



Gender in International Relations: Theory and Policy Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

International Relations (IR) as a discipline has historically been built upon masculinist assumptions that prioritise states, power, and war while marginalising issues associated with women, care, and the private sphere. This exclusion has not only silenced half the world's population but also produced partial and distorted understandings of global politics. Since the 1980s, feminist scholars have challenged this neglect by demonstrating how international systems are sustained through gendered hierarchies, militarised masculinities, and the undervaluation of women's labour. Literatures such as J. Ann Tickner's reformulation of realism and Cynthia Enloe's ethnographic accounts of women's invisibility in global politics highlight that gender is not a secondary category but a constitutive force shaping IR (Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2014). This article examines the theoretical foundations of feminist IR, surveys key debates across security, diplomacy, and political economy, and evaluates contemporary challenges such as criticism against gender equality, intersectional exclusions, and the gendered impact of climate change. In doing so, it argues that integrating gender into IR is not only a normative imperative but also an analytical necessity for producing more accurate and inclusive accounts of world politics (Shepherd, 2017).

Introduction

International Relations emerged in the early twentieth century after World War I, originated to understand the causes of war and promote peace through state cooperation. But the discipline has its



origins in elite male-dominated policy circles. It privileges state sovereignty, military power, and diplomacy, while ignoring the everyday lives of people, particularly women (Tickner, 1992). The canonical questions of IR, “Why do states go to war?” or “What is the balance of power?” were framed through masculine lenses that associated rationality and strength with men, and emotion or vulnerability with women (Peterson, 1992). This masculinist bias relegated “domestic” issues such as caregiving, migration, or social reproduction to the margins, even though they were central to sustaining international orders. The feminism in IR scholarship, started in the 1980s and gained momentum in the 1990s, challenged these invisibilities. Cynthia Enloe’s provocative question, “Where are the women?” revealed the hidden yet indispensable roles of women in diplomacy, war economies, and transnational labour markets (Enloe, 2014). J. Ann Tickner demonstrated that even the foundational principles of realism such as Morgenthau’s “objective laws of politics” were gendered, privileging militarised understandings of power over relational or cooperative forms (Tickner, 1992). Christine Sylvester expanded the feminist project by incorporating lived experiences and narrative methods into IR, arguing that global politics must be studied not only from the perspective of states but also from the everyday lives of individuals (Sylvester, 1994). Together, these interventions shifted the field. Gender became not an “add-on” variable but a lens that revealed the partiality of mainstream IR. By revealing masculinist assumptions and centring marginalised voices, feminist IR transformed the scope and method of the discipline. As Laura Shepherd observes, feminist IR insists on seeing the personal as political, the everyday as international, and the invisible as central to global politics (Shepherd, 2017).

Theoretical Foundations of Gender in IR

Masculinist Epistemologies and Early Exclusion

From its beginnings, IR theory has been marked by “masculinist epistemologies.” Realism, the dominant postwar paradigm, view the world as an anarchic realm where rational states pursue survival through power and security. These concepts were imbued with gendered meanings: autonomy, rationality, and strength were coded as masculine, while interdependence, care, and vulnerability were feminised and devalued (Tickner, 1992). As V. Spike Peterson noted, the public/private divide in political thought placed men in the sphere of power and women in the sphere of family, effectively excluding them from international politics (Peterson, 1992).

This exclusion was not benign. The naturalisation of masculinised values as “objective” and universal, IR scholarship erased women’s contributions to wartime economies, grassroots peace activism, and everyday survival strategies. For instance, while classic texts analysed Cold War nuclear strategy, they



ignored the women stitching uniforms, nursing wounded soldiers, or sustaining families in the face of militarization (Enloe, 2014). In effect, IR produced a partial worldview that conflated “international politics” with the politics of elite men.

The Rise of Feminist IR

The feminist turn in IR emerged in the 1980s against this background of exclusion. J. Ann Tickner’s landmark book *Gender in International Relations* systematically critiqued realism by reworking Hans Morgenthau’s six principles of political realism through a feminist lens. She argued that realism’s fixation on power and conflict marginalised cooperation, ethics, and human security, all of which are essential to a broader understanding of world politics (Tickner, 1992).

Cynthia Enloe, in works like *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, revealed that international politics is sustained by women in roles often rendered invisible i.e., wives of diplomats, sex workers near military bases, or factory workers in global supply chains (Enloe, 2014). Enloe’s ethnographic approach widened the scope of IR, moving beyond states and elites to highlight how gendered labour underpins the global systems.

Christine Sylvester advanced another key strand by introducing feminist theory’s concern with lived experience into IR. For her, IR must account for how policies and wars affect individuals in their daily lives, especially marginalised women, rather than categorising people as faceless masses or abstract units (Sylvester, 1994).

Together, these interventions demonstrated that feminist IR was not merely about including women but about challenging the very foundations of the discipline. By questioning whose voices are heard, whose labour counts, and whose security matters, feminist scholars began to reshape both theory and practice.

Various forms of Feminist Approaches:

Feminist IR is not monolithic; it encompasses diverse perspectives that offer different ways of analysing global politics:

Liberal Feminism argues for an equal representation of women in diplomacy, peace negotiations, and international institutions. This approach emphasises reform within existing structures, aiming to increase women’s participation and leadership (Steans, 2013). **Critical and Marxist Feminism** highlights the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism, depicting how women’s exploitation in the global political economy sustains international systems. For example, feminised labour in export-processing zones



illustrates how globalisation depends on gendered inequalities (Peterson, 1992). **Postcolonial Feminism** critiques both mainstream IR and Western feminism for their Eurocentrism, insisting that the experiences of women in the Global South which are shaped by colonialism, racism, and development politics, must be foregrounded (Mohanty, 2003). **Poststructuralist Feminism** focuses on discourse and representation, analysing how language constructs gender identities in world politics. Scholars such as Laura Shepherd show how UN documents on “Women, Peace and Security” reproduce certain stereotypes of women as victims rather than agents (Shepherd, 2008). **Intersectional Feminism** draws on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s framework to emphasise that gender cannot be studied in isolation but must be analysed together with race, class, sexuality, and other forms of identity that shape global hierarchies (Crenshaw, 1991).

By engaging these diverse approaches, feminist IR demonstrates that gender is not a mere “variable” but a constitutive element of international politics. It shapes who is recognised as an actor, what issues are deemed important, and how policies are formulated (Shepherd, 2017).

Gender and Security Studies

Security has long been the “core” of International Relations, but it is also one of the most gendered domains. Traditional security studies equate security with the survival of the state and prioritise military power as its guarantor. Feminist scholars argue that this framing privileges militarised masculinities that valorise aggression, protection, and domination while marginalising cooperative or human-centred approaches (Tickner, 1992). The image of the soldier as a heroic male protector depends on the construction of women as vulnerable and in need of protection, a dynamic that legitimise war-making and nationalism (Young, 2003). In this way, gendered narratives underpin state policies and justify military interventions.

Militarism also relies on the devaluation of feminised identities. Women are often referred to symbolic roles, such as “mothers of the nation,” while their actual contributions as nurses, peace activists, or victims of conflict continue to be indiscernible in dominant security discourses (Enloe, 2014). By exploring these dynamics, feminist scholars show how concepts like sovereignty and security are deeply gendered, not neutral (Shepherd, 2008).

Expanding the Concept of Security

One of the major contributions of feminist IR has been to broaden the definition of security. Instead of limiting security to territorial integrity or military strength, feminists advocate for a people-centred approach that includes economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Tickner, 1992). This aligns with



the notion of **human security**, popularised by the UNDP's *Human Development Report* (1994), which emphasises safety from hunger, disease, and repression. Feminist scholars argue that for many women, insecurity stems less from interstate war and more from structural violence such as domestic abuse, poverty, or exclusion from decision-making (True, 2012).

This redefinition also critiques the militarised allocation of resources. As Carol Cohn notes, states often spend billions on defence while underfunding health care, education, or gender equality programs domains that directly affect human well-being (Cohn, 2013). By foregrounding these disparities, feminist perspectives challenge the assumption that “hard security” is more important than the security of individuals.

Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

A landmark moment for feminist engagement with global politics was the adoption of **United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)** on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). UNSCR 1325 formally recognised women's roles in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction, and called for their meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Subsequent resolutions expanded this agenda to include protection from sexual violence and the promotion of gender equality in security institutions (UN Security Council, 2000). However, implementation has been uneven. Studies show that women remain underrepresented in peace negotiations, with only 13% of negotiators and 4% of signatories being women in major peace processes between 1992 and 2019 (UN Women, 2020). Where women do participate, agreements tend to be more durable, suggesting that exclusion is not only unjust but also counterproductive (O'Reilly, 2015). Critics also caution that the WPS agenda risks instrumentalising women, by viewing them primarily as tools for more effective peace rather than as rights-bearing individuals (Shepherd, 2008).

Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict

Feminist IR has also foregrounded sexual violence, as a central issue in international politics. Historically, dismissed as an unfortunate byproduct of war, sexual violence is now recognised as a deliberate weapon of conflict. This shift was due to feminist activism and scholarship that documented the systematic use of rape in conflicts from Bosnia to Rwanda (Copelon, 1994). The International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Rwanda (ICTR) set precedents by prosecuting sexual violence as a war crime and crime against humanity (ICTY, 2001).



Yet challenges remain. Survivors often face stigma, lack of access to justice, and limited reparations. Moreover, focusing narrowly on sexual violence risks reducing women to victims, and overshadowing their agency in resisting violence and participating in peacebuilding (Davies & True, 2019). Feminist scholars stress that a holistic understanding of security must address both the structural conditions that enable violence and the resilience of women in conflict zones.

Gender and Diplomacy

Historical Exclusion and Representation

Diplomacy has long been one of the most exclusionary spheres of international politics. For much of the twentieth century, foreign services around the world either barred women entirely or restricted their careers through discriminatory rules. In India, for instance, women could join the Indian Foreign Service after Independence, but until 1979, they were forced to resign if they married, a rule that reflected patriarchal assumptions about loyalty and domestic roles (Rai, 1996). Similar restrictions existed in Britain and the United States, where women were often excluded from postings considered “strategically important” (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). These practices ensured that diplomatic representation remained overwhelmingly male.

Even today, despite significant progress, women remain underrepresented in ambassadorial positions. According to a 2018 report by the Council on Foreign Relations, women accounted for only about 15–20% of ambassadors worldwide, with even fewer in high-prestige postings such as Washington, Beijing, or Moscow (CFR, 2018). This underrepresentation matters because diplomacy not only reflects but also reproduces gendered power hierarchies within international relations.

Feminist Diplomacy and Foreign Policy

In recent years, the concept of **feminist foreign policy (FFP)** has emerged as a significant innovation. Sweden became the first country to adopt an explicitly feminist foreign policy in 2014, framing gender equality as a central goal in areas such as development aid, trade, and peacebuilding (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016). Canada, France, Mexico, Spain, and several other states have followed suit, embedding gender equality into their diplomatic agendas (Thomson, 2020).

Proponents argue that FFP challenges traditional notions of security and foreign policy by prioritising human rights, inclusivity, and sustainability (Thomson & Aggestam, 2022). However, critics caution that feminist foreign policy can risk becoming rhetorical or selective applied externally to promote “soft



power” while domestic inequalities remain unaddressed (Sjoberg, 2013). Moreover, FFP frameworks sometimes reproduce Global North/Global South hierarchies by positioning western states as the saviours of women elsewhere (Prugl, 2015). Nonetheless, feminist diplomacy has succeeded in putting gender on the agenda of global politics in ways unimaginable a few decades ago.

Gender and Global Governance

The United Nations and Gender Mainstreaming

The United Nations (UN) has been pivotal in advancing gender equality within global governance. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provided a binding framework for addressing women’s rights at the international level (UN, 1979). The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) further established a comprehensive agenda across twelve critical areas, including women’s participation in decision-making, economic empowerment, and the elimination of violence (UN, 1995).

Since the 1990s, the UN has promoted gender mainstreaming and the integration of gender perspectives into all policies and programs. While this represents a shift toward institutionalising gender awareness, critics argue that it often becomes technocratic and depoliticised, focusing on checklists and numerical targets rather than substantive transformation (True & Parisi, 2013). For example, the presence of gender focal points in UN agencies does not necessarily translate into meaningful policy change if broader institutional hierarchies remain untouched.

Contemporary Challenges

Backlash and Authoritarian Populism

One of the most pressing challenges for gender in international relations today is the backlash against feminism and gender equality. Across regions, authoritarian populist leaders have mobilised “anti-gender” rhetoric, portraying feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and gender mainstreaming as threats to national sovereignty and traditional values (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). This backlash is evident in policies restricting reproductive rights in countries such as Poland and the United States, as well as in the demonisation of “gender ideology” in Latin America (Corredor, 2019).

Such movements not only roll back women’s rights but also undermine international norms on human rights and democracy. Feminist IR scholars argue that this backlash reflects broader anxieties about



globalisation and the erosion of patriarchal privileges, making resistance and solidarity across borders more urgent than ever (True, 2020).

Intersectionality and Inclusivity

While earlier feminist IR scholarship focused largely on women, contemporary debates emphasising **intersectionality**, the recognition that gendered experiences are shaped by race, class, sexuality, ability, and geography (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, migrant women workers face different vulnerabilities than elite women diplomats, and LGBTQ+ individuals encounter unique forms of exclusion in global governance (Sjoberg, 2013).

Intersectional perspectives push IR to broaden its focus beyond “adding women” to recognising how multiple forms of power intersect in shaping international hierarchies (Shepherd, 2017). They also demand more inclusive practices in diplomacy and peacebuilding, ensuring representation for marginalised groups who are often excluded from both mainstream politics and feminist spaces.

Climate Change and Gendered Vulnerabilities

Climate change has become one of the defining challenges of the 21st century, and its impacts are deeply gendered. Women, particularly in the Global South, often bear the brunt of environmental degradation because of their roles in agriculture, water collection, and household management (Dankelman, 2010). Disasters and climate-related displacement exacerbate gender inequalities by increasing risks of violence, exploitation, and economic precarity (Alston, 2019).

At the same time, women are leaders in grassroots environmental movements, from the Chipko movement in India to global climate justice campaigns. Yet, international climate negotiations remain male-dominated, with women often sidelined from decision-making processes (UN Women, 2020). Feminist IR scholarship insists that addressing climate change requires not only technical solutions but also the dismantling of gendered and racialised inequalities embedded in global environmental governance (MacGregor, 2010).

Conclusion

The integration of gender into International Relations has profoundly reshaped the discipline. By exploring the masculinist assumptions of traditional theories and centring marginalised voices, feminist scholars have expanded the boundaries of IR to include questions of everyday insecurity, labour exploitation, and global inequality. From the recognition of women in peace processes under UNSCR



1325 to the rise of feminist foreign policies and the embedding of gender in the SDGs, feminist IR has demonstrated both academic and policy relevance.

Yet, persistent challenges remain. Women and gender minorities continue to face exclusion from diplomacy and peacebuilding. The neoliberal globalisation reproduces gendered exploitation, and also rising authoritarian populism threatens hard-won advances. Moreover, global crises such as climate change reveal the urgency of intersectional, feminist approaches that connect local struggles to global structures.

Ultimately, gender in IR is not simply about representation or equity. It is about transforming the very foundations of the discipline by recognising that the “personal is international” and that without a gender-sensitive lens, our understanding of world politics remains partial and distorted. A gender-just IR is therefore both an analytical necessity and a political imperative.

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