

**A SAGE  
Whitepaper**

**HISTORY OF FEMINIST  
INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS**

**International Politics**  
**Concepts, Theories and Issues**  
**SECOND EDITION**

# HISTORY OF FEMINIST INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Feminist theories of, and analytical approaches to, IR have not come out of the ether. Individual scholars and innovative thinking and teaching have been crucial to the development of feminism. Gender took considerable time to enter the field of IR. This intellectual transformation had been generated by a network of women's scholars along with some men working together to reform university curricula to reimagine professional associations and to launch new scholarly journals. This network was created self-consciously not just across state boundaries but also across boundaries of race and culture and professional rank. The UN Decade for Women (1975–85) helped make mobilizations international. Many women studying for their doctorates and those who had academic posts took part in conferences that brought together feminist activists and researchers. By late 1980s, women studies courses were launched in Australia, the Philippines, India, Canada, Britain, Germany, Ireland, the United States and so on. Their teachers overcame scepticism from their own faculty colleagues who had cast aspersions on the alleged lack of intellectual rigour. Women's studies journals such as *Signs*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, *Women's Review of Books* and *Feminist Review* had been created. They attracted manuscripts from scholars working in history, literature, sociology, art history and anthropology.

While some courses in 'women and politics' had been created by individual academics as early as mid-1970s, there have also been moves by political scientists to organize women's caucuses inside professional groups such as the American Political Science Association. Little was being done in the late 1980s to bring feminist ideas into the field of IR. IR appeared to be a fortress of intellectual and professional resistance to feminist insights into the workings of power. Ann Tickner, led by a small group of American scholars, persuaded the Ford Foundation to sponsor a modest but intellectually innovative conference on women, gender and the study of IR. In 1988, it was held at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, in the United States. By early 1990s, several feminist editors began to accept articles and book manuscripts that put these growing feminist ideas about IR into print so that they could be widely debated, applied and assigned to students. Among the early publications were *Women and War* by Jean Bethé Elshtain (1987), *International Relations Theory: Contributions of Feminist Standpoint* by Robert Ethane (1989), *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Sense of International Politics* by Cynthia Enloe (1990), *Gender and International Relations* by Grant and Newland (1991) and *Gender in International Relations* by Ann Tickner (1992).

Academics such as Spike Peterson, Ann Tickner, Jindy Pettman, Sandra Whitworth, Christine Sylvester and Annie Sussie Runyun were active in the United States. They decided to create an arena for an ongoing exchange of feminist-informed ideas about IR. Fifteen years later, several things have been accomplished by the International Studies Association (ISA), Montreal, Quebec. There was a women's group operating within ISA to monitor and challenge sexism by academics in the ISA. Next, the Feminist Theory and Gender Studies Section (FTGS) of the ISA had been established for helping younger scholars to encourage participation by feminists in running of the ISA. It was also instrumental in sponsoring papers, setting up panels at meetings and expanding the culture of IR specialists. Just before the 2004 ISA conference, 18 full panels and additional 81 papers were accepted and projected on gender feminism and IR to suggest the sheer volume of feminist research engaged with discipline of IR.

Meanwhile, courses on 'gender and IR', 'IR feminist theory', 'women and human rights', 'gender in IR', 'gender in globalization' were becoming popular in universities across the globe. In 1999, FTGS also launched a new journal, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (IFJP). This journal was to serve as a place where diverse interactions of gender and power would be explored. The usage of the term 'feminist' was deliberately used in the title of the journal instead of the term 'gender'. The aim was to encourage scholarly conversation about the workings of the constructed femininities and masculinities in local and international affairs. Several multinational feminists were made to serve on the journals' advisory board along with other feminist male scholars.

Feminist research in IR still remains a work in progress, as the aforementioned facts only signify the onset of the development of feminist explorations in this field. Moreover, this progress depicts a conscious and deliberate effort by feminist scholars to alter the male-centric IR theorization. We will now move on from discussing the history of feminist IR theorizing to the feminist critique of IR.

## **FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

Feminist scholarship entered IR with two basic critiques of the practice of IR. The first and fore-most critique is that women were made invisible in the theorizing and teaching of IR. World politics, the subject of IR, was made to appear as if it was an all-male business. Women had no role in this realm. Since men were largely involved in the decision-making process in IR, it was assumed that women had no role to play in world politics. Women were only bystanders in this whole process. Another big assumption of IR theorists was that world politics affected men and women in the same manner. They were completely oblivious of the fact that politics affected women in a different way than men in many fields of conflict.

For example, the evils of war affect women much more insidiously than men. Gender, therefore, as an important factor was completely ignored in the analysis of world politics. The reason for this gross neglect, feminists argue, is because of the domination of males (elite) in the field and study of IR. Males, particularly elite males, were obsessed with standards and perspectives that were predominantly male.

Concepts such as conflict, competition, security and power were based on a particular notion of human nature. This basic notion of human nature was gendered. IR theorists focus on 'high politics' such as diplomacy, war and statecraft, visualizing a world of male-centric statesmen and soldiers. States were seen as units, ignoring their context, and international structures were governed by anarchy. Feminists instead focused on individuals in their social, political and economic contexts. They investigate how war and state behaviour in the international set-up is embedded in unequal gendered structural relations and how this construction affects the lives of the individuals, particularly women.

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