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Security Studies and the Marginalisation of Women and Gender Structures

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JAMES CHISEM, MAY 14 2011

In her seminal 1987 text, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, Cynthia Enloe directs the reader's attention to the realm of international politics and asks the question "where are the women?"[1]. One might reasonably be expected to answer – they are everywhere. From the political economy, in which women comprise 80% of the global factory workforce[2] and unpaid female domestic labour is estimated to contribute up to 35% of global GDP[3], to modern warfare, a theatre wherein the majority of victims are women[4] – gender is centrally implicated in the machinations of the international system. The emergence of critical theory and the encroachment of feminist scholarship into the mainstream International Relations (IR) discourse, along with the ratification of resolution 1325 by the United Nations Security Council in 2000, have gone some way toward highlighting the position of women within the international security framework[5]. And yet, the theoretical perspectives which dominate security studies, specifically realism and neo-realism, have been accused of approaching the study of IR "through a male eye and apprehended by a male sensibility", neglecting the gender variable[6]. Indeed, out of five thousand articles in the top five security journals, fewer than forty addressed gender issues as an independent theme[7].

It is the opinion of the author that traditional approaches to security have underestimated, or ignored the role played by gender in international relations. As a result, the existence of gender based hierarchies has been obscured, marginalising the unique security concerns of women.

The narrative will be divided into two constituent parts. Firstly, it will examine the gendered dimensions of states and the state system– relating this to the exclusion of women from the domestic and international security discourse. Section two will look at the way in which this impacts on women's experience of security and insecurity, with reference in particular to violence and conflict.

i) States, Gender and Security : Gender Structures in International Relations

The traditional security paradigm, of which the Realist tendency has been the most prominent since 1945, has a clear epistemological approach to the study of international relations[8]. The international sphere, according to realism, is characterised by an absence of an overarching central authority. As a result of this anarchical environment, states, which are understood to be unitary rational actors[9], must rely on their own auspices to pursue their interests[10]. A realist conceptualisation of security is thus predicated on perpetual inter-state rivalry and conflict, focussing on existential threats to the state which necessarily must be countered by the maintenance and application of military force[11].

This state-centric, top-down model, focussed as it is on high diplomacy and national defence, presents a number of dilemmas in relation to the study of women in IR. It assumes that the state is a monolithic unit devoid of internal structural variations – that the meanings, consequences, power relations and experiences derived from the state-system are essentially the same for both men and women[12]. This in turn supports the notion that international relations are gender neutral. However, whether these suppositions are accurate is questionable. In the past three decades critical and feminist theorists have sought to challenge what Kolodziej described as "too narrow a conception of security"[13].

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a) Society and the State

For post-positivists, the state is not a concrete reality, nor is it homogenous in its interests and ideology. Rather, it is the culmination of a series of interacting processes informed by a number of individual and social identities, one of which is gender. Consequently, the identity of the state can be seen as a reflection of the gendered power relations which exist between individuals and on a social level[14]. According to Cohn male dominance is a feature of almost all societies. Men customarily play the role of provider within families, acting as the head of the household and monopolising interpersonal authority in the process. This inequality is transposed to the political, economic and cultural spheres, which are overwhelmingly male dominated. Masculinity, therefore, is culturally associated with power – a seemingly natural, even biologically determined, quality required to organise society and the state[15].

One does not have to look far to pin-point real world manifestations of gender assumptions and power dynamics. Whitworth points to the woeful under-representation of women in public life, suggesting that men occupy a dominate position vis-a-vis women in most social contexts. This is true even in societies which have legal safeguards in place to promote gender equality[16]. As Tickner describes;

“While women represent half the global population and one-third of the paid labour force and are responsible for two-thirds of all working hours, they receive only a tenth of world income and own less than one percent of world property.”[17]

It is unusual then that, in spite of ample theoretical and practical evidence to the contrary, the realist discourse, wedded to a state centric analysis, explicitly denies the existence of far-reaching gender structures which disproportionately and negatively affect women. The underlying reason for this may be related to the patriarchal assumptions which permeate the founding texts of realism and, arguably, inform modern day conceptions of the state and security[18]. In *The Prince* the idealised ‘sovereign man’, pre-occupied with autonomy and self-reliance, is contrasted with the unpredictable and dependent feminine ‘Fortuna’. For Machiavelli women are thus cast as a threat to the security of the state[19]. Similarly, Hobbes portrays the male Leviathan as in constant danger from the disordered state of nature – which was associated “metaphorically...and metaphysically with the feminine”[20].

Indeed, normative research has lent credence to the existence of these gendered modes of power. Christine Chin examined the importation of female domestic workers to Malaysia in the 1970s. She found that the Malaysian government, beset by the dislocating social impact of rapid economic modernisation, exploited the association of domestic work with the feminised private sphere in order to pacify the middle class and reduce growing ethnic tensions. Such actions, Chin contends, reveal the gendered nature of the state[21].

b) The State System : The Domestic and the International

Expanding on the work of Andrew Linklater, who argues that the legitimisation of state power is dependent upon a binary distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ (i.e. constructing identities in opposition to each other)[22], feminists have highlighted the implications this masculinised vision of the state has for international relations. In the same way that gender dynamics are transposed from the society to the state, so the gender dynamics of the state influence the perception and conduct of global politics. This manifests itself in realist thinking as a gendered distinction between the international and domestic spheres, reflective of the divide between the public and private realms. According to Tickner, there has long been an ideational association of the ‘international’ with conventionally masculine characteristics. Since antiquity manhood and statecraft have been presented as inextricably connected and mutually reinforcing – reaching their pinnacle in the form of ‘the citizen warrior’[23]. It is worth quoting Kennedy-Pipe at length on this subject;

“Of course, historically, war and combat have represented the highest aspirations of the male members of the political social and cultural elites, across time and culture. In the modern period, military service for one’s country has...been regarded as a badge of honour”[24]

Simone de Beauvoir observed that participation in the armed forces has been socially constructed as the “highest

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form of patriotism". As, until very recently, this was "an accolade ...women have been systematically excluded from achieving", traditional modes of citizenship have served to strand women at the periphery of international politics[25]. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the key text of realism is called '*Man, the State and War*'.

Indeed, the position of women in international relations has, arguably, been principally defined by the need of the state to reproduce itself as a means of achieving its security objectives. There are countless examples of the state utilising women as a mechanism to increase national birth rates in order to meet economic, imperial or military national interests. Although this has been particularly evident in dictatorships such as the Soviet Union, in which the authorities coerced the female population to have larger families in reaction to the high death rates the country suffered in the Second World War, it is also a feature of modern liberal democracies – in 2004 the French government offered women financial incentives to have more than one child[26] and the Polish and Italian governments have considered introducing similar policies[27]. In many third world nations women are construed as part of the industrial process, being denied access to birth control and abortion to enact an increase in production rates[28]. The historical demand placed on them to be, what Blanchard terms, 'nationalist wombs' has relegated many women to a "space outside politics"[29].

In a similar vein, Cohn's ethnographic survey of strategic defence planners found that the linguistic forms they used were indicative of the confinement of women to the domestic sphere and the equation of femininity with weakness. The 'techno-strategic' language was infused with sexualised imagery of male dominance which relies on the perceived role of women as being naturally subservient[30]. Ideas such as disarmament, which do not fit into the traditional military-focussed dialogue about security, were negatively cast as emasculatory, thus limiting the policy options defence intellectuals could raise for fear they would sound like a woman[31]. In response to Cohn's study, feminists have also drawn attention to the way in which gendered dichotomies are invoked to disparage foreign citizens and governments who are conceptualised as "feminised, less rational and more unpredictable than those on the inside [of the state]"[32]. Moreover, masculine perceptions of gender often portray women as subjective and emotional, whereas men are understood to be objective and rational. In 1985, the White House Chief of Staff illustrated how influential this exclusory view was at the highest level of the political discourse by claiming that women "are not going to understand missile throw weights or what is happening in Afghanistan...some women will but most women...would rather read the human interest stuff on what happened"[33]. These assumptions have created a cultural environment in which only men are seen as capable of the decisiveness supposedly required to exercise power in international politics– devaluing and excluding the views of women on issues of security[34].

Enloe uses the example of US overseas military bases to demonstrate that although prevailing attitudes toward gender render the vast majority of women invisible in '*high politics*', defined gender hierarchies, and as such women, are central to the operation of the international political economy and inter-state relations. The unpaid domestic work which military wives do is not only essential to the assimilation of the base into often hostile local communities but it also provides the basis for the progression of their husband's military careers and, as a consequence, a militarised conception of security. The gendered division of the domestic and international spheres is epitomised, and perpetuated, by the widespread acceptance amongst base families that their sons will naturally follow the path of the 'citizen warrior' and their daughters will become 'homemakers'[35].

It must be noted that post-modernists have criticised the propensity of feminists to take the problematic category of gender as predetermined and unitary. Margaret Thatcher, Hilary Clinton and Angela Merkel, to name but a few powerful women, are unlikely to share the same perception or experience of gender structures and state power dynamics as women and men who occupy a subordinate position within society. Focussing so heavily on women can also leave the impact of hegemonic masculinities on men ambiguously placed in the theoretical framework[36]. Post-Colonialists have built on these critiques by focussing on the ways that imperialism shaped racial, gender and class relations. They argue that by essentialising gender feminists disregard the radically different experiences of women in the third and first world. To substantiate this claim post-colonialists draw attention to the enthusiastic support many western women lent to imperialist ventures[37].

Although these criticisms raise important questions concerning aspects of critical epistemology, they do not detract from the primary assertions of feminist scholarship regarding traditional approaches to security studies. As these

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approaches identify the state as their primary referent they fail to acknowledge the influence of gendered norms, identities and relations of power within the state and on the gender-neutral assumptions of the discipline itself. Consequently, the analysis and practise of international security has privileged male actions and perspectives whilst sidelining the experiences and views of women.

ii) Violence, Gender and Security : (In)Security and Women in International Relations

The existence of concealed and overt gender structures in international relations – in tandem with the traditional security literature's gender-blind analysis – has important repercussions for what is, and what is not, considered a security threat by academics and policy makers.

Lene Hansen's article on the Copenhagen School is particularly useful in highlighting how state-centrism severely limits the attempts of security studies to broaden the security agenda. Buzan and Waever's concept of 'securitisation', which refers to the discursive formation of security threats, is based heavily on the notion that elites set the security agenda by engaging in 'speech acts'. This presents two principal barriers for the recognition of female security issues. Firstly, as women tend to be largely absent from elite circles, female insecurity is rarely a subject of the speech act. Hansen calls this the 'security of silence'. Secondly, because the Copenhagen School does not regard the category of gender as being threatened existentially, it is ousted to the fringe[38]. In international security, the dilemma of women is thus analogous to the little mermaid – "Her silence prevents her from ever fully materialising as an embodied subject, and it prevents her from letting him know how his construction of her subjectivity fundamentally endangers her." [39]

In response to this, feminists have endeavoured to reconceptualise the current statist, military centred model of security by approaching it not only from a female perspective, but more generally from the 'bottom-up'[40]. To this end they have appropriated the concept of structural violence from John Galtung, which deals with indirect forms of oppression, to demonstrate how issues which are not usually afforded prominence in IR textbooks directly affect the security of individuals[41]. In this context, women are seen to be particularly vulnerable to 'indirect violence' in light of their precarious position within the International Political Economy[42]. As security threats are conventionally constructed in solely military terms, government funds which could have been directed into social welfare are instead funnelled into defence projects. Due to the high proportion of female-headed households which fall into low income brackets, and thus rely to some extent on welfare provisions and public services, high defence spending has been said to lead to the feminisation of poverty. Sheehan notes that "for the price of 20 Patriot Missiles, the entire female population of Africa could have been immunised against tetanus"[43]. Attempts to increase state security can therefore be implicit in the proliferation of economic and physical insecurity amongst millions of women – something which state-centric approaches fail to appreciate.

In recent years, feminist scholarship has also sought to dispute the long-established view that, as women are seldom combatants, they are affected less directly than men by armed conflict. Tickner, who has devoted reams of text to this subject, has illuminated the disproportionate impact that war has on women. Of all the casualties in post-1945 conflicts, 90% have been suffered by women and children, [44] a group which also comprises 80% of war refugees. Tickner underlines the insecurity experienced by displaced women in refugee camps, who are extremely vulnerable to physical and sexual violence[45]. These statistics undermine the gendered notion that wars are primarily fought by men to protect 'vulnerable' women – a culturally constructed dichotomy which Elshtain identifies as being viewed through the lens of 'Just Warriors' and 'Beautiful souls'[46]. Rather than making women more secure, conflict exposes them to a continuum of violence. The strategic use of sexual assault in wartime, for instance, is a major and pressing source of insecurity for women in conflict zones due to "their role as reproducers and transmitters of culture"[47]. Rape has been used not only as a means of terrorising women and subduing the male population, but also as part of a wider policy of ethnic cleansing – something which was particularly evident in the actions of Serbian forces in Bosnia during the mid-1990s[48]. Even UN peacekeepers have been implicated in the rape and sexual exploitation of the women they were sent to protect[49]. However, in spite of the widespread threat of sexual violence, in war and peacetime, it has been almost entirely overlooked by traditional security studies. Mackenzie postulates that this is because gender hierarchies sanctify sex as part of the private sphere. Such a perception "justifies decisions to treat issues related to sex...as private, domestic concerns rather than security concerns"[50].

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This demonstrates how, through the conscious and unconscious transmission of gendered norms and identities, the state can in many cases be a source of insecurity for its own citizens.

It is clear therefore that the masculine, national security state and the state-centric focus of security studies has established an environment in which certain issues are a unique threat to female security, and yet, by this very fact, are likely to be positioned outside of the security narrative.

Conclusion

The discipline of security studies has been dominated by realist approaches to the study of international relations. As the primary referent object in realist thought is the state, it fails to recognise the gendered identities and power relations that exist on a sub-state level, which accordingly influence the identity and actions of the state itself. As a result, traditional approaches to security have internalised the notion that the state and the state system are gender-neutral – leading them to privilege particularly male forms of knowledge and neglect the role of gender in the structural construct of international relations and international security. The exclusion of women from the security discourse and the inability of women to influence the content of the security agenda, along with the supremacy of masculine conceptions of what constitute ‘political’ and ‘private issues’, have served to marginalise the distinct security concerns of women – and in some cases exacerbate them. The gender-blind nature of security studies has been implicit in maintaining and reproducing these processes.

Since the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of all the certainties it supposedly entailed, the epistemological underpinnings of the realist paradigm have been open to rigorous examination from all corners of the broad church of critical theory[51]. The issue of gender highlights the limitations of state-centrism and problematises the formulation of objective laws for international relations. A greater appreciation of how gender influences the theory and practise of international relations, and how this in turn shapes the security and insecurity of both men and women, would greatly expand our ability not only to understand the world, but also to change it.

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