

Interview – Chamindra Weerawardhana

Written by E-International Relations

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Chamindra Weerawardhana is a writer, political and international affairs analyst, academic and educator. She is also a human rights activist with a strong intersectional feminist focus. Her discipline is international politics, with an interest in the politics of deeply divided places, intersectional feminist international relations and the politics of intersectional justice. A Sri Lankan national, Chamindra has held teaching and research positions in several countries including France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. She has also engaged in political organising in Northern Ireland and globally. Chamindra is the author of *Decolonising Peacebuilding: Managing Conflict from Northern Ireland to Sri Lanka and Beyond*.

Where do you see the most exciting debates/research happening in your field?

I broadly describe my 'field' as 'intersectional feminist and decolonial international relations'. Here, by 'intersectional feminist' I refer to the legacy of social and political mobilisation in the black feminist tradition of Turtle Island, and the invaluable knowledge base it has bequeathed us over the years. By 'decolonial', I mean what many indigenous rights activists reiterate – a form of knowledge generation and hands-on advocacy that is intended at disturbing, challenging, transforming, changing and dismantling oppressive systems and structures. Taking these key words into account, the most exciting and intellectually stimulating work actually takes place in black feminist work (for example Dr Angela Davis's internationalist political discourse, that of Dr Gina Dent and many others), and decolonial feminist work. This includes, for instance, the work of Dr Françoise Vergès and many other scholars representing different disciplinary roots, but whose work is of vital importance when we think of intersectional feminist and decolonial-feminist perspectives on international relations. The bodies of work by Jade Almeida and João Gabriel, for example, are extremely stimulating.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I come from a background with certain levels of privilege – having been to an elitist primary and secondary school in Sri Lanka, and then walking into a French university. In the early years of my university education, I went through a body of interdisciplinary coursework, which, in hindsight, has been helpful in figuring out different ways of 'understanding', if not taking stock of, issues of national and international politics. We are all moulded by what surrounds us and our lived experiences. There was a time in my life when my understanding of the world was very much based on what I would now call a very Eurocentric reading of world affairs. A very pan-European education, spanning France, Ireland, the Netherlands, and stints in Germany, would have been behind that. However, all of this began to dramatically change as I delved more and more into black feminist, indigenous feminist and decolonial feminist discourses. Actively engaging in rights advocacy on the ground in several places – Sri Lanka (home), Ireland, Turtle Island and as of late Aotearoa – has been a huge factor that has profoundly challenged me. It has also constructively changed how I understand world affairs, in that process sharpening my commitment to discourses and praxes of international relations that centre on women as well as peoples who have long suffered systemic forms of marginalisation.

Your research builds on a decolonial intersectional feminist epistemology. Can you explain what this epistemology means to you, and how it enhances understanding and theorising of the international?

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My understanding of a decolonial intersectional feminist epistemology is one that is focused on ensuring that two focus points of 'decolonial' and 'intersectional feminist' are interlinked. They are closely interrelated, and one cannot be holistically examined without the other. Some academics and research centres focus on decolonial work without a sufficient focus on intersectional feminist work (and vice versa). This does not help us delve deep into the complexities of the pressing sociopolitical, geopolitical, and economic challenges of our times. To summarise, 'decolonial' implies a commitment to transforming, challenging, and dismantling oppressive structures and systems. 'Intersectional feminist' is the most vital strategy and epistemological ethos that drives inclusive decolonial work. It is when this dual focus is lacking that we sometimes see efforts to give the words 'decolonial' and 'decolonising' reductive meanings and the tendency of some decolonial work to verge on the cis-heteronormative, thereby going against the very grain of its purpose. The decolonial intersectional feminist focus is very helpful in identifying the limitations of dominant discourses of international relations. It is also helpful in working towards an understanding of IR that is holistically inclusive, focused on unlearning dominant assumptions and perspectives.

You have argued for a transfeminist perspective to decolonising development work and international relations more broadly. What does this transfeminist perspective look like, and why do we need it?

To me, a 'transfeminist', or 'trans feminist', perspective of international relations, development work, or for that matter any policy priority, is of critical importance and relevance. This is because trans feminism is a discourse that is built from a commitment to 'expanding the table' of feminist thought. Trans feminist discourses have been developed by women at multiple intersections of non-cisnormativity, race, ethnicity, class dynamics and more. As opposed to a popular misconception, it is not only a body of work developed by trans women. Many cis women working to develop inclusive, holistic, humane, and comprehensive intersectional feminist advocacy work and epistemologies have made tremendous contributions to trans feminist thought. This makes trans feminist work a very strong platform for strengthening feminist allyship and taking care of each other.

Overall, trans feminist thought represents a constant reminder – of being forthright to affirm one's truth, not take things as they are, challenge societal norms of conformity and uniformity, challenge oppressive discourses of biopolitics, and envisage a world where people can affirm their true selves, have a right to self-determination, campaign for rights, of course with a strong logic of allyship. In a world where substantive transformations are imperatively required to create more equitable systems and forms of coexistence, where self-determination is a crucial principle of domestic and international politics, for individuals and communities, my understanding is that trans feminist perspectives can teach us a great deal about progressive sociopolitical change, and developing solidarities and support networks.

You are currently working on a monograph on transfeminist politics, parenting and reproductive justice. Can you tell us a little bit about this work and what it is inspired by?

This was initially very much inspired by my own lived experience. The more I worked on this project, the more I was struck by the fact that what I, a non-cisnormative queer woman who is also a mother, am in fact talking about are indeed shared experiences of many women. They are also experiences shared with non-binary people, indigenous peoples of gender identities specific to their local contexts, and trans men. My approach to reproductive justice comes from a place of commitment to challenging and working towards dismantling the patriarchal, body-policing, gatekeeping, deeply racially biased, and overpowering reproductive justice policies that exist across the board. Recent court decisions in countries such as the UK have clearly shown that judiciaries and many in the medical sector are precisely actors who are keen to maintain the existing status quo of oppression and denial of agency to people who have historically faced (and continue to face) reproductive justice-related systemic discrimination.

This book is also about building and strengthening politics, actions and discourses of constructive allyship, framed upon an in-depth understanding of 'intersectional' forms of historic and continuing oppression. Whether one is cis or trans, Tangata Whenua, Tangata Tiriti and/or Pākehā in Aotearoa, indigenous or settler in Turtle Island, belonging to an ethnonational minority or a majority, economically privileged or not, one woman's experience of denial of reproductive justice needs to be understood as a problem that affects all of us. I may not necessarily require access to abortion. However, if there is a woman anywhere in the world who needs access to an abortion and is denied one

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due to systemic injustices, body policing, misogynist laws of yesteryear, and misogynist ecclesiastic dictates, her problem automatically becomes my problem, and we need to fight for her rights collectively, in a spirit of allyship. The same understanding of feminist solidarity applies to persons of any gender identity/expression, sex characteristics or any other intersecting lived reality, who may require a termination. Indeed, the same applies to how we engage menfolk in reproductive justice and intersectional feminist discourses – trans men's rights to bodily autonomy, challenging the patriarchal dictates used when raising cis boys, challenging toxic masculinities and patriarchal dictates that continue to shape many institutions that affect our day-to-day lives, and so on. This framework of solidarity and intersecting advocacy is the basis on which this book project is developed.

You have also written on left political groups operating in deeply divided societies, including North Ireland and Sri Lanka. What do these two contexts teach us about the potentialities for progressive political change in deeply divided societies?

The north of Ireland is what I call a 'privileged' peace process. Analysts who talk about the comparative dimensions of the Northern Ireland peace process rarely talk about the elephant in the room – 'whiteness' – or how whiteness shapes peacemaking. The geostrategic positioning of Northern Ireland is such that it has never been, is not, and will never be treated the same way as a volatile deeply divided society in the global south. The place has strong ties of kinship with white settler political power bases on Turtle Island. In the pre-Brexit era, the entire province of Ulster was a full-fledged part of the EU. Aside from border politics/policies, the current Northern Ireland Protocol shows how deeply Ulster is entrenched in EU policymaking. Indeed, generous financial support from the European institutions was a key factor that enabled a range of transformative peacebuilding measures right throughout the divided communities in the province. A place of such exceptional specificities is often discussed in comparison with conflict contexts in the global south – something that used to rattle me in the mid-2000s. My effort in developing a comparative study of the conflict management experiences in Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka was to highlight the futility of the thesis that Northern Ireland represents a peacebuilding 'beacon' to the rest of the world. This claim has been questioned in the academy, but my effort was to bring in a global south, if not 'decolonial', perspective to the dialogue. My understanding was that this was a necessary perspective, given the extent to which this 'beacon thesis' is marketed across the world. To this day, so many teams of government officials (including VVIPs), law enforcement officials, military personnel and diplomats from deeply divided places in the global south come to Northern Ireland, to 'learn lessons' from the peacebuilding marvel of the province! At an earlier stage in my career, I happened to find myself in such circles, and the superficiality in which Northern Ireland is perceived by all parties concerned is beyond appalling. *Decolonising Peacebuilding* was an effort to develop an invitation to a different kind of counter-intuitive, critical dialogue, where the logic (or rather the 'illogic') of centring a peace effort in the global north was critically discussed, from a global south, and, by extension, decolonial feminist, perspective.

You have recently assessed LGBTIQ+ rights in South Asia, arguing that building feminist movements with a consistent approach to LGBTIQ+ rights remains one of the greatest challenges to progress. Can you explain why this is the case?

Feminist movements in South Asia, just like almost everything else in the region, also carry a substantial amount of colonial baggage. If you look at some of the early feminist circles, they were composed of wealthy, able-bodied, mostly upper and upper-middle class, English-speaking cis women who had been through a very colonial system of education. These realities have long made feminist organising in that part of the world follow the ideas and perspectives that fuel white feminism in the west. Even when local realities are addressed, the general tendency has been to depart from a place of uptight, cis-heteronormative and ableist approach to feminist organising. Feminist movements in the South Asian region, in my view, have taken a long time to glean insight and inspiration from progressive feminist discourses developed by non-white women, especially women at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression and systemic marginalisation. This is starting to happen, and I have great hope in the younger generation of intersectional feminist activists working across the South Asian region today. Many of them are busy challenging the cishnormativities, heteronormativities, classism, ableism, biopolitics, and many other related vices in the previous generations of feminist work in our part of the world. They also take issues such as Savarna supremacy and the intersections of feminist work and work against caste-based discrimination. Dalit feminism, for example, is absolutely crucial for the epistemological strengthening of South Asian feminisms, and by extension, to strengthen

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feminist organising at all levels.

You are also an intersectional feminist activist with a focus on LGBTIQ+ and specifically trans rights. What does activism mean to you both in the context of your everyday life and academia?

As an intersectional feminist activist, my focus is precisely on what I would term 'intersectional justice', and in the original black feminist sense, 'intersectional feminism'. True, I do engage in quite a bit of SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, sex characteristics)-focused work, but my feminist advocacy is not limited to SOGIESC. On the same note, meaningful SOGIESC-feminist work, trans feminist work, or queer feminist work, cannot be done by compartmentalising that work. SOGIESC-related feminist work is very closely linked to many other issues of feminist politics and feminist policymaking. It is also especially linked to feminist foreign policy and feminist international relations. This is where the going gets tough, when one is a trans woman of colour from a global south country. You are tagged as working on a somewhat 'marginal' area of feminist advocacy – which leads to many forms of exclusion from vital dialogues and actions that concern domestic and international politics. The same phenomenon is rampant in the academy. It is still quite rare to have a trans feminist or queer feminist scholar-activist teach anything like critical security studies, conflict studies, politics of deeply divided places, and feminist security and foreign policy etc. These areas often belong to a group of feminists who are seen as part of a so-called 'mainstream' at varying levels – mostly cis women, very largely cis-het women, a majority of cis-het-white-able-bodied women, and a minority of cis and very often cis-het non-white women. The racial dynamics are important here, if we are to delve into the politics of exclusion that take place in the political, diplomatic and academic spheres.

So my activist work on the ground in several contexts (which I carry out with no fanfare, in a very low-key way) and my work in transnational intersectional feminist solidarity-building are very much focused on figuring out ways in which we could challenge multiple forms of exclusionary dynamics in politics, diplomacy, the academy and elsewhere. This inevitably means a body of painstaking work, with lots of setbacks, and little change in sight. Yet, it is a necessary body of work. The most important centre-point of this work is the fact that no branch of intersectional feminist work (be it trans and/or queer feminism, indigenous feminism, women-of-colour-led feminist work in the West, and many more), can be carried out in a compartmentalised way. Trans feminist work, for example, is inextricably linked to indigenous feminist work and priorities. Similarly, when we think of feminist governance, we can in no way afford to overlook specific issues that concern indigenous people and their leaders. The recent challenges faced by the likes of Te Pāti Māori's Rawiri Waititi MP and Debbie Ngarewa-Packer MP in the Aotearoa parliament who were kicked out for raising issues of systemic anti-indigenous racism, therefore, require unconditional solidarity from those of us advocating for trans feminist politics and governance.

How can we build truly inclusive feminist movements?

There is no right way of going about this. The most important thing is for us to remember that we are all on a learning curve, that feminist advocacy, activism, and knowledge generation are constant processes. We are only temporary contributors to these movements, and we need to make sure that we work in such a way that we leave things at a much more advanced place, compared to when we started. This spirit of continuity is of tremendous importance. Keeping it in mind helps us prioritise the task of supporting successive generations of feminist leaders. Beyond that, as I mentioned earlier in response to the previous question, it is vital to understand the close links between the work that we do in our specific areas of interest, and many other issues. In this sense, maintaining an open-minded attitude and being prepared to constantly learn, unlearn and critically engage are absolutely essential if we want to build inclusive feminist movements. It is also very important to remember that this work is always focused on 'extending' the table and challenging ourselves to go beyond biopolitics, essentialisms, cishnormativities, heteronormativities and related platitudes.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Think outside the box, challenge existing ways of knowledge production, centre indigenous approaches to politics and international relations in your work, stop seeing feminist international relations as a 'fringe' area of the discipline of international relations, be prepared to challenge old-school ways of teaching and learning IR. To that, it is

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important to add the importance of 'unlearning'. It no longer works to see IR as a discipline that can be tucked away in a politics department. It is a discipline with so much relevance to many other disciplines and knowledge bases taught and researched in other departments – so keeping an open mind, being prepared to try new approaches and epistemologies, and to quote Dr Paulo Wangoola, a focus on the pluriversity (rather than the 'uni'iversity) are absolutely crucial.