

# Intersectionality and International Relations

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*December 12, 2017*

*Blog post produced as a result of the Fair Chance for Education project blogging workshop at Ambedkar University Delhi on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2017.*

It is often misconstrued that International Relations (IR) as a discipline deals only with manly issues like realism, war, military and soldiering; in other words – issues that are “masculine” which results in classifying this discipline as a “men’s club” (Enloe, 1989)[1]. This is also evident from the fact that “most of the key players in this discipline- diplomats, policymakers, academic professionals have been and still are- males who come from patriarchal social and political backgrounds” (Tickner, 1992), as a result of which we can see that this masculinized and gendered discourse thrives on marginalizing and invisibilizing a woman’s work, worth and labour thereby making it hard for them to be perceived as first-class citizens capable of holding positions of power (Tickner, 1995). Therefore, there is a need to use gender as a category for analyzing international politics, and to recognize that “gender is an integral, and not an accidental feature of the worldwide structure of diplomatic, military and economic relations.” (Parpart & Zalewski, 2008, p. viii). Given the fact that gender as a perspective has made inroads to law, health, medicine et al, it is high time that it is recognized, acknowledged and included in this discipline of IR too because we should not forget that while “gender is not a part of the core of International Relations as a discipline, it most certainly both structures and is structured by the practice of international politics.” (Enloe, 2012) Hence, the political salience of gender and gender identity should not be underestimated in the study and practice of International Relations.

But the problem does not end just yet. The subjugation of women that happens does not and cannot ever imply that all women are equally oppressed because in some ways or the other, parameters like class and race also creep in. While the feminist movement is made up of millions of women trying to fight the patriarchy and misogyny, not all those women experience the same levels of discrimination. An immigrant woman of colour might have to face not only sexism, but also racism in her struggle for success; something a white woman from a privileged background has probably never experienced. This is when ‘intersectionality’ comes to the front. It developed as a feminist analytical tool to study the imbrications of the various intersecting systems of oppression and has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege. (Ackerly & True, 2008)

To understand the lives of women, it is important to look at the intersections of their identities to get a more accurate picture of women’s experience. We are aware of how women’s experience did not and still does not play an important role in the theorization and perception of this field. Therefore, the main argument that is being advocated is, to use this feminist tool called intersectionality to understand why we do not see more women across and at all levels in the field of IR. “Intersectionality addresses multiple discriminations and

helps us understand how different sets of identities impact on access to rights and opportunities. The use of intersectionality in international relations moves the participants beyond theory and into personal experience as well as offers strategies of survival to those who have been marked as “other” based on their gender, race, class, sexual orientation et al.” (Sgoutas & Alejano-Steele, 2007). In other words, intersectionality describes the hierarchical nature of power and how belonging to multiple discriminated classes can mean that one’s issues are ignored. This way, issues of oppression and subjugation of women actually can be highlighted which otherwise remains absent in mainstream IR discussions.

We know that gender is a social construction that has created a binary in the society. Over the years, this binary has been so normalized and routinized that people do not realize how it actually results in a powerful structural hierarchy which confers far more power to men than women, and rewards masculinity more than femininity, which really makes it important to challenge this oppositional hierarchical binarism, because it in some ways or the other perpetuate and propagate oppression of the “other”. We should not forget that hierarchy is contingent upon power, control, regulation and inequality, which ultimately leads to violence. This discipline is not only believed to be “the last bastion of social sciences for women”, it sometimes also indulges in intensive research that presents only a partial “malestream”<sup>[2]</sup> view of international reality of world politics. “As a result, its scholars continue to theorize politics and the international realm in a way that guarantees that women will be absent from their research or inquiry and their research agenda remain unaltered, wherein discussions would remain largely constrained by those who lack consideration of women’s role in world politics” (Tickner, 1992)

Furthermore, an important aspect that ought to be kept in mind is that in order to achieve gender equality, including both integration of gender perspectives and the recognition of women scholars in IR, the discipline needs to become more theoretically diverse and pluralistic, including more reflective of the global community of scholars. (Ackerly & True, 2008)

I’d like to conclude by saying that living in a patriarchal society that thrives on oppressing women should not really hinder the inclusion of more female scholars in the field of IR. The aim should be to increase their presence in this field and their participation in the international politics so that they provide credible solutions to global problems that are overlooked by their male counterparts, especially those issues pertaining to women and healthcare. The latest news where Donald Trump actually signed and passed an anti-abortion executive order in a room surrounded by men also points to the day-to-day sexism, and since this has international consequences it also showcases how even in 2017 the discipline seems gendered. His order could have far-reaching consequences and severe implications for women’s reproductive health access and could be **deadly** for women and girls in developing countries and conflict zones, but he along with all the privileged section behind him supporting him are undeterred.<sup>[3]</sup>

The discipline of International Relation remains highly gendered without a doubt. That is why there is a need for scholarship of Feminism in International Relations to make the discipline more open in order to point out how the issues of gender are embedded with the discipline, for which they need intersectionality. There is a need to highlight the fact that IR feminists are only trying to “pluralize IR epistemologies, methodologies, and ontologies to enable more cross-fertilizing and thus fruitful dialogues between feminist and non-feminist IR scholars to make IR more “international” (Tickner, 2014) and thus should be encouraged

and supported. Realists talk about how masculinity and femininity are respectively symbolic of war and peace. I personally see no reason as to why this should be dismissed. There are various issues that need to be sorted in the world and violence is not the answer to them, peace is. To be a woman is to be a stereotype, which again should not hinder their path to challenge the evil trinity of sexism, racism, and classism along with all the other systems of oppressions. “Intersectional feminism recognizes that feminism is not and cannot be a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. It recognizes that we must acknowledge and include minority voices. We must remember that feminism *“isn’t just me and mine—it’s us and ours”*”[4]



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[1] Cynthia Enloe in *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making feminist Sense of International Politics*. 1989

[2] Malestream is a concept developed by feminist theorists to describe the situation when male social scientists, particularly sociologists, carry out research which focuses on a masculine perspective and then assumes that the findings can be applied to women as well. The term was first used by Mary O’Brien in her 1981 book *The Politics of Reproduction*

[3] Huffington Post article on Donald Trump signing the anti-abortion executive order: [http://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/donald-trump-abortion-men\\_us\\_5886369be4b0e3a7356a7910](http://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/donald-trump-abortion-men_us_5886369be4b0e3a7356a7910)

[4] <http://thediplomat.com/2013/03/women-in-international-politics-an-essential-element/>

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