



International Relations

Feminism and International relations

Professor Kimberley Hutchings:

A feminist analysis starts from the significance of gender. And gender may be understood in different kinds of ways, but all feminist analyses take gender seriously. And when they're thinking about gender, they're thinking about ways in which the world is organised according to gender categories, such as masculinity and femininity, and they are thinking about the ways in which those categories operate in terms of a hierarchy, and in some ways, institutionalise and perpetuate certain kinds of inequalities.

So feminist analysis starts from gender, and it starts from gender as a hierarchical relational category. And it tries to look at the world through that kind of lens.

So if you look at how that comes into international relations, in terms of the social sciences, it was relatively late on that an interest in feminist perspectives arose in international relations. It had been around much more in history, in sociology, and other disciplines before. So really, in the late 1980s.

And the first manifestation of it was the recognition that gender mattered to certain kinds of practices that everybody agreed with central to international relations. Practices such as diplomacy, war, global economic relations. And feminist scholars started to study those aspects of international relations, bearing in mind gender, and taking a variety of approaches to try and to work out how gender might matter in relation to those kinds of things.

So for example, in relation to war, in the late 1980s somebody like Jean Elshtain is writing a book called *Women and War*, which looks at the ways in which practises of war have always been gendered. There's always been a gendered division of labour. The languages through which war is justified and legitimated used gendered kinds of categories. And in many ways, the whole practise relied on a distinction between masculinity and men understood as protectors, defenders, fighters; and women understood as those on the home front, those who are in need of protecting, those who are taking care of the injured when they came home, and so on.

When feminist scholars start to look at certain core areas of international relations, such as war, peace, diplomacy, and use the category of gender to try to understand what is going on, and what they find is that gendered relations of power are hugely important to all of those areas of international relations. For example, things like the work of diplomats often being structured in terms of the division of labour between a diplomat and his wife, which then gets very complicated when you start having more women diplomats in the 1990s. And suddenly,

the foreign office can't work out what to do, because there's nobody to do the social side of things that the diplomat's wife has traditionally done.

So something as central to international relations as diplomacy turns out to rely on certain kinds of gendered relations, which are also relations of power. So that's the kind of thing that feminist analysis starts to do in international relations. And as you go on through the 1990s and the 2000s, feminist work extends to more and more aspects and topics within international relations, including, of course, economic globalisation and international political economy, where gendered divisions of labour and gendered effects of economic changes are really important.

In terms of realism, feminism is particularly wanted to point to the importance of gender as a structuring principle for what states are, how they operate, but also the significance of non-state actors of various kinds in the international system. So going back to the original example I was using, the ways in which a gendered division of labor is absolutely crucial to the practise of war. So feminism challenges realism by bringing in different sources of explanation, different ways of thinking about central practises like war.

It argues that the state isn't the only significant actor within international relations. It opens up the range of non-state actors, right down to individual men and women as being important to how international politics works. And it's also suspicious of the assumption that everything must be driven by the kinds of power and security logics that realism assumes. So feminism, in that sense, shares, I think, something with liberal and instructivist approaches, which tend to open up much more the possibility of change and challenge, the possibility of actually making the world a better place in some sense.

In terms of constructivism, I think you could certainly argue that feminism is an example of a constructivist approach, in that very few feminist perspectives-- in fact, none that I can think of within international relations-- would think about gender as something that somehow is biologically given or factually just there. The assumption is that gender is a socially constructed category, that it comes out of whole sort of systems and layers of meaning, that it's structured into the way in which the world works, and can be unstructured, if you like, or deconstructed in some sense. So in that sense, feminism is part of a constructivist agenda. There are, however, tensions between feminist and constructivist work. One of the interesting areas of this is that some constructivists have started to take gender seriously as a kind of causal variable, and started to talk about the way that gender can influence the actors-- the people involved in international politics.

For example, there's a very famous piece of work that looks at the evacuation of Srebrenica before the major massacre that happened in the mid 1990s during the wars and the breakup of Yugoslavia. And there's constructivist work on that that has argued that because of the way

they humanitarian organisations and other organisations took for granted certain assumptions about gender.

It wasn't recognised that actually it was men who were the category of the population most under threat from the invading forces. And they gave priority by mistake to the old, the sick, and to women and children to get them out of Srebrenica prior to the men and the boys going out.

Now that's a very interesting argument, and feminists, I think, would be very interested in it. But one of the things that followed from that, for the constructivist scholars concerned, was that you could somehow simply rewrite the booklets of the humanitarian organisations to rethink their hierarchies of gender victimhood, without thinking much more seriously about what gender actually means, and why it is that there's this automatic link between women and civilians, or women and those that need to be protected. So feminist analysis, I think, goes further than a lot of constructivist work, in that it really wants to look critically at the concept of gender, and at how gender operates, rather than taking it for granted in the way that particular argument did.

In relation to a whole range of issues, including things like human trafficking, sexual violence, and war, and so on, the first point is that a feminist analysis actually sees these things as significant in a way that just hasn't happened within mainstream analysis from any of the different perspectives that we were talking about. So there's a sense in which something like sexual violence in war wasn't considered as of any specific importance in terms of understanding how war works, in terms of a kind of social scientific explanation of what's going on in war. It's not until feminists start to look at that phenomenon that you actually get an attempt to understand what's going on social scientifically.

So if I can just try and exemplify that-- traditionally, sexual violence in war was understood as a sort of leftover thing that just happened. It was one of those things-- of course, men, after they've conquered the city or whatever, are going to go around raping people. It's just par for the course. That's what they do. A kind of very reductive, biologically essentialist way of thinking about men and masculinity.

Feminist scholars want to raise questions about that. For start off, they would link sexual violence to all the other ways in which war is gendered. And they would try to think about, well, what role is sexual violence playing in war? What's it reflecting, and what's it constructing? When you start to study it in detail, and when you look at sexual violence not just against women, but also against men in war, you find some really interesting dynamics

Well, one has to go back to gender, I think, in terms of what feminism allows you to see.

There is an expression that quite a lot of feminist IR uses, which is to talk about looking at the world through a gendered lens, or a gender lens. This is simply something that isn't visible to most work in international relations.

I frequently had conversations with colleagues in which they've said, yes, but how can it have anything to do with interstate relations? I just don't see it. Isn't it to do with personal relations, or something that maybe sociologists should be interested in. But why international relations? So there's a literal kind of blindness that you simply don't see it without that feminist push to see it. And once you start to think about gender, you do see that it's everywhere. Now that doesn't mean that it's everything, so I guess this brings us to the limitation side of it, or at least to the ways in which feminist analysis and paying attention to gender needs to go along with other things, as well.

Most feminist analysis is very interested in intersectionality, and in the ways in which different kinds of identity categories-- gender, race, class, sexuality, disability-- all these things are significant for how the world works, and for the different kinds of hierarchies of power that operate within it. I suppose the other side would be that sometimes, people accuse feminist analysis of lapsing into only being interested in women. Although, one could say to that, well, at least somebody is, because if you didn't have that, then you probably wouldn't have anybody saying anything about women at all.

And that brings us back to the point about how men and masculinity is something that actually feminist lenses do, I think, open up or bring to our attention. But nevertheless, it could be argued that some feminist analysis doesn't look carefully enough at men and masculinity, and focuses too much on that kind of gender as a synonym for women problem. I suppose the other side of this-- and this is really a matter of debate within international relations-- from the point of view of certain kinds of approaches to social science, feminist analysis tends to focus too much on the micro level or on questions that you can investigate through qualitative techniques doesn't do enough in terms of being able to generalise or come up with law-like observations about the way in which the world works.

Now again, that's contested, and there is some feminist work that actually does use a lot of quantitative positivist or neo-positivist techniques. But it could be argued that it tends to focus attention down more to the micro level than the macro level, in terms of what it does. So that could be another limitation.