male-grounded ones. Notwithstanding the potential validity of such accusations against feminism, they should be evaluated against, firstly, the exact object of their criticism and, secondly, the position they come from.

Feminism has many different faces, and while some of them do frown upon interpretations of gender that aim beyond pinpointing and subsequently reversing women’s underprivileged status, such overgeneralizations do injustice to other strands of feminism. Although gender has become widely understood as the product of socially constructed attributes being stacked upon male and female bodies, liberal and standpoint feminists tend to overemphasize its corporeal dimension at the expense of the culturally imposed, identitarian one (Steans, 2006, p.10-13). Liberal feminism, with its positivist bend, aspires to raise awareness to the marginalization of women in international relations and the study of IR, as well as create an auspicious terrain for women to be treated on an equal footing with men (Steans, 2006, p.12). Standpoint feminism is more ambitious in that it seeks to place women at the very center of social and political life – a move justified by its essentialist assumption that women are biologically conditioned to be different than, even superior to, men (Steans, 2006, p.13; Jones, 1996, p.408). By circumscribing gender experiences within biological confines, both of these feminisms become prone to devaluing the category of gender. Critical feminism, on the contrary, explicitly separates gender from the physiological by treating femininity and masculinity as sets of characteristics that travel across and beyond bodies (Zalewski and Parpart, 2006, p.11). Hegemonic masculinity, construed in terms of crude power, is thus seen to also inhabit the non-male and the non-human. As the system of oppression that is based on hegemonic masculinity, ‘patriarchy’ comes to denote the marginalization of women and men alike, of structures and behaviors that are associated with feminine characteristics (Ibid.). Poststructuralists, understanding the world “to be discursively constructed,” (Steans, 2006, p.16) problematize notions of unified human experience, embrace difference, and constantly call into question gender and sex identities: they make “sex and gender mobile across bodies and identities, and feminism mobile across sexed bodies and gender identities” (Wiegman, 2002, p.127). Being the ultimate challenger of the existing order, poststructuralist feminism is in fact wary of the normative commitment to women’s emancipation and fears its potential overriding domination over knowledge-production (Steans, 2006, p.16). Hence, these post-positivist strands of feminism are careful not to reduce gender to piecemeal snapshots of male and female experiences or surrender to dangerously unconstrained normative prescriptions. A close reading of the attacks against feminism discussed above discloses their failure to grasp and address the diversity within feminism: not only is the core of the critique directed at feminist empirical work likely to have a bodily dimension, but the post-positivist strands are only paid lip service.

Studying Gender in International Relations without Feminism?

Written by Nadezhda Trichkova

This is so because the critique is informed by mainstream IR, which is inherently rationalist, hostile to attempts to subvert it, and condescending to stances that fall short of its positivist aspirations. Within IR's dichotomized interpretation of the world, the rational is superior to the irrational, and the former needs to be sheltered from the irrelevant or perilous invasions of the latter. Critical feminist vision is instrumental in shedding light on this binary: rationality is the principle of operation of the international system, because it is socially and culturally ascribed to the realm of the masculine (Hooper, 2001, p.101). Like the irrational, the private is also feminized and depoliticized, meaning that it is reduced to a second-order concern not to displace the ultimate questions of war and security. Gender as a site of identity formulation and expression is thus relegated to this depoliticized sphere (Hooper, 2001, p.115). This poses problems to mainstream IR's capacity to address meaningfully masculinity: IR is the main site of masculinity (re)production and, yet, it stubbornly excludes questions of identity from its scope of analysis, since matters of identity belong to the same inferior space that the irrational and the feminine do (Ibid.). In their critique of Jones (1996), Carver et.al. (1998) pinpoint the rationalist prejudice within IR by assessing the likelihood, or lack thereof, of Jones engaging with various feminist analyses. He is found to discuss favorably feminists who do not view feminism and mainstream IR as innately incommensurable and find ways for feminism to supplement, rather than oppose, rationalist approaches to the discipline. On the other hand, more radical feminist works are perceived negatively and rendered irrelevant because of their alleged incapability to contribute any value to IR; the fundamental distrust of post-positivism even appears to make them unworthy of criticism (Carver et.al., 1998, p.288-290). Therefore, a paradox emerges to the surface once the attacks against feminism are considered in light of their rationalist origin: the critique envisions a more gender-inclusive approach *within* a context that is inherently averse to such identity-based diversity instead of appreciating how such inclusiveness is achievable in a post-positivist feminist framework.

Despite its allegedly exclusivist normative stance, feminism has developed a theoretical framework that is sophisticated and sensitive to the complexity of gender. While a women-focused agenda has encouraged the mistreatment of men and masculinities within feminisms that conceptually merge the corporeal and identitarian manifestations of femininity and masculinity, the knowledge-building and analysis carried out within other feminist strands, most notably the post-positivist ones, "have led the way in championing, explaining and validating attention to gender as a category" (Youngs, 2004, p.82; see also Steans, 2006, p.4; Goldstein, 2001, p.36). Hooper (2001, p.1) specifically highlights that feminism has brought *gender*, as opposed to *women*, to the fore of IR inquiry, thanks to Enloe, who first managed to "bridge the private/public divide explicitly" (2001, p.93). Furthermore, the categories 'men' and 'masculinities' actually emerged within *women's* studies and as a result of the theoretical maturation of feminism: as feminists grew increasingly conscious of the racial and class differences among women, the monolithic, homogenous character attributed to women and gender was problematized (Wiegman, 2002, 108). Resultantly, an "intellectual curiosity about the myriad international political dynamics of masculinities" (Enloe, 2004, p.95) was also spurred, and feminists became averse to the non-genderedness of men and the existence of the male as a mere antithesis to the female. As Wiegman asserts, "to remove the generic fallacy, to unveil masculinity as a particularized ontology [...] has been the task that feminism since the mid-1980s has been pursuing as a necessary political intervention" (2002, p.109). Such a shift also reflects the possibility that feminism's originally totalizing emancipatory agenda becomes more responsive to and reflective of other perspectives (Zalewski and Parpart, 2008, p.6). All these developments translate into feminism's strong claim to reflecting gender in the multitude of its appearances, thus invalidating the merits of abandoning feminism's normative voice for a non-feminist (non-normative or differently normative) approach to gender. Moreover, such a move would simply reflect "the [illusory] idea that gender implies a critical expansion over the category of woman," (Carver et.al., 2003, p.292) but would not resolve "the dilemma of identity politics" (Ibid.) that is applicable to feminist and non-feminist approaches to gender alike. Feminism might have undergone a long process of difference internalization, but is its embrace of plurality achievable empirically?

The evolving theorization of gender within feminism allows for thorough and inclusive gender analyses to be conducted under a feminist label. Feminist analysis reaches beyond the imagined reservoir of unified women's experiences in order to expand its theoretical body. In light of this, it has been argued that a focus on men and masculinities is better suited to unmask the gendered character of the international system and to identify the superiority/inferiority dichotomies embedded within it (Carver, 2008, p.71). Since this point emanates from a feminist frame of inquiry, the idea that feminism creates constructions of gender impermeable by non-feminist perspectives and necessarily synonymous with 'the female' is put to scrutiny. Goldstein, having defined feminism as "[his] own

Studying Gender in International Relations without Feminism?

Written by Nadezhda Trichkova

ideological preference" (2001, p.2), pursues an objective that is neither alleviating women-specific wartime vulnerabilities, nor mass-producing female victims. Rather, he explores the gender-informed mechanisms of war perpetuation with the end of understanding and suppressing them (2001, p.373). Similarly, when analyzing PTSD among soldiers in armies, Whitworth distances herself from essentialist understandings of gender: she illustrates how militarized masculinities affect both women and men by respectively 'othering' and shaming them for not living up to society's expectations of trauma endurance and emotions-mastering (2008, p.121). Viewing masculinity through a critical feminist lens, therefore, unveils power distributions within society and raises questions about why these have been produced rather than providing fragmentary, and ultimately useless, accounts of who has been harmed more in the process. Hence, the normativity of feminism, as far as its anti-foundational subdivisions are concerned, does not impede the impartial and meaningful reflection on the genderedness of the international system; an abandonment/reformulation of the normative character of the feminist-inspired category of gender is thus unnecessary.

Feminism's normative stance is actually essential for achieving this, as it highlights and reinforces the role that gender plays vis-à-vis mainstream IR. As already pointed out, the positivist and masculinist biases run deep in the body of the discipline, making it impermeable by foreign to its 'ideology' perspectives. Thus, the assumption that once disassociated from the women-specific normative burden of feminism, gender can function as an all-embracing explanatory framework is woefully erroneous (Carpenter, 2002, p.154). To quote Carver, "it is [rather] going to figure into the explanatory frameworks that people already have, and into the ones that international relations (IR) theorists think that they should have" (2003, p.288). It is not feminism's normative agenda that limits gender, but the fact that gender is inseverable from identity concerns. The normative stance of feminism thus functions as a sobering reminder that IR is "utterly blind to gender politics" (Hooper, 2001, p.93). 'Gender' is, therefore, more useful on the margins, from where it can interrogate the mainstream, than it would be at its center, where it would be reduced to one of many independent variables to explain and validate the existing order, gender's own marginalization within it included. Moreover, when looked at with a new appreciation for its capacity to internalize difference within a post-positivist frame, feminism's normative take on patriarchy cedes to invoke it as a buzzword for women's oppression per se (Carver et.al., 1998, p.297). Instead, 'patriarchy' reflects the idea that power distortions and relations of domination, ubiquitous in the international system and discernible along racial and class lines, characterize gender divisions as well. Therefore, various gendered roles are grouped under the label of 'patriarchy': men-as-victims, women-as-victims, men-as-power-holders, etc. (Ibid.). Revoking feminism's normative vision with its emphasis on patriarchy would, then, obscure myriad power relations made visible by feminism. It has actually been argued that feminism's role of a challenger is so feared that the attempts to move to a non-feminist approach to gender analysis represent "the gratuitous desire to confine feminist scholarly work within specific [innocuous] contours" (Carver et.al., 2003, p.293). Forsaking feminism and its normative stance in particular would therefore be detrimental to, firstly, the critical potential of gender as an explanatory framework and, secondly, the insights with which feminism has already shed light on the international system's gender aspects.

While a non-feminist approach to gender could be undertaken if feminism's normative content is forsaken or replaced by a specifically non-female agenda, such a move would not expand conceptually gender as a prism through which the world is explained, but would *devalue* it. In illustrating how feminism informs and enriches gender rather than monopolize and constrain it, the essay focuses mainly on the post-positivist strands of feminism, but the rationalist liberal and essentialist standpoint branches are also referred to: they serve as points of reference against which, firstly, developments within feminism are assessed and, secondly, the masculinist bias of mainstream IR is measured. Feminism has thus been shown to pertain not to women per se, but to the wider specter of gender's manifestations. By embracing difference, post-positivist feminism has abandoned homogeneous understandings of gender and has enabled comprehensive analyses of gender, such as Goldstein's and Whitworth's, to be conducted under its auspices. Furthermore, feminist normativity's function has also been to reinforce gender's critical potential, most notably through the understanding of patriarchy as power of domination that is mobile across and beyond bodies. Without this explicit normative frame of reference, gender becomes more vulnerable to being assimilated as yet another variable by IR's mainstream. Therefore, silencing feminism's normative voice, given that it conforms to the principles of plurality, has been rendered both unnecessary and undesirable.

Bibliography

Studying Gender in International Relations without Feminism?

Written by Nadezhda Trichkova

- Carpenter, R. C. (2002) "Gender Theory in World Politics: Contributions of a Non-feminist Standpoint?" in *International Studies Review*, Vol. 4(3), pp. 153-165.
- Carver, T. (2008) "The Machine in the Man" in Zalewski, M. and Parpart, J. (Eds.) *Rethinking the Man question: Sex, Gender and Violence in International Relations*. London: Zed Books. pp. 70-87.
- Carver, T., Cochran, M. and Squires, J. (1998) "Gendering Jones: Feminisms, IRs, Masculinities" in *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24(2), pp. 283-297.
- Carver, T., Zalewski, M., Kinsella, H., Carpenter, C. (2003) "Gender and International Relations" in *International Studies Review*, Vol. 5(2), pp. 287-302.
- Enloe, C. (2004) "'Gender' Is Not Enough: The Need for a Feminist Consciousness" in *International Affairs*, Vol. 80(1), pp. 95-97.
- Goldstein, J. (2001) *War and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hooper, C. (2001) *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations and Gendered Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jones, A. (1996) "Does 'Gender' Make the World go Round? Feminist Critiques of International Relations" in *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 22(4), pp. 405-429.
- Kimmel, M. (1992) "Review: Reading Men: Men, Masculinity and Publishing" in *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 21(2), pp. 162-171.
- Romaniuk, S. N. and Wasylciw, J. K. (2010) "'Gender' Includes Men Too! Recognizing Masculinity in Security Studies and International Relations" in *Perspectives*, Vol. 18(1), pp. 23-39.
- Steans, J. (2006) *Gender and International Relations: Issues, Debates and Future Directions*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Whitworth, S. (2008) "Militarized Masculinity and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" in Zalewski, M. and Parpart, J. (Eds.) *Rethinking the Man question: Sex, Gender and Violence in International Relations*. London: Zed Books. pp. 109-127.
- Wiegman, R. (2002) "The Progress of Gender" in Wiegman, R. (ed.) *Women's Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*, Duke University Press.
- Youngs, G. (2004) "Feminist International Relations: A Contradiction in Terms? Or: Why Women and Gender Are Essential to Understanding the World 'We' Live in" in *International Affairs*, Vol. 80(1), pp. 75-87.
- Zalewski, M. and Parpart, J. (2008) "Introduction: Rethinking the Man Question" in Zalewski, M. and Parpart, J. (Eds.) *Rethinking the Man question: Sex, Gender and Violence in International Relations*. London: Zed Books. pp. 1-16.

Written by: Nadezhda Trichkova
Written at: University of Edinburgh
Written for: Dr. Xavier Guillaume
Date written: November 2015