THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMINIST APPROACHES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Global politics are filled with gender inequalities: men and masculinities have disproportionate power in the discipline and its practice instead of a full social reality for all. Feminist International Relations analyses the discipline from the perspective of the marginalised, often women, and how these inequalities have affected International Relations (IR), and its practice. Mainstream scholars of IR have been engaging selectively with feminist IR, however, as the dominant position of positivist approaches have been challenged since the 1990s, it has given more space for alternative theoretical angles, such as feminism (Steans, 2003). Feminist approaches of IR have been flourishing separately but without truly impacting the field as a whole (Youngs, 2004). Feminism, together with other 'new' approaches such as post-modernism, constructivism, and critical theory, contest the power of mainstream IR (Aydin, 2016). Its scholars have already published on core issues, such as war, peace, and the protection of the nation-state boundaries, with the aim of promoting a more comprehensive security for the international system (Blanchard, 2003).

The most likely victims of war are marginalised groups, such as women and children (Tickner, 1997). Hence feminism, coming from the perspective of the disempowered, should be clearly taken into consideration in a discipline that focuses on war

and conflict trying to predict, explain and reduce their likelihood and impact (Caprioli, 2004). In this light, feminism is important for the study of international politics as it offers a view on it that traditional IR fails to see.

Firstly, the essay will provide accounts for feminist IR approaches in relation to mainstream IR. Secondly, the importance of women as subjects of knowledge is discussed, following with a discussion of objectivity in both mainstream and feminist IR. Finally, the paper will examine how gender inequalities affect the discipline and how feminist approaches take this into consideration.

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO IR

It is important to define what is meant by both mainstream IR and feminist IR to understand how they relate to each other. Namely, mainstream IR is a compound of theories that rely on empiricism - especially realism - and the rational actor model (Aydin, 2016). These frameworks have profound epistemological and ontological contradictions with feminist understandings, raising unsolved critiques on the latter. According to Steans (2003), in fact, despite their differences, neo-realism and neo-liberalism, the dominant theories, both assume that it is possible to understand the world objectively, and that international relations can be investigated through scientific methods. Feminist theories, on the other hand, are grounded in epistemology that takes social

relations as its central category of analysis (Tickner, 1997). Additionally, most of their practitioners would locate themselves in the postpositivist constructivist tradition (Steans, 2003). Feminist IR often regards positivist scholarship as superficial (Youngs, 2004). Indeed, Steans (2003) notes that neo-realism lacks deep insights about the world order, and that it can potentially be put to the service of conservative political ends. The anarchic world order and state-centric system which realism uses to explain world affairs truly proves to be inadequate in understanding aspects of international relations that feminist approaches could possibly offer by focusing on the human.

There is no single feminist IR theory, but rather many approaches, such as Marxist, radical, standpoint, or existentialist feminism, which are often grounded in sociological traditions that lie outside the discipline of mainstream IR (Tickner, 1997). As an example, standpoint feminism suggests that as women's experiences in life are distinct from men's, most knowledge of the masculine discipline does not reflect their realities (Allen, 2009). Therefore, women can produce different knowledge that holds insights into world politics due to their marginalised perspective. Radical feminism, in turn, seeks fundamental social transformational change rather than equality to the existing system (Hudson, 2005). Liberal feminism, however, is an exception in a way that it does not necessarily aim to challenge the epistemological premise of mainstream IR, since it also sees objectivity as possible, but calls for more attention to the position of women when practising IR (Steans, 2003). This essay concentrates on feminist approaches which denounce the epistemological shallowness in mainstream IR, namely, the possibility of objectivity.

Notwithstanding the different approaches, according to Steans (2003), feminist IR has four core tasks: indicating how mainstream IR excludes and has bias in terms of its state-centric analysis and positivism; making women visible as social, economic, and political subjects in international politics; analysing how gender inequalities are embedded in IR; and empowering women as subjects of knowledge by building theoretical understanding of their lived experiences. These points are discussed next.

IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES

Women's perspectives have often been excluded from traditional IR (Tickner, 1997). According to Youngs (2004), due to the top-down logic of mainstream IR, how wars affect children and women (military occupation, militarization, (forced) migration, human trafficking, forms of slavery, prostitution) is often ignored. Inequalities, which decrease an individual's security, cannot be understood by using conventional state-centric tools of analysis (Tickner, 1997). However, feminist approaches can produce useful knowledge on this. One of the ways that the legitimacy of women as 'knowers' has been questioned is through the public and private divide. This divide sees men as the 'knowers' of politics, economics and justice in the public sphere, and women as existing solely in the private sphere, not included in politics (Tickner, 1997). The divide has previously legitimised the ignoring of women in IR and has led to mainstream IR being patriarchal in character (Aydin, 2016). Dichotomies such as the mentioned public/private are gendered, and they permit the excluding of women as subjects of

knowledge (Tickner, 1997). Men are associated with the public, therefore part of the discipline, and women with the private, thus excluded from IR analysis (Aydin, 2016). By taking these ideas into the analysis, feminism acknowledges their gendered nature, and participates in the inclusion of what was previously ignored.

According to Aydin (2016), 80 to 90 percent of war casualties since World War II have been civilians, the majority of whom are women and children. Thus, ignoring the perspectives of the most likely victims of conflict means that mainstream IR lacks analytical depth, and provides an incomplete picture of events. Therefore, the knowledge of mainstream IR is problematic because it is constructed only by those in a position of privilege, often white males, producing a distorted view of the world (Sjoberg, 2012). By taking the 'private' into consideration, feminist approaches offer a view of the actual reality, which is more comprehensive.

However, the bottom-up, rather than top-down, approach that considers the human for international politics has been widely questioned by traditional IR scholars (Tickner, 1997; Steans, 2003; Youngs, 2004). Feminists see different realities than traditional scholars when they write about international politics (Tickner, 1997), and therefore do not fit into the narrow boundaries of the discipline, creating questions of legitimacy. As stated by Youngs (2004: 84), the top-down approach of mainstream IR causes an issue of war: "If silence is political, not-knowing is at the core of power and its abuses". As long as the perspectives of women and other marginalised groups are excluded, power relations caused by women's unequal position can be ignored. Therefore, mainstream IR fails in taking issues which

women confront daily into consideration (Youngs, 2004). According to Steans (2003), neo-realism has been criticised for its oversimplified view of the anarchic structure of the world and the state-centric analysis. Feminism can offer a different viewpoint, by placing social relations and real lived experiences at the centre of its analysis (Aydin, 2016). By examining international politics at the microlevel, a better understanding of the relationship between all forms of violence and how unjust social relations contribute to insecurity can be achieved, and therefore, it can inform the discipline about causes and consequences of war that are missing from traditional approaches (Youngs, 2004).

According to Hudson et al. (2009) the treatment of women in society is a fundamental and powerful factor in explaining when wars occur: dysfunctional templates of violence and control often diffuse throughout society and manifest in state security and behaviour. Hudson et al. (2009) maintain that in order to both understand and promote national and international security, scholars cannot overlook the situation and perspective of women. Evidently then, women should not be ignored in the study of international relations.

QUESTIONING OBJECTIVITY

Mainstream IR often criticises feminist approaches because of their rejection of the notion of neutrality of facts, therefore claiming it lacks objectivity (Tickner, 1997; Steans, 2003). However, precisely this perspective offers understanding of the international politics that mainstream IR fails to see. Feminist IR seeks to explain the fuller dynamics of political and economic power, including the real experiences of women and how they are deeply connected

to military systems including, but not limited to, acts of sex tourism, slavery, human trafficking and torture of both women and children (Youngs, 2004).

Due to the ontological and epistemological limitations, traditional IR fails to see the whole picture of war, peace and international politics in general. The assumed universality of world affairs of conventional IR, which is based on the male perspective, excludes people by offering narrow-minded explanations that are perpetuated in the theories (Caprioli, 2004). Tickner (1996: 456), one of the key scholars in feminist IR, states that "a feminist perspective on international theory must begin by questioning claims of universality". Universality can be defined as "the quality or state of being universal; existing everywhere, or involving everyone" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Yet what is claimed to be universal or objective in IR is largely the knowledge of privileged men, which therefore excludes others from the discipline (Tickner, 1996). Feminism takes the structural inequalities that contribute to the insecurity of women, children and other excluded groups into the analysis. Inequalities, which are built into the historical legacies of the modern state and the international system - "only by analysing the evolution of the modern state system and its changing political, economic and social structures can we begin to understand its limitations as a security provider" (Tickner, 1997: 626).

Sovereignty is a form of legitimation which converts power into authority (Steans, 2003), and the structural inequalities that stem from the state-system are central contributors to the insecurity of individuals (Tickner, 1997). By offering an alternative unit of analysis , and questioning the objectivity and inequalities of

the international system, feminism can offer a more adequate platform in understanding the security issues faced by individuals. Youngs (2004) states that if these assumptions of 'universal knowledge' are not questioned, the philosophical limitations will continue to be reproduced. While acknowledging the impossibility of universality, feminist approaches can assist in searching for a mutually shared conception of the world (Tickner, 1996). It should be noted that feminist approaches do see regularities, such as gender or patriarchy, but these are socially and culturally constructed rather than universal and natural (Tickner, 1997).

Standpoint feminists claim that the 'objectivity' of positivist approaches is false (Steans, 2003), as claims are always subjective on some level. Recognising that there is always a bias can, in fact, offer a better ability to reach higher levels of objectivity. Feminists are suggesting that international theories which claim to offer objective and universal explanations, have been constructed out of the behaviour of men (Tickner, 1994). Claiming universality or objectivity can then be seen as arguing that the male perspective is, in fact, the 'human perspective'. Therefore, assumptions made from this inaccurate truth can clearly be seen false as well. Harding (1990, cited in Tickner, 1996: 456) argues that, in fact, the perspective of someone from the outgroup is likely to produce more objective knowledge than a member of the dominant group, whose ways of thinking are close to dominant conceptual schemes. Ultimately, Tickner (1997) adds that broadening the knowledge base by adding women's experiences into the discipline could enhance objectivity.

GENDER IN IR

Feminism not only tries to include women in its analysis, but it also considers how gender affects the discipline, its practice, and its basic assumptions. Feminist theorists are revealing biases and inequalities in traditional IR (Caprioli, 2004), which are both reifying gender hierarchy as well as offering an incomplete picture of events and of global politics (Sjoberg, 2012). Gender relations vary in different cultures, however, they are almost always unequal, making gender a way of signifying power (Tickner, 1997).

According to Sjoberg (2012), 'gender' refers to expectations, attributes and behaviours that are considered appropriate for a person's biological sex category; being a male is associated with masculine characteristics and being a female with feminine. The terms 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably, however they are fundamentally different. As Caprioli (2004) states, the study of politics and understanding of the world is based on masculinities, which are valued over femininities. However, the political world cannot be completely understood by taking these assumptions of masculinity as neutral. Scott (1987, cited in Sjoberg, 2012: 8) states that gender is a system of symbolic meaning that creates social hierarchies based on degrees of perceived association with masculine and feminine characteristics. According to Sjoberg (2012), in Western cultures, masculine characteristics usually revolve around strength, autonomy, rationality, power, aggression and public life, whereas the feminine is linked to weakness, interdependence, emotion, sensuality, domesticity and private life. It is important to note that feminist perspectives can

be held by men, and vice versa (Steans, 2003).

In IR, gender is often difficult to see, as masculinities appear gender-neutral (Sjoberg, 2012), which masks deeply embedded masculinist assumptions that can naturalize or hide gender differences and gender inequalities (Tickner, 1997). Youngs (2004) states that male power can and should be explained, not just taken as given. By explaining male power and questioning these gendered assumptions of IR, feminism creates space to understand how they have affected the field. It has already achieved to reveal the level of gendering in the discipline that has affected the range of subjects studied, the boundaries of the discipline, its concerns and motifs, as well as the lack of women practitioners in academia and practice (Youngs, 2004).

Traditional IR scholars may believe gender is not about international politics and not part of 'real' politics and therefore, irrelevant to IR as a discipline (Tickner, 1997). However, by failing to take gender into account, mainstream IR offers partial views of power that remain on the surface of an assumed, predominantly male-constructed reality (Youngs, 2004). Feminist approaches understand gender cannot be ignored in IR as it is a constitutive element of how the modern international system was created; taking it into the analysis can reveal the complexities of the power relations present.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although feminist approaches cannot explain the whole international system, they offer a perspective from the disempowered, who are the most likely victims of war. Placing social relations and lived experiences at the centre of the analysis informs the discipline about causes and consequences

of war that are missing from traditional approaches - state-centric tools of analysis cannot effectively reveal the inequalities and all forms of violence that decrease an individual's security. Mainstream IR relies on masculinist assumptions offering a partial view of reality; taking gender into account can expose the patriarchal power relations present in the international system. Broadening the knowledge base of the discipline through adding women's perspectives into it, could enhance objectivity. Thus, feminist approaches can lead to a more adequate view of the state of events. They are important to global politics and should be considered as a valued part of the practice and disciple of international relations: integrating feminism into IR can lead to higher levels of security in societies.

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