

Review - Feminist Strategies in International Governance

Written by Eric M. Blanchard

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Feminist Strategies in International Governance

By: Gülay Caglar, Elisabeth Prügl, and Susanne Zwingel, eds.

New York: Routledge, 2013

To a remarkable extent, international organizations (IOs) and states around the world have committed themselves to gender equality (after decades of feminist activism). Gender experts and “femocrats” now people the halls of multilateral institutions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international bureaucracies, shaping agendas on development, security, and other vital areas of international policymaking. If the integration of gender norms in international governance still falls short in significant respects, gender issues and awareness are now firmly on the international agenda, more prominent in the international policymaking process than they are on the mainstream academic IR agenda. *Feminist Strategies in International Governance* considers these developments in light of the establishment of United Nations (UN) Women, a promising agency, operational in 2011, formed to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. The essays in this edited volume aim to inform the evolving agenda of UN Women, but they also call to mind Robert Cox’s often-cited distinction between “critical” and “problem solving” theory. While feminist IR theorizing tends to fall within the critical theory perspective, the extraordinary if incomplete successes of gender approaches at the global level, or “intergovernmental arena” as the book’s editors prefer, mean that neither the critical nor problem solving mode can be jettisoned.

The need for tactical action amidst “givens,” such as a world of states and IOs made up of member states committed at least in principle to gender equality, backgrounds the book’s concern with balancing the benefits of strategic cooperation with the risks of co-optation. How can advocates and theorists protect core feminist ideas while collaborating within established governance institutions to bring about gender equality and other feminist goals? Further, how can the authority and legitimacy of feminist advocates be bolstered to meet a number of the pressing challenges of feminist global governance? These challenges include: the dominance of elite technocratic decision-makers captured by neoliberal consensus, the existence of bureaucracies applying gender policy without the appropriate participation of civil society, the reduction of gender-aware policies to checklists and administrative routines, the struggle to establish global gender standards in the face of conservative political resistance, and the difficulties of managing divergent state commitments and seeing through the implementation of existing agreements. The digestible, if sometimes dense chapters in this excellent collection address such issues, managing to integrate case studies (spanning Argentina, Peru, Lebanon, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Germany, UK, and Sweden) with conceptual critique and theory development, provoking reconsideration and debate and drawing lessons for future practice, each within a space of sixteen pages or so.

Feminist strategies for human rights, security, and global economic governance

The book’s first section reviews, theorizes, and critiques feminist strategies in the realm of international governance where advocates and experts operate from inside and outside the international legal, UN, NGO, and IO context. Regarding these strategies, Hilary Charlesworth discusses the use of international human rights law to disseminate feminist norms, while Carolyn Hannan examines attempts to influence intergovernmental processes and build

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support in the UN and other global venues. Jacqui True and Laura Parisi elaborate on efforts to promote the practice of accounting for gender differences throughout all UN programs (including peace and security operations), using gender analysis in order to move policy towards more just and equitable outcomes for women and men (“gender mainstreaming”). Feminists, as Mariama Williams shows, also organize through transnational networks that connect academics, activists, and feminist organizations, in the process achieving legitimacy on highly technical international issues, building awareness, and holding actors accountable. Elisabeth Prügl argues that feminists’ strategic cultivation of gender expertise should be seen not only in terms of translating feminist approaches into policy, but as an exercise of power for multiple feminist ends.

The chapters in the second part of the book focus on the diffusion of human rights norms, in particular those encapsulated in the definitive international institution for women’s human rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), arguing that global norms are not simply transmitted, enacted, and adopted unproblematically to local environments. Rather, the authors demonstrate that understanding the dynamics of norm diffusion requires attention to processes of translation across cultures, transmission between levels of scales, and interpretation on terms acceptable to particular locales. Susanne Zwingel shows that the process of defining human rights norms, evident in the way states’ diverging value systems lead them to accept different components of the norm of gender equality, means that norms such as those embodied in conventions concerning women’s human rights (like CEDAW) are understood and adapted in an often inconsistent and restricted manner. In addition, Zwingel argues that the contestation and translation process cannot be separated from gender norm advocates’ strategic ability to “be considered an authoritative and legitimate interpreter of women’s rights” (p.120), seen in efforts on the part of the CEDAW implementation oversight committee to defend its socially constructed legitimacy against efforts to undermine CEDAW on the part of “pro-women” “anti-feminist” groups whose perspective overlaps with, but diverges from, the aim of achieving women’s rights. Peggy Levit and her co-authors demonstrate how global norms and ideals of gender equality are connected and made intelligible “on the ground” by NGOs serving poor, urban women in Lima, Peru, without direct reference to the UN system or international law. They find that norms are instead reworked through a process of “vernacularization,” whereby women’s rights organizations reshape global norms, such as the promotion of freedom from violence against women, to more effectively interrelate with historically changing Peruvian ideas of culture, religion, and social justice. Rita Sabat’s chapter argues that global CEDAW norms are “filtered” into the local Lebanese context; efforts to deal with violence against women run up against both a culture of violence incubated by more than a decade and half of civil war and the societal gender roles inherent in the patriarchal order, which construct women as vessels of family honor and preservers of family cohesion.

Part three investigates the impact and implementation of gender approaches within the UN’s “women, peace and security” paradigm, with particular attention to the groundbreaking Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325), which commits UN member states to taking women’s perspectives, interests, representation, and equal participation into account in discussions of peace processes, post-conflict reconstruction, and the elimination of gender-based violence. However, Claudia von Braunmühl finds that the UN system—UNSCR1325 and five subsequent UN resolutions—constrained by its adherence to the liberal and neoliberal paradigm, persists in seeing women as victims to be protected instead of agents to be empowered. Neoliberal commitments to ideals like individual rights, and policies like structural adjustment, come at the expense of the consideration of more transformative, feminist-inspired peace alternatives that might recognize, for example, how “Sexual violence against women as an instrument of war would not be possible without women being objectified, denigrated and suppressed in civil life” (p.174). Moving from a critique of UN discourse to a focus on implementation, Andrea Schneider and Jutta Joachim provide a comparative study of German, British, and Swedish national action plans (NAPs) for UNSCR 1325, a site where state commitments meet national level implementation politics. They argue that varying degrees of implementation of UNSCR 1325—Sweden and the UK seem to have more coherent, encompassing, and potentially transformative NAPs than Germany—might be best explained by levels of civil society consultation and participation at the domestic political level.

While the inclusion of women’s organizations and other civil society actors in the process of formulating national responses to Resolution 1325 seemed to lead to broader interpretations of gender mainstreaming in stable, advanced industrialized European states, like the UK and Sweden, in post-conflict contexts, women’s rights are

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institutionalized *despite* the unfavorable (if internationalized) post-war agendas of the intervening international community. Anne Jenichen's chapter shifts the focus to how international peace building efforts in post-war societies afford domestic women's rights activists opportunities to network and form coalitions with relevant members of the international community whose resources and expertise can help these advocates access the policy processes and influence domestic policy. Looking at the implementation of gender equality norms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jenichen finds that domestic norm entrepreneurs are able to leverage the presence of international peace operations to gain support for women's rights norms in the peace-building context and influence the post-war political agenda by playing the emerging state's desire for international legitimacy and stability against the international community's demands for good governance, human rights, democracy, and development.

A third of the volume's substantive chapters focus on gender in global economic governance, a site that perhaps best exemplifies the difficulties of pursuing both critical and problem-solving goals. The challenge for feminists here is being taken seriously within elite global economic circles, even while raising serious questions about their foundational neoliberal assumptions. For example, Williams explains how trade-focused networks such as the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN) try to influence the World Trade Organization (WTO) while resisting versions of gender mainstreaming policies that silence alternative models, leaving the underlying neoliberal ideology intact. In part four, the book's emphasis shifts to economic governance and how gender analysis reshapes discussions of trade, finance, and development. Shahra Razavi argues that neoliberal assumptions remain resilient even after the 2007-8 global financial crisis and the shift it prompted from "Washington Consensus" style restructuring towards "good" economic governance, poverty reduction, and social protection policy. While motherhood, family, and children are central concerns of the ascendant "social investment" perspective, this approach addresses the "social" in a limited way that neglects the structural reproduction of social inequalities, masking the limitations of development schemes aimed at children instead of women, future generations instead of current victims, and market-friendly employability instead of gender equality.

Kate Bedford's analysis of World Bank policies in Latin America continues this line of critique, demonstrating how certain Gender and Development (GAD) projects approached poverty reduction through an emphasis on family strengthening, a strategy that relies on hetero-normative assumptions about family cohesion and market fundamentalist views of women's empowerment that, in turn, enable actors with agendas antithetical to feminist advocacy like the Catholic Church. Gülay Caglar highlights the interpretive struggles over the very definition of policy goals within IOs like the World Bank and UN Development Program (UNDP) that have accepted certain gender-aware tools and analytic methods, but have yet to adjust the macroeconomic policymaking priorities that underpin their economic development strategies. For Caglar, this state of affairs underscores the importance of normative "gender knowledge" in the determination of whether the "problem" of gender is framed in social or economic terms. Thus, activists and feminist economists can provide expertise necessary to reconstruct such problems (or targets of policy intervention) and ultimately promote change towards more equitable economic policy. While formulating and framing gender-related concerns in a manner familiar to economic policymakers can legitimate feminist claims, Caglar argues that this strategy can also "reinforce and reproduce the epistemic hegemony of the economics discipline" (p.256).

Brigitte Young's chapter emphasizes both women's exclusion from top-level positions in international finance (regulatory institutions, central banks, formal and informal networks) and the impact of gender-biased knowledge structures. The absence of women from the increasingly private institutions and "clubs" of global financial experts, along with a commitment on the part of the male financial elite to abstraction, mathematical models, efficiency enhancement, and undemocratic practices, rule possible, less orthodox alternatives out of bounds. Global governance models built on the insulated, shared beliefs of such communities produce a gender-biased financial order detrimental to both women's interests and the more general well-being of international society, as seen in the regulatory failures of 2007-8.

Feminism, expertise, and the future of global gender governance

The significance and social construction of gender expertise discussed in Caglar and Young's contributions is one of the book's more fascinating themes. The role of fresh thinking and expertise in overcoming and transforming the

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contemporary neoliberal economic and security order, along with the injunction to be reflexive about expertise and power relations, is a prominent part of the recommendations for UN Women collected in the book's conclusion. The focus on expertise seems timely, given both the increasingly technocratic qualities of global governance and the devastation of the recent global financial crisis. As True and Parisi show, even the relatively established strategy of gender mainstreaming is hampered by its routinized bureaucratic application in the absence of significant activist and civil society input. The elite, male-dominated fields of economic governance and finance, on both global and domestic scales, seem particularly resistant to women's interests and feminist thought, and the book shows how claims to produce "policy-relevant knowledge" are evidently important to the authority of those who wield the technocratic financial knowledge necessary for the functioning of the contemporary global economy. The strategies of international gender experts are likely to draw upon critical and problem-solving approaches, taking care to navigate the dangers Prügl identifies of implementing feminist knowledge without betraying its radical potential.

One key takeaway from this collection is that feminists cannot neglect the problem solving pursuit of incremental change from "inside" the world of global governance "as it is" anymore than they can abandon the critical-theoretical push for historical transformation. Given the arguments and themes outlined above, this volume will be of great interest to IR feminists and gender scholars, who will certainly find much food for thought here, in addition to classroom-ready treatments of some main topics in feminist IR. It will also hold appeal for mainstream IR scholars of international organization, norm diffusion, advocacy networks, and human rights who are looking to re-situate their topics in a gender frame. For readers less familiar with feminist IR, the book offers excellent, succinct primers on topics like feminist activism in international multilateral institutions, gender mainstreaming, feminist economics, feminist human rights and international law, and the history of UN resolutions on peace, women, and security. Activists and other students of international policy may appreciate the way debates between various sects of feminist thought (often given more expansive treatment) are put aside after a brief early discussion in favor of a more practice-ready conceptual architecture.

Feminist Strategies in International Governance is likely to become a fixture in graduate IR gender courses, and future editions might include more coverage of the track record of UN Women as it develops and reflections on its successes and failures in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of global gender norms and standards as they relate to the arguments found in the collection. The book as it stands provides an excellent example of engaged IR scholarship and will hopefully help improve the quality of feminist strategy, shape the agenda of powerful institutions like the UN and World Bank, and contribute to these institutions' ability to nurture innovative feminist policies.

About the author:

Eric M. Blanchard is currently Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Political Science department at Columbia University in New York City. His research interests include gender, IR theory, international security, and East Asian IR. His work has been published in *Signs*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Review of International Studies*, and *Journal of International Relations and Development*.