

Chapter 1

Feminism, International Relations and War

s a scholar and teacher of International Relations, I have frequently Lasked myself the following questions: why are there so few women in my discipline? If I teach the field as it is conventionally defined, why are there so few readings by women to assign to my students? Why is the subject matter of my discipline so distant from women's lived experiences? Why have women been conspicuous only by their absence in the worlds of diplomacy and military and foreign policy-making?,' noted feminist and international relations (IR) scholar Ann J. Tickner aptly posited these questions in her study Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security (1992). Many feminist scholars, by challenging the masculinized theoretical and practical structure, have emphasized on broadening IR to include a gender perspective. However, even after two decades the issue of gender invisibility remains relevant and IR has still a long way to go to make both the discipline and the scholarship gender inclusive, especially in the context of war and conflict. A number of questions remain unanswered including where women stand in war and conflict situations, how war impacts women, and more importantly, from the point of this book, how women impact war and what kind of roles they play in violent situations. Though literature on these issues is increasing, much needs to be added, for instance, by focusing on regional specificities.

The role of gender in shaping our global political perceptions has become one of the concerns of contemporary international relations. Many scholars question why gender has remained at the periphery of traditional IR with most concluding that conventional areas that are of importance to states such as power and security have dominated the discipline. R. B. J. Walker argues that the obsession surrounding the concept of sovereignty has relegated all



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other issues as marginal.1 IR, traditionally defined as the study of states and their security, has been an overwhelmingly male-dominated discipline as not only the actors (leaders) but also the analysts have been men. Women have played a crucial role in IR but the masculinized nature of both players (leaders) and commentators (analysts) has ensured that their roles as well as viewpoints remain insignificant. The international relations system is constituted by gender hierarchies, which in turn contribute to the subordination of women. Gendered IR is crucial to respond to this suppression and to correct the inadequacies in both theory and practice. In fact, it is not just about gender but also about the way in which international relations operates and is analysed. Only through a gendered analysis of IR can the differential impact of international developments on women and men be appropriately understood and appreciated. V. Spike Peterson contends that feminist scholarship commonly agrees that gender is socially constructed and that it produces subjective identities that shape the global realities for us.² Similarly, Christine Sylvester argues that introduction of feminism in the discipline of IR has to do with 'disordering and space-opening - for women, theory and alternative practice.'3 Cynthia Enloe asserts that a study of IR will remain incomplete without taking gender as a unit of analysis.

Feminist-informed investigations by academic and activist researchers have revealed that many forms of public and private power are dependent for their operations, legitimation and perpetuation on controlling popular notions of femininity and masculinity. It therefore follows that if we do not become seriously interested in the conditions and lives of women, we are likely to craft analyses of international power dynamics that are at best incomplete and at worst faulty and unreliable.⁴

Enloe makes a lucid argument for according due place to gender in IR in her book *Bananas*, *Beaches and Bases*. She elaborates how heavily everyday manoeuvring of global power depends on gender constructions. Through an interesting analysis of various under researched roles that women play ranging from being wives of diplomats to being part of sex tourism she argues that international relations cannot survive even a day without the structures of gender. All these women who play crucial roles across the globe to sustain masculinized international relations share invisibility. Jonathon D. Wadley points out that ignoring gender means making the masculine knowledge universal and thereby leading to the building of partial theories. Gender neutrality makes an analyst 'blind to processes through which these gendered identities are produced – processes that are in many ways central to the operation of world politics.'



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Feminist IR has emerged as a crucial approach for understanding global security. Broadly the term is attributed to works that bring gender concerns into the understanding of international relations. It does not solely emphasize on issues related to women. It involves looking at how international politics impacts both the genders and vice versa. The origin of feminist IR can be traced back to the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The end of the cold war and the broadening of the traditional discipline of IR to take account of nontraditional concepts provided a fertile ground for the growth of the approach. The IR discourse was reshaped in the sense that an array of traditionally neglected issues such as human rights and civil society were accorded place, although on a limited basis, due to increasing voices for looking at alternative perspectives. It is now globally accepted that the concept of security should not be merely studied from a state centric perspective. A humane perspective, wherein the concept of security can have different connotations for different people, needs to be an integral part of the overall discourse. For instance, for women the concept should address issues such as rape and violence not only from the 'enemy' but also from those belonging to their 'own group'.8 Traditionally these issues have never been a part of analysis; as a result policymaking too has remained gender exclusive and even demeaning to women. Hence, the advocacy for a humane feminist security, a new kind of security factoring gender.

What is Feminist Perspective?

Virginia Sapiro argues that, 'feminism is both a way of thinking about the world, and a way of acting in it.... [It] is a perspective that views gender as one of the most important bases of the structure and organization of the social world.'9 A feminist approach focuses on the historical oppression of women and stresses on the intersection of theory and practice to eliminate it. ¹⁰ Susan Okin categorizes feminists as those who believe that sex-based discrimination is unacceptable and women should have the same rights and opportunities that men benefit from.¹¹ All feminists agree that gender inequalities exist and need to be addressed. Challenging the centrality of men in both the theory and practice of local, national as well as international relations is the predominant issue in the feminist approach across disciplines, including in IR. Feminist perspectives create a standpoint to observe, analyse and criticize the traditional perspectives on IR. 12 The emphasis is, thus, on engendering IR. For Sarah Brown, a feminist theory of IR is an act of political commitment to understanding the world from the perspective of the socially subjugated. She argues, 'there is the need to identify as yet unspecified relation between



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the construction of power and the construction of gender in international relations.' Cockburn contends that feminist gender analysis is unified on the issue that 'the differentiation and relative positioning of women and men is seen as an important ordering principle that pervades the system of power and is sometimes its very embodiment.' 14

Different perspectives exist in feminist scholarship on the whys and hows of discrimination and subjugation and also on ways to overcome them. For instance, many feminists contend that patriarchy, simply understood as a male dominated structure, is the primary reason for the oppression of women.¹⁵ Others argue that gender is only one among many reasons of subjugation. There are many other factors such as race, class, caste and ethnicity that lead to oppression.¹⁶ Diversity exists within the scholarship though the focus remains same, that is, making IR gender inclusive. Sylvester elaborates on this unity in diversity:

Feminist theories are diverse, but generally concur that the invisibility of gender issues within mainstream social theories, and of women in 'important' public domains of human existence, cannot be remedied simply by adding a pinch of women – to the state, to capitalist processes and to theories – and stirring. Visibility requires considerable analysis of the points in the international system, and in the theories which depict it, where women's behaviors and contributions are choked off and men's are taken as the norm. ¹⁷

A crucial term for the feminist perspective is gender that 'refers to the complex social construction of men's and women's identities...[and] behaviors... in relation to each other.'¹⁸ It is, argues Laura Sjoberg, 'a system of symbolic meaning that creates social hierarchies based on perceived associations with masculine and feminine characteristics.'¹⁹ Judith Lorber interprets gender as,

A social structure that has its origins in the development of human culture, not in biology or procreation...[and] exhibits both universal features and chronological and cross-cultural variations that affect individual lives and social interaction in major ways. As is true of other institutions, gender's history can be traced, its structure examined, and its changing effects researched.²⁰

To put it simply, gender is a social invention that apparently has nothing to do with the biological differences between males and females. It is a social categorization that puts human beings in a relationship of power. Joan W. Scott defines gender as 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and...a primary way of signifying relationships of power.' In this relationship of power, women are at the receiving end. Gender is a set of socially and culturally constructed



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characteristics in which attributes such as power, autonomy, rationality, activity and public are associated with men and their opposites such as weakness, dependence, emotionality, passivity and private are linked with women. ²² Thus, generally the qualities associated with gender are structured as dichotomous pairs such as 'rationality/irrationality, civilized/barbaric, autonomous/dependent, active/passive, and powerful/weak – all of which map onto the dominant signifier pair of masculine/feminine. ²³ A cursory glance at these gendered dichotomies provides ample guidance to comprehend how discriminatory the social construction has been.

What is War?

Wars have traditionally been a crucial subject of IR. Fought between two or more states in the form of pitched battles, wars dominated the global scenario until the Second World War. The concept underwent a noticeable change thereafter and is, many times, used synonymously with conflict, as I am doing in this book. Though the post-cold war world witnessed decline in inter-state warfare it also inversely witnessed the rise of conflicts confined within states, which were hence termed internal conflicts. The term conflict, owing to its fluid nature, is applied generically to various kinds of situations. When conflict becomes violent and includes weapons of destruction, the term used is armed conflict. Armed conflict can be defined as when actual and perceived incompatibilities result in destructive violence.²⁴ The data set of conflicts compiled by Uppsala Conflict Data Program and International Peace Research Institute, Oslo defines armed conflict as a 'a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, [and] results in...deaths.'25 This data set categorizes conflict keeping in view the number of deaths in a single year. 'War' involves at least 1,000 battle-related deaths per year, 'intermediate conflict' has between 25 and 1,000 deaths per year, and 'minor armed conflict' has at least 25 deaths per year. 26 Internal conflicts are defined as

Protracted armed confrontations occurring between governmental armed forces and the forces of one or more armed groups, or between such groups arising on the territory of a State [party to the Geneva Conventions]. The armed confrontation must reach a minimum level of intensity and the parties involved in the conflict must show a minimum of organisation.²⁷

Modern day conflicts are complex in nature. Though many of them are intra-state, there are instances of their linkages across the formal boundaries of



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the state. From the beginning of 1990 the world has witnessed more than 100 armed conflicts, most of which were civil wars, often confined to one region of a country but internationalized through the involvement of outside powers. Warfare, as an open conventional clash between two or more state armies in battlefields have been replaced by irregular and guerrilla style conflicts where no battle lines are drawn and the confrontation is not direct. This results in heavy men and material losses for civilians. Joshua S. Goldstein details:

Guerilla war, which includes certain kinds of civil wars, is warfare without front lines. Irregular forces operate in the midst of, and often hidden or protected by, civilian populations. The purpose is not to directly confront an enemy army but rather to harass and punish it so as to gradually limit its operation and effectively liberate territory from its control....In guerilla war, without a fixed front line, there is much territory that neither side controls; both sides exert military leverage over the same place at the same time. Thus guerilla wars are extremely painful for civilians. This situation is doubly painful because conventional armies fighting guerillas often cannot distinguish them from civilians and punish both together. ³⁰

'New Wars'³¹ are increasing and correspondingly increasing the scholarship on them from various perspectives including gender.

Women and War

War and security are two core issues of IR with which feminist scholars have engaged on various fronts. Traditionally the equation between women, war and security has not been a major subject of study. Wadley argues, 'nowhere is the silence toward gender more deafening than in the field of International Security. The study of war, anarchy, alliances – all observably gendered processes – stand to benefit the most from the recognition that the key actors do not act without, or outside gender.'³² Since the leaders of states as well as fighters are generally men, they form the focal group in the history of war. Elaine Showalter contends:

Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in *male-centred* terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history which are inappropriate to women. To rectify this, and to light up areas of historical darkness we must, for a time, focus on a *woman-centred* inquiry, considering the possibility of the existence of a female culture within the general culture shared by men and women.³³



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Absence of women-centric war narratives has prompted a few scholars to conclude that war is gender-free.³⁴ Feminist scholars contend that gender is crucial to understanding the issues related to wars and conflicts since gender impacts war and vice versa. They share the concern that women are a disadvantaged and discriminated class in both theory and practice of IR. They intend to change this male dominated scenario in both the spheres. Beyond this agreement there seem to be differences within the feminist scholarship on why and how gender intersects with war. There is no commonly agreed feminist approach to war and peace since 'feminists are not only at war with war but with one another'.³⁵

Though feminists have broadened the scope of research to study gendered aspects of IR and themes such as foreign policy and decision-making and social institutions such as family, they have largely shied away from analysing the concept of war. As Sylvester argues, 'feminists understudy war relative to other trans-historical and transnational institutions, such as the family and religion.'³⁶ Even when wars are studied from a gender perspective, either women's role as peace makers or more commonly their experiences of victimization are highlighted. Women perpetrators of violence are on the margins of war related discourses.³⁷ Feminism may lose its relevance if 'it does not speak "of" and "within" the margins.'³⁸ From this perspective, the discourse on women making war has assumed increasing significance.

Theories of war generally revolve around the assumption that men fight wars and hence women are irrelevant to the study of war. War is described as 'a masculine endeavour for which women may serve as victim, spectator, or prize.'39 Ralph Pettman points out, 'statemaking and warmaking are cognate activities and warmaking has long been a way of defining and demonstrating a range of stereotypically masculinist traits. 40 Even a cursory glance at the traditional literature on war would suffice to reinforce the postulation that men make war and women make peace. 41 The iconic image of war is men armed with weapons and, in continuation of that, woman mourning the dead, fleeing, searching for food, struggling to care for children, or as victims of sexual abuse. 42 In this context, comes to picture the 'protection discourse' that plays a crucial role in legitimizing war; making violent actions by men commendable and justified. Lauren Wilcox opines that without this discourse a number of wars would become futile and unnecessary. 43 Under this framework, wars are fought by men to defend the vulnerable section of society including women from potential or actual threats. Men are protectors and women are protected and the protector and the protected cannot be equal. 44 Iris Marion Young argues, 'the male protector confronts evil aggressors in the name of the right and the good, while those under his protection submit to his order and



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serve as handmaids to his efforts.' 45 Jean Bethke Elshtain in her classic work *Women and War* (1987) introduced the notion of the 'Beautiful Soul' and the 'Just Warrior' as gender identities that legitimize war since the 'Just Warrior' wages war to protect the 'Beautiful Souls' who are 'too good for this world yet absolutely necessary to it.' 46

Feminists often have to confront the accusations that through a gendered debate they imply that women are more peaceful than men.⁴⁷ Tickner argues that most IR feminists reject this labelling on various grounds including:

The association of women with peace and moral superiority has a long history of keeping women out of power.... The association of women with peace can play into unfortunate gender stereotypes that characterize men as active, women as passive; men as agents, women as victims; men as rational, women as emotional.... Moreover, it detracts from what feminists consider to be more pressing agendas, such as striving to uncover and understand the disadvantaged socioeconomic position of many of the world's women and why women are so poorly represented among the world's policymakers.⁴⁸

Are women more peaceful than men? Can war and men be synonymous and women and peace be linked without any exception? These questions have been debated and discussed cutting across boundaries of disciplines not only in social sciences but also in science disciplines. There can be no easy answers though across the globe it is commonly assumed that women are more peaceful. If we accept this argument we have to delve further to understand as to why this is so. Women's peaceful character is sometimes attributed to biology and at other times to sociology (socially constructed). The most convenient way to analyse this issue is to look into the nature versus nurture or as Sherry Ortner puts it 'nature versus culture' dichotomy; women are more peaceful because nature has made them so versus because they have been socially constructed to be more peaceful.

All is Natural

Plato believed in the concept of 'idea', an abstract entity of which all objects in this material world are imperfect manifestations. It is not difficult for students of political thought to recall endless list of examples cited by professors such as the particular chair and the particular horse as imperfect manifestations of the ideal chair and the ideal horse. Essentialism draws some of its basics from this Platonic concept. Diana Fuss in her book *Essentially Speaking* (1989) writes, 'essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the "whatness" of a



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given entity. '50 Essentialism holds that for an entity, there is a set of 'incidental attributes' necessary to its identity and function. 51 The approach is based on the notion that things and beings have specific inherent and enduring qualities. These innate traits are crucial for distinguishing all non-living and living beings from each other, including men and women.

Essentialist feminism considers that all women are in essence similar. Women, irrespective of class, caste, race, religion and culture across time and space, share common characteristics. Elizabeth Grosz explains this approach as 'the attribution of a fixed essence to women....Essentialism entails the belief that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times....Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions.'52 Notwithstanding disagreements as to what defines the essence that all women share, many scholars hold that gender identities are unchangeable due to permanent underlying, primarily biological, factors. In simple terms, you must be born a woman to be a woman. Nature and not nurture define gender differentiation, as elaborated by Inger Skjelsbaek:

For men in power, the essentialist position can be taken to mean that there is something about men's power status which originates in their gender identity – that is, the 'true' nature of men. The fact that women have stayed at home and taken care of the house and children is also explained in terms of women's 'true' nature. This interpretation suggests that throughout history men and women have tended to do what they are naturally good at. Gender difference thus becomes a matter of nature rather than nurture. ⁵³

Essentialist feminism resonates with the difference feminism approach that contends that there are deep-rooted real gender differences. This strand of feminist theory is based on the assumption that women are dissimilar to men in that they have an alternative way of looking at the world.⁵⁴ They are ontologically different from men due to the possession of distinct natural qualities, which include being peaceful and cooperative.⁵⁵ Many difference feminists, including essentialist ones, advance a major theoretical claim relevant to this book – women are inherently peaceful and less aggressive and men are relatively violent and more aggressive. This strand of feminism believes that women should not fight wars to preserve their 'feminine' qualities. Virginia Wolf, though not an essentialist, in her work *Three Guineas* (1977) comments,

Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman's rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you [men], not by us [women].... Obviously there is for you some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting which we [women] have never felt or enjoyed.⁵⁶



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Goldstein summarizes various arguments that primarily relate men to violence and women to peace into five categories: (1) men's genes make them violent; (2) testosterone makes men comparatively more aggressive than women; (3) men are bigger and stronger than women; (4) men's brains are programmed for aggression; and (5) women are biologically tailored for nurturing roles that preclude participation in violence.⁵⁷ A boy attains manhood by, among several things, participating in war.⁵⁸ A girl attains womanhood by becoming a mother and this role is considered central to the assumption of women being innately peaceful. Due to their nurturing roles, primarily as mothers, women are more inclined to give life and not take it.⁵⁹ Skjelsbaek points out,

We regard motherhood as the central marker of the transition from girl-hood to adult womanhood, and war-related activities as markers of the transition from boy to man.... When femininity is conceptualized as inherently peaceful, it is the concept of motherhood which is emphasized and cited to legitimize the claim. 60

Elshtain criticizes the viewpoint that all women are peaceful and all men are violent contending that it 'dangerously overshadows other voices, other stories: of pacific males; of bellicose women; of cruelty incompatible with just-war fighting; of martial fervor at odds – or so we choose to believe – with maternalism in women.'61 Sex is immutable while gender is a social and historical construction. All women may not necessarily possess 'feminine' qualities and similarly all men may not possess 'masculine' qualities. Also, a feminist view based on the essentialist construction cannot be a true representative of all women since 'we have yet to be able to specify some essence that is genuinely common to all women.'62 There are possessions that have essence and some, such as gender, do not, argues Andrew Sayer.63 'All women are women, no woman is only a woman,'64 and, hence, differences exist within gender emerging from several other socially constructed identities that women possess. Judith Butler points out:

If one is a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive... because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out gender from the political and cultural intersection in which it is invariably produced and maintained. 65

A major critique of essentialism is that it undermines the role of nurture in societal processes, attitudes and behaviours associated with constructing