

Reconceptualising Feminism in International Relations: A Critical Analysis of Masculinized Paradigms and Disparities in Leadership, Politics, and Power

Larry Asego

Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, University of Nairobi

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2023.7938>

Received: 20 July 2023; Revised: 24 August 2023; Accepted: 29 August 2023; Published: 24 September 2023

ABSTRACT

International Relations (IR) as an academic field has its roots in predominantly masculinized perspectives, where traditional notions of power, dominance, and war shaped the international discourse. The article sought to explore and critically analyze how feminist theory addresses the disparities in leadership, politics, and power within the context of international relations. The article delved into the historical development of IR as a discipline, examining how traditional theoretical frameworks have inadvertently perpetuated gender biases. The article highlighted the multifaceted contributions of feminist scholars in challenging the conventional norms and striving for gender equality within the international political arena. The subsequent sections of this article discussed the evolution of feminist thought within IR. They emphasized the relevance and importance of feminist theory in reshaping the discourse of IR, making it more inclusive, and promoting gender equality in the article and practice of IR. By recognizing the significance of feminism within IR, this research sought to contribute to the ongoing efforts to transform the field and make it more reflective of diverse voices and experiences. The article used Realism and Liberalism feminist theorists. Desktop research review method was utilized by exploring secondary data from published articles. The article concludes that the oppression of women is rooted in unequal power dynamics that exist at all levels of society, from the individual to the political. International politics will remain a male domain and privilege as long as there are not enough powerful women to tip the scales.

Key Words: Feminism, International Relations, Realism, Liberalism

INTRODUCTION

The ever changing landscape of world politics has over time redefined the scope of IR. Ever since the First World War, realism, pluralism and structuralism have been the dominant IR theories^[1]. The Cold War era signaled a surge of theoretical approaches in IR; critical theory, postmodernism, post-structuralism, feminism, and constructivism.^[2] Thereafter, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, scholars and academicians embarked on theorizing contending notions of the dominant Realist, Idealist and Liberalist schools of thought in what Sylvester calls the “*Destabilizing decade.*”^[3]

The post-World War 1 era highlighted the realist school of thought as the dominant approach in IR. Realism has been a dominant theory of world politics that contends that the state is the principal actor in IR. Fronted by thinkers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, Morgenthau among others, the theory is hinged in the premise that international politics is driven by an endless struggle for power and this power is the preserve of the State.^[4] However, the post-cold war era saw a rise in other theoretical approaches that were quite distant from the realist thought. Within these theoretical approaches in the feminist approach that challenged the state-centric and positivist characteristics of IR.^[5] The contributions of feminist approaches in IR aimed to deconstruct realism, which was the prevailing explanation of power politics in IR during that period.^[6]

The conclusion of the Cold War signaled ideological changes in IR. The shift from realist perspectives that was more focused on war and security and the state as the central actor, paved the way for more liberals’

approaches, more concerned with the international political economy, the human rights regime and an influx of non-state actors among others. New perspectives in the international system; including feminist approaches address the feminist perception in various issues within the international system, for instance, the role of feminism in investment, in tourism, in world political economy, diplomacy, in security among others. [7]

Feminism as an academic field emerged from the feminist movement during the 1960s and 70s, which aimed to attain equal political, social, and economic rights for women. [8] Whitworth argues that contemporary feminism originates from grassroots women's movements protesting the imbalanced power relations between men and women. [9] Feminism as a field of study is not new, but examining women from the perspective of their experiences represents a novel approach to knowledge. [10] Feminists have raised questions especially around the areas of human security, economic justice, human rights, and democratic participation from a local to a global perspective. Each of these inquiries has explored the ways in which structures within the international system have played a role in the marginalization of women and other oppressed communities. The area of feminist study has been focused on answering the query, "Where are the women?" which has guided research that bases the main argument that conventional IR studies have so far been biased in favor of more masculine approaches. [11] Feminist scholars have contended that the theoretical underpinnings of IR are shaped by masculine viewpoints, leading to the subsequent assignment of gender-specific roles through the lens of male-female comparisons, often resulting in the exclusion of women.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In ancient history, some societies held the role of women within the community in high regard. In ancient Egypt for instance, the role of women matched those of men; women could inherit property, trade and divorce; they had a vital role in leadership positions and contribute to the political dynamics [12]. Examining the historical records of influential women rulers from ancient times reveals the existence of female leaders in various civilizations such as Artemisia, who in the fifth century B.C., ruled Halicarnassus and supported King Xerxes in his war against Greece. [13] Around 60 C.E., Queen Boadicea led the Iceni in a rebellion against Roman rule in East England. [14] Egypt stands out as a state with a notable number of women rulers throughout history, including Nefertiti, Meryt-Neith, Hatshepsut, and the renowned Cleopatra, the last Pharaoh of Egypt and a prominent figure from the Ptolemaic dynasty [15]. These examples demonstrate that women held significant positions of power in diverse ancient societies. [16]

Apart from active roles held by women rulers, especially positions of power, there were other passive roles that women were subjected to such as being married off to forge Alliances in medieval Europe [17]. They formed or sealed part of treaties and the bride price paid for them ensured continued diplomatic ties between two entities. In so far as they were forced into such roles, they did indeed contribute immensely to the traditional international political practice at the time. Greek mythology talks about Helen of Troy whose abduction brought about the Trojan War where alliances were formed to go and bring back the abducted daughter of Zeus and Leda with a promise of marriage to the suitor. [18] Marriage alliances were also formed between monarchies in England, France, and Spain as a way of securing peace or waging war. Women were central to such Alliances and diplomatic relations albeit passively [19].

Throughout history, the realm of international politics has been predominantly governed by men, creating challenges for women to attain prominence at the highest echelons. Niccolò Machiavelli emphasized the importance of masculine traits in conducting state affairs [20]. As a result, men held leadership and protective roles within states, advocating for their own interests. Granting women positions of power was regarded as a possible threat to male dominance and perceived as a sign of vulnerability. [21] Diplomat Sir Harold Nicholson shared similar concerns with Machiavelli, contending that women's qualities of zeal, sympathy, and intuition could be perilous in the context of international affairs unless strictly controlled. These views held by male British diplomats contributed to the notion that women should remain in

subsidiary roles within high politics and diplomacy, which could explain the delayed appointment of British women as diplomats in the United Kingdom (UK), a milestone only achieved in 1946.^[22]

Notwithstanding the strong association between leadership and masculinity, certain women have demonstrated remarkable capability in providing robust and visible leadership in virtually every community. Figures like Elizabeth I of England and Catherine the Great of Russia managed to rule as monarchs, as their dynastic or marital lines took precedence over gender.^[23]

In the late nineteenth century, women played significant roles in campaigns related to prohibition, settlement houses, and the fight for women's suffrage. Throughout history, "First Ladies" have utilized their positions of influence to raise awareness for important issues, with exemplars like Jane Addams and Eleanor Roosevelt. Numerous family enterprises have been led by women, and countless females have taken on leadership responsibilities in diverse fields, including religious and charitable organizations focused on aiding the sick and injured, as well as educational and cultural institutions.^[24]

THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Feminist theories present gender as a critical avenue for assessing the interactions amongst States in the international system. Despite the push to build an inclusive IR Theory, international relations which has historically been masculinized, feminist contribution to international politics are yet to take hold in international politics. Feminist analysts propose that the absence of feminist ideas in international politics might stem from the long-held perception of the international political elite as exclusively masculine. They view gender as a collection of socially created traits that differ across different societies and historical periods. Traditionally, traits like power and autonomy have been linked to masculinity, while attributes like weakness, dependence, and emotionality have been associated with femininity. As these associations are products of social construction rather than biological factors, it becomes feasible for women, particularly those in influential positions like Margaret Thatcher, to exhibit qualities traditionally seen as "masculine" or characteristic of "Real Men."^[25] Furthermore, gender is not solely concerned with women; it also encompasses the experiences and expectations of men. In this view, challenging and redefining gender norms applies to both genders, seeking to break free from restrictive gender stereotypes that limit individuals' potential based on their sex.

Given the historical dominance of a masculinized environment in international politics, it becomes essential to acknowledge the significance of masculinity frequently employed to justify states' foreign and military policies. Two main theorists Professor Cynthia Enloe and Professor Ann Tickner have presented theoretical and conceptual analyses of feminist approaches in the international system^[26]. The contention is not even discrediting the theoretical approaches already fronted, but in challenging the epistemological factors on their creation seeing as they appear to have omitted the role of the women in their definitions. Such epistemological factors are hinged on are *gender* and *patriarchy*^[27] as concepts that frame the feminist discourse in IR.

3.1 Gender and Patriarchy

Gender, in the context of feminist discourse, encompasses the socially constructed identities and behaviors of men and women in relation to one another. An essential aspect of gender studies involves analyzing the power dynamics existing between different genders. Feminists use the notion of gender to scrutinize how power is exercised and how these interactions have been shaped by historical and societal factors over time. On the other hand, patriarchy represents a system where females are placed in a subordinate position to males, concerning power and social status. This system is rooted in the notion that it is natural for men to hold authority and women to be obedient and subservient to them.^[28]

Feminists employ the concepts of 'gender' and 'patriarchy' to observe how women have been marginalized and left out of international politics. For instance, when candidates run for political office in certain states,

they often highlight their past military experience as a qualification. However, historically, women were denied access to military service until much later, creating a disadvantage for them in seeking national government positions that deal directly with international defense and security matters.[\[29\]](#) As a result, gender norms and patriarchal structures limit women's opportunities to ascend to positions of power within the realm of world politics.[\[30\]](#)

3.2 Origins of Feminism: A Platonic perspective.

Plato is often referred to as an early proponent of feminist ideas due to his critique, found in Republic V, of traditional notions of marriage and the nuclear family. He proposes the inclusion of female guardians in state-funded child care and education, challenging gender roles and advocating for a system where jobs and responsibilities are allocated based on an individual's nature rather than their gender or appearance within an ideal state.[\[31\]](#)

However, some critics argue that Plato's position does not truly make him a feminist because his primary aim was to improve the efficiency of the state, rather than addressing gender inequality as a moral concern. Plato held the view that men were superior to women, and his argument for sexual equality was driven by the community's interests, aligning more with authoritarianism rather than liberalism.[\[32\]](#) That is to say, getting the best citizens for the state supersedes male vs female discourse. In other words, retiring a perfectly capable woman to house chores when she is as qualified as her male counterpart if wasteful and inefficient.[\[33\]](#) In fact, according to Plato, the only difference between all men and all women is that, as he put it, "*the male begets and the female gives birth.*"[\[34\]](#)

An idealist contending within a realist epoch, Plato opined that; "*Female watchdogs do just what the male ones do, except that they are weaker, and their lives are interrupted by giving birth. By analogy, the same is true of women; though they are weaker than men and their lives are interrupted by childbirth, they are otherwise the same, and so should be given the same upbringing and tasks as men,*" – Plato[\[35\]](#)

Not many modern day feminists would consider Plato a feminist, although his thoughts could have contributed to the various feminist approaches to the modern day international system. Feminist perspectives in IR reveal alternative ways to comprehend the international relations framework, going beyond conventional disciplines like liberalism and realism. These feminist approaches emphasize why gender is a significant classification of analysis, which has often been overlooked in traditional paradigms. Contending approaches such as liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist, post-colonial, post structural feminism and social constructivism among others, attempt to build onto the feminist theory discourse in modern day society.

3.3 Feminism and Conventional International Relations Discourse

In 1989, Lapid introduced the concept of the "Third Debate," signaling a shift towards a post-positivist era in IR. This new perspective highlighted the significance of approaches like critical theory, and postmodernism, which diverged from the traditional inter-paradigm debate between realism and idealism.[\[36\]](#)

Within this context, feminists challenged the state-centric and positivist aspects of international relations, going as far as deconstructing realism, which was the predominant explanation of power politics in the field at that time.[\[37\]](#)

The quest for power and protection of national interests is at the center of the realist debate. The best way to maintain this power is via military security. The State is the primary actor and the individual is secondary. Feminist approaches pretty much present a sharp critique of the realist approach. Feminist theories put into consideration how individuals are included or excluded in the workings of the State and how these domestic policies, in turn, translate into foreign policies. While contesting the insistence on the protection of national

interests as a core of international relations, feminist scholars would pose the question as to who defines these interests and whether these interests would bear the same definition if presented by women.

3.4 Realism, Liberalism, and Feminism: Traditional Perspectives

Realism forms its theoretical foundation on the state's pursuit of power and protection of its national interests amidst global anarchy or the absence of higher authority beyond the state. States seek to safeguard their interests by establishing a balance of power in the global arena, predominantly relying on military means and being prepared to engage in war if necessary. Many feminist theories in IR are born from a critical examination of realism, as its socially constructed worldview still influences much of the thinking about global politics.[\[38\]](#)

Feminist arguments critique the realist perspective for overemphasizing the role of the state in shaping IR while neglecting scrutiny of the internal political and social structure of the state itself.[\[39\]](#) Feminist theory, on the other hand, seeks to examine how the state integrates or discounts individual citizens' views and how domestic perspectives influence foreign policies. By questioning the definition of national interests, feminists challenge the absence of women's perspectives in these discussions and explore how their inclusion might lead to different interpretations and approaches in international relations.[\[40\]](#)

Feminist theorists contend that realism is incompatible with achieving gender equality, as it perpetuates patriarchal norms and dismisses the importance of the individual, especially female individuals, in shaping international affairs.[\[41\]](#) In contrast, liberalism places greater emphasis on the role of individuals in international relations, advocating for consensus-building rather than a struggle for power. Liberalist tools, such as free trade, education, and international institutions, aim to safeguard and advance the economic, and civil interests of people.[\[42\]](#) However, feminist criticisms of liberalism highlight how free trade can exacerbate economic inequalities, disproportionately affecting women.[\[43\]](#) Jacqui True points out that male-centered economic indicators undervalue women's work, leading to women being disproportionately disadvantaged globally.[\[44\]](#)

Given that states remain the central actors in realist thinking, the role of the individual, both male and female, is relegated to the periphery. As a result, the recognition of female individuals and the feminist debate is even further marginalized.[\[45\]](#) Conversely, liberalism places greater emphasis on the role of the individual, viewing consensus as a crucial element in explaining international relations. Liberalists prioritize issues like Free Trade, democratic processes, and civil rights in their discourse.[\[46\]](#)

Feminism can be perceived as an offshoot of liberalist thought. This allows for the potential to bolster institutions, particularly civil society groups, where feminist ideologies can advance the feminist agenda within the international system. Civil societies offer a platform for feminist and liberalist discourse, prioritizing the individual as a crucial actor in shaping international relations.[\[47\]](#)

3.5 From Traditional to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches

Various modern feminist approaches have sought to push the feminist agenda in international politics as they seek to cancel the patriarchal culture that has for years dominated the field of IR. The push for power to be equally distributed has indeed taken a strong foothold in recent times especially with movements such as the "me too" movement[\[48\]](#). However, in addressing the question of whether men and women are truly equal, the analysis of Fukuyama's arguments points out a significant issue with the feminist perspective. According to Fukuyama, feminists tend to attribute attitudes towards violence, power, and status entirely to patriarchal culture, while he suggests that these behaviors and characteristics may, in fact, have biological origins. Fukuyama contends that altering the masculine biological inclination towards violence, power, and status would be challenging because attempting to re-socialize men to be less violent, i.e. resembling women, would face limitations. He believes that deeply ingrained traits are not easily changeable through

shifts in culture and ideology, or as he puts it, “*What is bred in the bone cannot be altered easily by changes in culture and ideology.*”[\[49\]](#) Although male perspectives on traditional matters like childcare, household chores, and emotional expression have significantly evolved in recent generations due to societal influences, there are limitations to what socialization can achieve. While social pressure can bring about changes in behavior, certain inherent male tendencies, such as forming competitive groups, striving for dominance in status hierarchies, and engaging in aggressive behavior towards one another, may be redirected but not entirely eradicated.[\[50\]](#)

Nonetheless, in the 1980s, the initial contributions of feminist IR, particularly by influential scholars like Cynthia Enloe in 1985, centered on fundamental IR topics such as war, militarism, and security. These scholars emphasized how such concepts were closely tied to gender structures, particularly highlighting the prevailing forms of masculinity associated with the roles of protector, conqueror, and exploiter, in contrast to femininity as the object or “other.” Consequently, they underscored the vital significance of subjecting these issues to gender analysis. Enloe’s research in 2015 is touted as one of the most comprehensive works that has sought to impact mainstream international relations paradigms.

Conventional IR has traditionally viewed the state as a unified entity predominantly led by men. In contrast, feminist IR has extensively examined gendered realities of the state, particularly through the lens of the ‘public over private’ hierarchy, commonly referred to as the sexual contract. This framework historically outlined politics and economics as primarily public domains, associated with male influence and identification, while the home, family, and social reproduction were considered predominantly private domains, linked to female influence and identification.[\[51\]](#) Therefore the history of state identity is one of gendered oppression.[\[52\]](#) Oppression, patriarchy, subjection, and other terms have been used by feminists to characterize this kind of relationship,[\[53\]](#) but the common denominator in these studies is an understanding of power as an unjust relationship. A variety of philosophical and political backgrounds are represented here, including those steeped in phenomenology and radical feminism as well as theories of intersectionality and post-structuralism.

3.5.1 Phenomenological Feminist Approaches

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) offers scrutiny of feminist phenomenological approaches to understanding male domination. Women’s lives are richly contextualized in this work by Simone de Beauvoir in terms of their social, cultural, historical, and economic settings. Women, according to Beauvoir, are the immanent “Other”, while men are the central actors[\[54\]](#).

Beauvoir (1952) explicitly states that women are defined and differentiated in relation to men, portraying them as incidental and inessential compared to men, who are seen as the unchangeable and essential.[\[55\]](#) This contrast between man as Subject and woman as Other forms the foundation of Beauvoir’s concept of dominance or oppression. Beauvoir’s claim is that subjugation of women limits their political and social enterprise because they are confined to the “Other” narrative. It may be said that women live in a constant state of tension between the two opposing forces: the ability to transcend as self-aware human beings and the cultural and social pressures that keep them bound to the world of the here and now.[\[56\]](#)

However, some feminist theorists have critiqued or elucidated on Beauvoir’s approach, some by arguing that it does not factor in paradigms such as “race,” while others by further expanding her understanding of power. One such critique comes from feminist scholar Iris Young [\[57\]](#) who claims that when it comes to female oppression, Beauvoir does not pay enough attention to the function that female embodiment plays.

Although Beauvoir discusses women’s bodies in connection to their immanent “Other” position, she prefers to emphasize women’s physiology and how physiological traits like menstruation and pregnancy connect women more directly to nature, hence, to immanence.

In the book “*Throwing Like a Girl* (1980),”[\[58\]](#) the author discussed how self-objectification contributes to constrained and ineffective motor performances, such as “throwing like a girl.” This phenomenon is influenced by the Objectification Theory, which suggests that Western culture socializes girls and women to

view their bodies from a third-person perspective, leading to self-objectification.[59] As a result, women's physical activity tends to be hesitant and uncertain, while men's movements appear more confident and purposeful.[60]

Patriarchal culture views women as objects, reducing them to nothing more than a physical body, and in sexist societies, women are commonly treated as such[61]. Despite this, women are subjects who cannot be reduced to the status of simple physical objects. As a consequence, women "cannot be in oneness with themselves[62]." Women's experiences with their clothing and breasts are only a few of the topics. Young delves into in other writings, along with the conflict between transcendence and immanence and the lack of wholeness that is distinctive of feminine subjectivity[63].

3.5.2 Radical Feminist Approaches

Radical as the term suggests, looks for an overhaul of the status quo where feminists call for a total overhaul of the patriarchal system instead of making adjustments to it. Radical feminists, who are more militant in nature, perceive power in terms of the connection between master and slave, which is frequently likened to the relationship between master and slave in ancient Rome.[64] Catharine MacKinnon's notion of dominance is interwoven with her understanding of gender differences, stating that male domination in the home is all that causes gender inequality. [65] Differences should be valued and respected, but the issue is that they are influenced by the power structure. Given a world where men hold dominion and women are oppressed, it follows that men are perceived as powerful while women are perceived as powerless. The division between women and men extends beyond mere differences and encompasses issues of power and powerlessness. Many second-wave feminists, including MacKinnon, have delineated this contrast between biologically rooted characteristics that define males and females and the concept of gender, which is often assumed to be inherent and unchangeable.[66] This approach is strong on discourse surrounding the right to give birth or to abort, critique of patriarchal power in government and even religion, on issues of prostitution and rape among others.

3.5.3 Socialist Feminist Approaches

A fundamental Marxist model of power is the capitalists' expropriation of surplus value created by labor. Marx's categories are gender-blind, according to many second-wave feminist critics. When Marx primarily considers economic production, he ignores the fact that capitalist production techniques exploit domestic reproductive work done by women and that this labor is also exploited at home. Due to Marx's failure to address gender issues adequately, second-wave Marxist or socialist feminists contend that his analysis needs to be complemented with a radical feminist examination of patriarchy to fully comprehend women's oppression. The "Dual Systems Theory" proposes that women's subjugation originates from two independent systems, combining elements of Marxist feminism and Radical feminism.[67] Men's dominance, or "patriarchy," is responsible for women's oppression, while class relations or "capitalism" are to blame for the subjugation of both the working class and the vast majority of females.

3.5.4 Poststructuralist Feminist Approaches

Foucault's works on "power" has heavily influenced the poststructuralist feminist approach. Modern power, according to Foucault, is an ever-shifting system of force relations that originate from every social contact and hence saturate the social body.[68] It is not that power encompasses everything, but that it emanates from everything, in his words. Foucault's emphasis lies not on the concentration of power in the hands of the sovereign or state, but on how power operates throughout society in what he calls a "micro-physics" of modern power, flowing through social capillaries. For Foucault, the "oppressive hypothesis" is the view that power is intrinsically repressive, which he refers to as the "repressive assumption." As he puts it, "power generates; it makes reality; it develops realms of objects and procedures of truth." Foucault does not

disagree that power may be oppressive, but he argues that it is equally constructive. He argues that contemporary authority generates subjects by submitting them to power; in the same way, it creates subjects. For feminists who want to examine oppression, Foucault's concept of subjugation and his analysis of power, in general, have been immensely useful, but they have also been highly contentious.^[69]

3.5.5 Postcolonial and Decolonial Feminist Approaches

Critiques of imperial and colonial control in the past and present may be found in postcolonial and decolonial thought. They do, however, come from different places, have different theoretical commitments, and have different ramifications. Postcolonial theory is heavily inspired by post structuralism, notably the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and takes as its fundamental point of reference the colonization of Southeast Asia by northern Europeans^[70]. The Modernity/Coloniality group of Latin American and Caribbean scholars helped birth the decolonial thought in the early 2000s^[71]. The decolonial theory draws largely on Latin American Marxism, global systems theory, and indigenous political movements to analyze the connections between capitalism, colonialism, and racial disparities. As a result of its larger historical perspective and calls for epistemic decolonization and detachment from capitalist modernity/coloniality, the decolonial theory is generally considered the more radical of the two^[72].

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

The late 1980s and early 90s marked a key turning point for the feminist debate in IR. Gender and IR were intertwined in feminist thought because of a new theoretical paradigm developed by critical thinkers to challenge the epistemic and ontological underpinnings of realist theory. Scholars in the field of feminist IR used traditional IR research to ask, "Where are the women?" and "How do we find the women?"^[73] In the 1970s, gender and the role of women in development were first presented. On the other hand, development studies are distinct from international relations since they are based on economic theory rather than political theory. During the inaugural 1988 Women and IR Conference in 1988, many speakers directed their attention to the contributions of women in developing nations^[74]. As a result, a feminist IR expert noted that there was scarce material that could be regarded as traditional IR in an academic sense.^[75] However, a decade or so later, feminist IR studies questioned the state's role as an impartial player in international politics by challenging hegemonic masculinity^[76].

To the extent that males continue to control conventional political institutions, it is their viewpoints that dictate both intra- and inter-state activities. Women involved in international relations argue that the international system and state actions carry gendered characteristics because they have been shaped by male influence and masculinity. Additionally, this feminist perspective questioned "high politics"^[77] and its emphasis on security considerations, as well as IR's view of the state as an abstract, sovereign entity. Using this notion of state and international politics, feminist IR specialists sought to highlight the paucity of women in all areas of international relations, including politics and academia. It was also the purpose of these researchers to include women and to include gendered analysis into international relations theory to inform on the connection between IR and economics such as the persistence of poverty and better social policies^[78].

Women have been systematically excluded from IR because of a conviction that their theories were universally applicable. For the past half century, women's studies in IR researcher point out that mainstream research does not recognize the relevance and effect of gender on IR theory, despite the widespread acceptance of gender as an analytical tool. Gendered research does not just include creating a gender variable and incorporating it into standard research methods^[79]. Other areas, such as political science, have begun to question the social constructs of the state and global players such as gender. In her 1997 text, "You Just Don't Understand," Tickner looks at IR from a gendered viewpoint arguing the need to chart new tracks instead of trying to squeeze women's connections with IR into already established frameworks.^[80]

In her work “Do We Understand Each Other Yet,” feminist IR theorist Marysia Zalewski noted that even after ten years since her influential essay “You Just Don’t Understand,” gender continued to be side-lined in IR[81]. She argued that this marginalization was a result of the ongoing tension between “doing” feminism and “undoing” the discipline of IR, as fully incorporating gender perspectives would entail deconstructing the mainstream theoretical approaches in the field.[82]

After the end of the Cold War, there emerged a “novel audience” for IR, prompting the re-evaluation of earlier methodologies and strategies to suit the needs and interests of this evolving audience. This concern is commonly raised by IR theorists, but feminist researchers also need to be mindful of another epistemological issue prevalent in both mainstream IR literature and the feminist paradigm. The problem arises from the overwhelming presence of “Western” scholars, which significantly impacts research and discourse within the field of international relations, leading to certain epistemic gaps or “blank patches” in knowledge due to the dominance of Western perspectives.[83]

This influence extends beyond Western academia, as researchers from the First World often have a considerable impact on scholars in the Third World through their research and writing, driven by the prevailing “First World/Third World” (or “Developed/Developing”) dichotomy in geopolitics and academia [84]. Even European researchers have expressed concerns about the prominence of their American colleagues in IR literature and research.[85] Therefore, studies from influential scholars, especially those from the United States, are extensively published and quoted, contributing to the establishment of the prevailing discourse in the field[86].

Where are the men?

Men are present as they have always been in the international political system. In the 1980s, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher contributed in highlighting the gender inequalities in international politics. She was not a feminist herself, but her very presence helped to break through the gender detachment.[87] Her presence in the international political space played an essential role in the international system. During an international meeting in Venice in 1987, the picture taken of all the presidents present revealed a glaring inequality in the number of men vis-à-vis women in high political office.



Figure 1: G7 leaders pose for a portrait at the sixth G& summit in Venice, Italy in 1980. Photograph: Archivion Cameraphoto Epoche/Hulton Archive/ Getty Images

Similarly, Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor and British Prime Minister Theresa May, played a comparable role in raising awareness about gender issues when they stood for a photograph with other heads of government, which represents the world's major economic powers. A woman's presence in the photo makes it difficult to overlook the fact that the majority of the individuals in the group are men. [\[88\]](#)



Figure 3: G7 leaders pose for a portrait at the summit in Charlevoix in Canada. Photograph: Neil Hall/Pool/EPA

GENDERING INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

5.1 Gendering Tourism

In many societies being feminine was characterized by staying close to home while being masculine was almost an automatic permit for travel. Throughout history, women from various societies have experienced compelled journeys as enslaved laborers, refugees, sex slaves, and powerless members of male-controlled families. In contrast, for a man to be perceived as truly masculine, he is often expected to leave his home and venture out independently into the world. Women explorers, popularly known as Victorian Lady Travelers defied the defined feminine role and explored uncharted lands. [\[89\]](#) The works documented during their travels helped shape, to some extent, the colonial landscape.

During the mid-1800s, Thomas Cook, the visionary behind Thomas Cook Travel, conceived the concept of group travel on chartered trains, primarily targeting working men at first. However, as time progressed, Cook recognized the potential of package tours to also appeal to working men, their wives, children, and even independent female travelers without male companionship. [\[90\]](#)

In the mid-1800s, women's travel became a common phenomenon and Mr. Cook soon offered packages for the solitary woman to travel alone and destinations were gauged by how safe they were for women because if they were safe for women, they were safe for most people.

If a government declares its intention to prioritize tourism as a key industry, it indicates its commitment to being internationally compliant to the extent that even a solo female traveler will feel welcome and comfortable in that country. [\[91\]](#) Nonetheless, as time passes, a development strategy reliant on tourism could be jeopardized if the country gains an international reputation as an unsafe destination for women. [\[92\]](#)

A case in point is the gang rape in New Delhi in December 2012, where five men raped a twenty-three-year-old Indian lady on a bus which triggered an unprecedented public outcry in India. Although similar attacks had occurred before, this particular case gained global attention and led to widespread outrage. In the aftermath of the gang rape, Indian feminists, international organizations, and the media pressurized the government to act. The growing concern over women's safety, there was a significant decline in foreign tourists visiting India, with a 25% drop overall and an even steeper 35% decline in female tourists. The

violence against women was negatively impacting India's substantial tourism industry.[\[93\]](#)

5.2 Gendering Air Travel

Air travel in the mid-twentieth century saw a rise in the number of women crew members due to the preference of women passengers to be attended by female staff. This trend began in 1930 when Ellen Church, a trained pilot and nurse, proposed her services to the owner of Boeing Air. Aware of the male-dominated airline industry, Church suggested that skilled white female nurses would be best suited as airline cabin crew members which resulted in an eight-woman crew pioneering female stewardship with Boeing Air Transport in the 1930s. The process of feminizing the airlines' cabin crews proceeded rapidly and by 1937, the number of female flight attendants had doubled that of men in American airlines. After the second World War, international air travel grew and while most pilots were still men, the cabin crews became predominantly female.[\[94\]](#) Yet, the decline in working conditions during flights and the endeavors of male executives to objectify flight attendants and commodify their services for corporate mass marketing had a profound impact on the working conditions of female flight attendants. This and other such incidences prompted action by Transnational feminists, who have been urging organizations like the International Labor Organization and the United Nations (UN) World Tourism Organization to adopt a more gender-conscious approach in monitoring labor conditions within the thriving global tourism business. As a response, UN Women, the UN agency responsible for monitoring and advocating women's rights in various sectors, has started paying attention to the tourism industry. Today, women hold positions as hotel managers, travel agency proprietors, and pilots among others.

5.3 Gendering Nationalism and the Veil

Amid the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring in the Middle East between 2011 and 2013, women took to the streets in diverse attires to protest against dictatorial leadership and advocate for democracy. For instance, female protestors in Bahrain established a women-only base camp in the heart of the town, demanding political reforms from their country's monarchy. In contrast, during the same period in Cairo's Tahrir Square, Egyptian women joined male protestors, but what stood out was the varied attire they wore. Some women donned headscarves, while others chose to expose their hair. Among nationalists, the topic of the veil has been a subject of extensive debate.[\[95\]](#)

5.4 Gendering War

Throughout history, the prevailing image of a soldier has been that of a warrior, dedicated to selflessly protecting women, children, and other vulnerable individuals. Military training has often relied on diminishing anything perceived as feminine since the concept of being a soldier is traditionally seen as antithetical to being "womanly." This idealized portrayal of masculinity in war often involves marginalizing women's roles in such conflicts, relegating them to patriotic or supportive positions like mothers, wives, or daughters. Nevertheless, as some states now accept women into their armed forces, cultural and traditional notions of who can be a warrior have been stirred, giving rise to deep currents of change and reflection.[\[96\]](#) There are mixed reactions by some feminists who believe that women should be allowed to serve in the military while others believe that women should not fight in "men's wars."

5.5 Gendering Diplomacy

Madeline Albright, Condoleezza Rice, and Hillary Clinton are among the most powerful U.S. Secretaries of State. Their rise to diplomatic prominence has had significant gendered implications. Notably, when Hillary Clinton was secretary of state,[\[97\]](#) some male heads of government began appointing female ambassadors to Washington. However, the historical context of marriage in politics plays a crucial role in determining whether doors are opened or closed to women in diplomacy. If women continue to be primarily perceived as wives, gender barriers will persist, and the traditionally masculinized nature of diplomacy will remain

entrenched. Marriage, for many women, not only serves as an obstacle that omits them from influencing foreign policy, but also becomes a tool wielded by governments. Throughout history, the conduct of international relations has often involved the roles of women as wives, illustrating how marriage operates on both domestic and international levels. The gendered politics of marriage significantly influence the gender dynamics within IR.[\[98\]](#)

THE FUTURE OF FEMINISM

Feminist approaches in international politics still face challenges of recognition and acceptance. According to Cosslett and Baxter, the key challenges facing feminism today are; equal division of “domestic” labor. According to their argument, even though there are more women in the workforce now than before, eighty percent of them can still claim to do more housework than their male counterparts.[\[99\]](#) A second challenge is the media who have over the years perpetuated some gender-based stereotypes. Third, is the proverbial glass ceiling. Save for Margaret Thatcher who broke the glass ceiling; there is still a long way to go before more female leaders can access what is termed as the “boys club.” From a list of 197 heads of state, only 22 are women, representing a mere fraction of leadership positions worldwide. Across various job sectors, the percentage of women holding top positions remains below 25%. Additionally, women who return to work after having children often.[\[100\]](#) Challenges like social inequality and violence against women also are a hindrance to the advancement of feminist ideologies in the modern contemporary world.

However, the future of feminism does not paint quite a gloomy picture. In 1997, French Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin adopted the “*Parité*” (equality) model with the aim of addressing the existing gender imbalance in the political sphere. The objective of “*Parité*” was to attain the same access to electoral functions for men and women.[\[101\]](#) Advocates argued that since women constitute half of the population, they ought to have the same chance to be elected to office.

To promote gender equality in political representation, the French government offers funding to political parties by ensuring that supporters of “*parité*” get more funds than those who did not field an equal number of women and men as contestants for office. This measure of equality was passed into law by the National Assembly in 2000 and 2001.[\[102\]](#) In the year when the municipal elections were initially conducted following this scheme, women secured 47.5% of the seats in city government, which marked a significant increase compared to their previous representation.[\[103\]](#)

Several other countries, such as Sweden, Germany, and Israel, among others, have adopted similar provisions to address gender representation in politics. In 1992, Tanzania enacted a law mandating that women make at least 15% of parliamentary representation. Rwanda has also achieved a significant milestone in increasing female representation in its parliament. On the other hand, Kenya is still in the process of debating the two-thirds gender bill, which has faced criticism from some lawmakers. Despite challenges, there is an ongoing trend of improvement in achieving gender parity in politics across different nations.

The world economy is no longer reliant solely on men’s paid labor, but there is also a heavy reliance on women’s paid labor. Both women and men are calling for the implementation of fresh social policies that offer them the freedom to balance caregiving and breadwinning responsibilities, rather than being compelled to make an either-or choice.[\[104\]](#) While motherhood will continue to hold significance in women’s identities, sexual autonomy has gained equal importance worldwide. This could manifest in choices such as the decision to marry or divorce, or the freedom to select sexual partners and explore various pleasures. Globally, women are asserting their right to reject unwanted sexual advances, violence, and demeaning cultural representations and stereotypes of femininity. Instead, they are actively shaping alternative and empowering notions of beauty, power, and justice.[\[105\]](#)

Feminism is expected to endure and evolve. Rather than fading away, this movement aims to acknowledge

the full humanity and citizenship of all women, valuing their labor on par with men's. As it progresses, the movement is positioned for further growth and development. Speaking during the 1995 Beijing conference, Gertrude Mongella, secretary general of the Fourth World Conference on Women, opined that, *"A revolution has begun, and there is no going back. There will be no unravelling of commitments—not today's commitments, not last year's commitments, and not the last decade's commitments. This revolution is too just, too important, and too long overdue."* [106]

The feminist ideology could thrive if we gained some insight into the history of women's movements.

CONCLUSION

The pursuit by feminist scholars in constructing a better, more holistic IR Theory to contribute to international political system has experienced setbacks mainly because policy-makers and decision-makers are ever too keen to merely brush aside feminist approaches. Feminists argue that perhaps the reason why feminism has been stifled in international politics is because it has always been perceived as a preserve of men. This explains why the theoretical foundations of IR theory are predominantly masculinized. The feminist approach argues that the traditional epistemologies in international relations exclude the possibility that women could be agents of knowledge and this accounts for the male-centric notions from the international system.

The post-Cold War era brought about recognizable theoretical shifts within the field of IR. Emerging theories challenged the state-centric approach by realists. The Feminism Approach remains instrumental in broadening perspectives within IR. Its main emphasis on promoting international cooperation aligns it with a sub-category of liberalism, thereby reinforcing and enriching the liberalist theory. There is an avenue to strengthen the institutions especially civil society groups where feminist's ideologies can lead the feminist agenda in the international system. The civil societies do offer an outlet for feminist and liberalist's discourse focusing on the individual as an essential actor in the international system. Feminist theories can provide fresh insights into state behavior and individual needs, especially for those on the peripheries of the international system. By adopting a feminist perspective that draws from women's experiences, new dimensions can be added to our understanding of the world political system.

Some of the initial aims of the Feminist movement were to increase women's political power and to encourage women to actively participate in political processes at all levels of government. Women are still not sufficiently represented in positions of power, in elections, in political parties, in democratic institutions, in legislatures, in cabinet posts, in executive roles, and in the making of policy in most parts of the globe. There are many cultural hurdles and preconceptions that women who want to participate in public life must overcome. The oppression of women is rooted in unequal power dynamics that exist at all levels of society, from the individual to the political. Politics will remain a male domain and privilege as long as there aren't enough powerful women to tip the scales in the other direction. Women's independence in all spheres of society, economy, and politics is a precondition for genuine democracy. The advancement of gender parity, the eradication of violence, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and world peace depend on women's active engagement in government.

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