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International Women's Day Interviews

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To celebrate International Women's Day, we asked several scholars and previous contributors to E-IR:*Where do you see the most exciting research/debates on the issues of gender and equality? What are your hopes for the future of IR theory and practice?* Below are responses from Chamindra Weerawardhana, Sara Riva, Anne-Kathrin Kreft, Valentine Moghadam, Sharmila Parmanand, Jessica Cheung and Khushi Singh Rathore.

Chamindra Weerawardhana is a writer, political and international affairs analyst, academic and educator, and human rights activist. Access her previous interview with E-IR here.

Thinking of the 'most exciting' research and debates on issues of gender and equality, from where I stand, the first place that comes to mind is work surrounding Black feminist epistemologies and activist praxes in Turtle Island. This is a very diverse body of work that connects to queer feminist and especially trans feminist perspectives, abolition, intersectional justice, reproductive justice and the promotion of deeply critical approaches to local, national and global politics. I am particularly reminded of the work not only of thought leaders such as Dr Angela Davis, but also the work of a new generation of scholars such as Charlene Carruthers and Robyn Maynard, which carry a great deal of significance when one reflects upon new, innovative, and more equitable approaches to global governance, combatting racial, gender-based and other intersectional injustices. In the current global turmoil, I am particularly thoughtful of Black feminist internationalism, which has a long history of extending solidarity to marginalized peoples from Cuba to Palestine, and efforts to engage with racial and social justice work internationally. At a time when the racial fault lines of conflict and international security are ever so apparent, these engagements carry special resonance.

The next most exciting avenue is indeed the bodies of work in indigenous feminisms, developed especially by indigenous women. The recent book by Dr Emalani Case, *Everything Ancient was Once New*, for example provides very exciting new avenues to reflect upon approaches to international relations that are grounded in indigenous justice discourses, knowledge systems and histories, through her exploration of the concept of *Kahiki*. Dr Case's work also reminds me of the prolific body of work of her doctoral mentor, the late Professor Tereseia Teaiwa, who made very important contributions to Pacifika perspectives on feminist security studies, militarization and much more. In Turtle Island and elsewhere, discourses and praxes on decolonial approaches to governance, indigenous governance and indigenous approaches to environmental justice are all among the most stimulating debates and knowledge bases if we are to steer IR in a way that genuinely helps us address some of the most pressing challenges in world politics today.

My hope for the future of IR theory and practice is that more and more of us begin to think outside the traditional boxes of IR, challenge (and work towards dismantling) the persistent problems of 'representation' in IR and make theory and practice more innovative and inclusive. Indeed, this is a challenging path ahead, especially for IR theorists and practitioners from the global south/s, from gender minorities and other multiple intersections of experience that routinely face systemic forms of marginalization. Following a key Black feminist principle, we must also never lose sight of the fact that this transformative work is a constant 'process' and stretches way beyond our lifetimes.

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I think the most exciting research is always interdisciplinary and takes into account intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989)—i.e. taking into account how the different dimensions of our identity (our sex, gender, age, race, ability, sexuality and so on) intersect with each other and with each context. I like to engage in research using a transnational feminist framework. This lens connects and visibilises colonial histories to present-day racism, sexism, etc. It allows us to trace violent presents to colonial pasts while acknowledging that identities are embedded in power relations (Briggs, McCormick and Way 2008; Grewal and Kaplan 2001, 663). I believe that one of the most exciting debates that is taking place now is the one on border abolition. This debate is connecting academic research with on-the-ground activism and establishing a much necessary nexus. When engaging in the study of border abolition we are forced to take into account the multiple power structures that surround borders and migration. Separating borders from territories—externalizing them to third countries—, their increased militarization, the privatization of security, the introduction of new technologies in border vigilance, as well as the incentive to profit from those who seek a safe haven, are all elements that must be considered when addressing migration issues. For instance, if we research women who cross borders and end up detained in privatized detention centers through a transnational feminist lens, we are compelled to connect the violent past of colonialism and confinement that people of color have historically experienced with current neoliberal regimes, as well as their unique experiences based on their sex and gender. I am excited to see how early scholars and activists engage in interdisciplinary work that takes into account intersectionality. Additionally, my hopes for the future of any discipline, including IR, is to make stronger connections between theory and on-the-ground work.

Anne-Kathrin Kreft is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Oslo. Access her previous interview with E-IR here.

I am always amazed at how vibrant and diverse the research on gender in IR is! That makes it almost impossible to pick just one topic or debate. But I am very excited about research that complexifies the gendered dimensions of political violence, especially in conflict settings. Particularly intriguing to me are efforts that move beyond dichotomies and highlight how both victimhood and agency, in a context of vulnerability, characterize the experiences of women (and others too, of course!) affected by war. That is, it is important to draw attention to the various facets of women's and victims' resilience and agency in highly violent contexts (e.g. see Berry 2015; Kreft, 2018, Zulver 2019; Krause, 2019) to ensure that international efforts to increase gender equality do not take place under the assumption that women are passive and need to "be empowered" by external actors. However, it is equally imperative to acknowledge the severe precarity of women's political activity – broadly conceived – in conflict settings, i.e. to bear in mind how exposed activists, journalists, political candidates and others are in their clamor for a more gender-equal and more peaceful future. For example, consider the waves of violence targeting social leaders in Colombia that have skyrocketed since the peace agreement was signed in 2016.

That said, it is essential that a gender-sensitive approach to violence against political actors in conflict settings moves beyond a focus on only women. That is why I applaud the budding literature on gendered political violence, which sets out to examine more systematically how politicians, political candidates, civil society activists and other political actors are targeted and experience violence in gendered ways. That is, what patterns and variations do we observe in how men, women and individuals of other gender identities are differentially targeted in different forms of violence, and in how they respond to such violence? There is so much we don't know yet, especially in conflict-affected contexts. This is where a comprehensive gender approach can improve our knowledge base and better guide what initiatives might be best suited to create a safer environment, for example, for women to exercise their political agency in societies transitioning from war. But let me emphasize that we stand to learn the most if qualitative and quantitative research enter into even greater conversation with each other, because different methods are suitable to answer different aspects of the patterns and dynamics surrounding gendered violence. In the longer term, my wish for IR research is that it becomes more common to integrate a gender perspective from the outset – particularly in new data collection efforts.

Valentine M. Moghadam is Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Northeastern University, Boston. Access her previous article for E-IR here.

What is a feminist foreign policy? Does women's political presence mitigate militarization and war? Would having

more women as heads of government and defense ministers move foreign policy in a more peaceful and cooperative direction? Or would it mean encouraging more women to join the military at the frontlines? These questions link to what I see as a key area of inquiry and debate for scholars of gender and equality in the field of Feminist International Relations: the extent to which a feminist foreign policy can deliver given the nature of the contemporary world system.

Feminist IR is a dynamic field of research, with notable publications spanning the early works of Cynthia Enloe on militarism and the 2019 *Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security*. There also is a long history of feminist peace action, from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in the early 20th century to Code Pink in the 21st century. Feminist scholars (e.g., Tickner 1992) and politicians (Wallstrom 2010) suggest that men and women hold different perspectives on peace and security, with women being more likely to recognize the links between the two and to promote dialogue. One study finds that higher levels of militarization are associated with less gender equality (Elveren and Moghadam 2022). Others highlight correlations between greater female parliamentary representation and lower military spending (Koch and Fulton, 2011; Clayton and Zetterberg, 2018), more generous donor aid (Lu and Breuning 2014), and reduced levels of conflict (Demeritt et al. 2014; Shair-Rosenfield and Wood, 2017), although the effect depends on the political party in power. At the same time, female defense and foreign ministers seem not to make a significant difference. As Barnes and O'Brien (2018) note, more research is needed on which women reach such cabinet positions and through what pathways, as well as the gendered meanings attached to such portfolios in specific national contexts.

The growing number of countries that have followed Sweden's lead – launched in 2014 under former Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallstrom – to declare that they are adopting a feminist foreign policy suggests the popularity of the concept and goal. A focus on rights, representation, and resources is at the core of a feminist foreign policy. But what does it mean to place women, girls, and gender equality at the center of such a policy? And which women are meant to benefit? Is the continued eastward expansion of NATO compatible with a feminist foreign policy? We know that the U.S. will continue its aggressive foreign policy, but what of the countries with a self-described feminist foreign policy? How do its proponents in Sweden, Canada, and France approach "defense" spending and arms sales? Given that the Middle East and North Africa region is highly militarized, penetrated, and conflict-ridden (see Mako and Moghadam 2021), how does the continued flow of weaponry to countries that wage war on other countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen) benefit women and girls? In such a context, can the SCR 1325 national action plans – notably those of Iraq, Israel, and Palestine – change realities for women and girls?

We need clarity on such questions, which can only come from more research as well as continued feminist advocacy, lobbying, and activism. On the occasion of International Women's Day 2022, let's hope for, and work toward, a more peaceful and cooperative world order.

Sharmila Parmanand is a Fellow in Gender and Human Rights at the London School of Economics. Access her previous interview with E-IR here.

I hope to see more reflexivity in relation to knowledge production within the academic and policy fields of International Relations. This includes a greater openness to questions of race, gender, and sexuality, which have traditionally been understood as falling outside the boundaries of IR as a discipline. Recent events such as the COVID pandemic and Russia's attack on Ukraine demonstrate that global inequality, racial capitalism, and masculinist logics are important when thinking about broader issues such as global health challenges, the revival of right-wing populists, and war and conflict. Reflexivity also requires a wider recognition of imperialist and colonial histories when studying the "politics of the present", and more reflection on how academic and policy experts can avoid perpetuating "hierarchies of humanity", for example, based on how we think and speak about specific groups of people or parts of the world. The increasing problematisation of "borders" within IR scholarship and activism is especially promising, with borders being conceptualised not just as the outer edges of a nation's territory, but as broader racialised and gendered processes of control.

Jessica Cheung is a PhD candidate at the Freie Universität in Berlin. Access her previous interview with E-IR here.

Admittedly my research interests are quite biased, but the work being produced on feminist foreign policy continues to captivate my attention. The reason behind this critical fascination stems from the strategic political mobilisation of feminism as a form of “ethical” politics and normative generator/regulator of “soft power”. As the existing research has shown, feminist foreign policies are limited by violent and colonial legacies of gender essentialism and instrumentalisation/co-optation that have occurred as a result of the widespread adoption of (neo)liberal understandings of feminism and gender. This flawed foundation is further exacerbated by the inconsistencies that exist between feminist rhetoric and violent state action. As we have witnessed in the cases of Sweden and Canada, the discrepancy between state conduct and feminist intention has the capacity to completely undermine any attempts to shift traditional approaches to international relations and foreign policy. Therefore, as more and more countries jump on the “feminist” bandwagon (see Germany’s recent commitment to adopt a feminist foreign policy), it will be interesting to see how far feminism will travel, what it will become, and if anything changes for the better.

As an early career researcher, I hope that the field of international relations will move further away from its traditional and normative understandings and studies of the discipline. This means doing away with the androcentric approaches and understandings of IR that work to exclude marginalised peoples from participating in the production of knowledge. It also means adopting an intersectional approach to analysing issues that acknowledges power as unfixed, existing in multiplicities and interrelated. Most importantly, I hope to see more diversity in the field both in terms of voices, perspectives and methods. This would occur not as a matter of “political correctness”, but in solidarity with the communities and peoples who are disregarded and dismissed as legitimate knowledge producers.

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The emerging conversations around a feminist ethic of care are very exciting, as any discussion on gender and equality is incomplete without talking about care. The pandemic changed many things for people, individually and as a collective, and the academy is no different. As things moved online, campuses shut down, everyone started working from home or tried to, one could see the gendered implications of this ‘new normal’ which in themselves are not universal; the academy is not homogenous. Conversations around care allow us to interrogate and challenge these new realities while taking into account grief, which is not really what we study in IR. Of course, I found these conversations in feminist spaces where scholars like Dipali Anumol and Roxani Krystalii brought our attention to the need for incorporating love and care in our work, but this is also a window into a world that we can create, the academy that we can create. Just imagine the implications of theory that emanates from an ecosystem of love and care! The act of caring instantly makes the human visible, as a subject as well as the scholar conducting the research. It sensitizes one to the precarities and vulnerabilities within and outside academic spaces. Caring makes us ask at each step, whom are we leaving behind and why? This introspection is crucial to the ongoing efforts of refocusing IR away from the usual western quarters and in making resources and opportunities accessible to scholars marginalised by gender, class, caste, race, geography etc.

The hope is for a future where conversations are happening beyond silos. No matter how much we progress within our own areas of expertise, as a discipline we will remain stunted if we do not talk across our differences. A lot of this labour needs to be done by those constituting ‘mainstream IR’. It is crucial that scholars who are trying to be allies by bringing more women to the table when it comes to panels and discussions also work towards engaging with feminist thought, bridge the gendered citation gap in relation to feminist knowledge – something I have so far found amiss in my reading of IR at large and South Asian IR in particular, as that is my context. This discomfort is much needed in the so-called ‘core IR’ discourse because, without bridging this gap, we might address the issue of gender inequality to some extent and yet talk past it.