Still Engaging from the Margins?

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Abstract

Over the past twenty-five year feminist International Relations has produced wide-ranging interdisciplinary research, yet it remains on the margins of the discipline in most places. Certain scholars welcome this position while others note its limitations. This reflection addresses both sides of this issue.

Introduction

In the twenty-five years since feminist theorizing entered the field of International Relations (IR), feminist scholarship has proliferated in creative and exciting ways. The wide-ranging topics, with which it has engaged across a variety of disciplines and methodological approaches, provide striking evidence of this. Journal articles, books and other scholarly outputs reflect considerable interest in gender issues. In 1999 the first IR feminist journal, The International Feminist Journal of Politics began publication. Indicators that IR has come to take feminism seriously can be found in the recognition of feminist scholarship as a paradigmatic approach (Maliniak, Oakes, Peterson, and Tierney 2008), inclusion of feminist scholarship in certain IR introductory texts, and in the publication of a feminist special issue of the journal Security Studies in 2009.

Feminist IR dates back to the end of the Cold war, a time when the IR discipline opened up to new issues and new methodological perspectives. When this happened it was remarkable the extent to which feminist scholars in different parts of the world, and in different disciplines, began thinking along the same lines at about the same time. In 1998 the British journal Millennium published its first special issue on ‘Women and International Relations’ and, in 1993, Jindy Pettman published an article in Australia’s
leading international affairs journal entitled ‘Gendering International Relations’ (Pettman 1993). Two years earlier Hilary Charlesworth and her coauthors’ article in the *American Journal of International Law* drew attention to the gendered foundations of international law (Charlesworth 1991). A conference held at Wellesley College, USA in 1990, that brought together feminists and IR scholars, resulted in the edited volume *Gendered States* (Peterson 1992). In a 1989 article Robert Keohane, a participant at the 1990 conference, characterized feminist IR as ‘likely to fundamentally change IR’s greatest debates’ (Keohane 1989, p. 246).

So has this promise of changing IR’s greatest debates been borne out? I would argue that, in spite of the successes noted above and efforts to engage in conversations with both mainstream and other critical approaches, feminist IR has remained on the margins of the discipline although this may be changing somewhat – at least in certain geographical locations. It is doubtful whether many IR scholars would agree with one of feminist IR’s central claims that recognizing gender as an analytical and structural category would fundamentally transform the discipline. Citation of feminist work by non-feminists remains limited. But it is not only the degree of non-recognition that has placed feminist IR at the margins of the discipline. Other issues, such as interdisciplinarity, subject matter and methodology, have also contributed to IR feminisms’ positioning at what is perceived as being beyond the boundaries of what is conventionally considered IR. Many feminists prefer not to be constrained by the conventional discipline; for them this is an exciting place to be. Yet it has its costs, with respect to recognition and professional opportunities as well limiting the widespread dissemination of valuable insights that feminist research provides. It also means that students lack training that is
needed to understand the political, cultural, racial and economic inequalities and violence associated with gender discrimination.

**Margins can be Empowering**

The post-World War II IR discipline was greatly influenced by the policy interests of the United States. Since many scholars were trained using US texts, this worldview pervaded IR well beyond the US. The postwar US also proved a favorable environment for the receptivity of the scientific tradition that placed IR (particularly in the US) firmly within the discipline of Political Science. More recently, even non-US scholars see a continuation of US hegemony, a discipline that, in the words of British scholar Steve Smith, ‘runs the risk… [of becoming] far removed from the agendas and concerns of other parts of the world’ (Smith 2002, 68). While it is always the case that a disproportionate amount of knowledge is produced in privileged resource-rich environments, I do believe that feminism, less bound by the scientific and disciplinary constraints of US social science, has been more international and more methodologically pluralistic. It has also successfully pushed beyond the boundaries of IR. Born out of social movement and protest, feminism more generally has been less constrained than the social sciences by serving the interests of the state.

IR feminist research is now being produced well beyond the original centers mentioned earlier. Evidence for this can be found in the pages of the *International Journal of Feminist Politics (IFJP)*. Founded in 1999 under the editorship of Jan Jindy Pettman of the Australian National University, with subsequent editors from the UK and Canada, whose editorial teams included scholars from different regions and continents,
the IFJP is currently edited by scholars from the UK, US and South Africa, assisted by a team from six continents. During the first half of 2014, IFJP published articles by authors in the UK, US, Ghana and South Africa; forthcoming articles include authors in India, Canada, Finland, Turkey, Cyprus, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Australia, and Germany. Reflecting on the tenth anniversary of the IFJP in 2009, founding editor Jindy Pettman stated that the journal’s goal was to be strongly multidisciplinary. The editorial board has included international lawyers, geographers, anthropologists, as well as those from more conventional IR backgrounds (Pettman 2009).

Over the past twenty years, IR feminists have provided rich empirical case studies shedding light on those at the margins whose lives are deeply affected by global politics and economics. Feminists have demonstrated how the lives of sex workers, domestic servants, home-based workers and those who work at unremunerated caring and reproductive labour are intertwined with global politics and the global economy. They have investigated the gendered discourses through which war is legitimated, as well as the lives of those who suffer the violent consequences of conflict - both soldiers and civilians. Feminists are also paying attention to issues of race and empire. Most recently feminists are beginning to introduce queer theory into IR. Feminists are defining the discipline broadly on their own terms and, in so doing, are leaving space for critical engagement with activists and those seeking social change.

Many of these issues have been investigated using methodologies not normally employed by IR scholars. Although much of feminist IR falls within critical, constructivist or post-structural methodologies, feminists have paid particular attention to being self-consciously reflective about the purposes and ethical implications of their
research. Asking questions that have never been asked before, IR feminists are committed to constructing knowledge from multiple locations and to the importance of studying silences and absences.

The issue of creating knowledge from the margins has generated a lively debate in feminist IR. In the introduction to their edited volume, *Gender and Global Politics in the Asia Pacific*, Bina D’Costa and Katrina Lee-Koo claim that, while critical feminist IR scholars find themselves located on the margins of the discipline, the margins of IR offer a provocative and productive location. They describe ‘borderlands’ that provide a fresh perspective and critical distance from which feminists are investigating new methodologies and issues not considered within the confines of the discipline (D’Costa and Lee-Koo 2009, p.11). Likewise, Lily Ling sees marginality holding exciting possibilities for positive change. As early as 1988, Sarah Brown warned that feminist IR might lose some of its critical edge were it to try to fit into the discipline (Brown 1988). And in 2007 Marysia Zalewski suggested that holding feminism to the demands of an established discipline would invite critical atrophy (Zalewski 2007, p.303).

**Margins can be Limiting**

I have offered some thoughts on how working at the margins has contributed to the creation of a truly international inter-discipline using uniquely feminist methodologies. Nevertheless, if, as many believe, feminist IR is still working at the margins, marginalization comes with costs as well as opportunities, particularly in terms of recognition by the rest of the field. In a 2003 article entitled ‘Engaging from the margins: feminist encounters with the “mainstream” of International Relations’, Jill
Steans claimed that IR scholars have engaged selectively with feminists, ignoring those who work with unsettled notions of gender while engaging with those who work within a positivist approach, especially those using quantitative methods (Steans 2003). The debate over whether feminists should use quantitative methods has been a lively one; given the link between feminist activism and feminist scholarship, efforts to compile better data that can help us understand the complexity of women’s lives should be welcomed. But using data and defining gender as a variable amenable to causal analysis are different issues. What is problematic, particularly in the United States is that the social scientific approach is the only approach that gets published in mainstream journals.

But it is not only the mainstream with which feminists have had difficulties of engagement and recognition. In an article published in 2006, Georgina Waylen castigated critical International Political Economy (IPE) for barely mentioning gender despite feminist attempts to engage in conversation (Waylen 2006). As Waylen claims this is all the more surprising given that critical IPE and feminism have much in common – understanding and changing global structures of domination and using a social constructivist framework. Hilary Charlesworth finds the same problem in international law where she claims feminism ‘is an optional extra, a decorative frill on the edge of the discipline’ (Charlesworth 2011). Feminist economists encounter even greater barriers. Julie Nelson reports that topics, such as labour market discrimination, household production and caring work are marginalized by both mainstream and heterodox economic approaches; those who express interest in researching such topics are treated as lightweight, only interested in “women’s issues” rather than “real” economics (Nelson 2006, p.1060).
Since very few recent systematic studies of the issue of marginality have been conducted (Foster et al 2013, p.571), I have solicited some personal impressions from feminist IR scholars located in different geographical regions as to whether they have seen progress over the last few years. Two of the places where feminist IR was first established, the UK and Australia, appear to have made the most progress, along with Canada where critical approaches more generally are thriving. Jill Steans sees a great deal of progress in the UK since she wrote her 2003 article. Courses on gender at the undergraduate and graduate level are established at many universities and there is a definite resurgence of interest on the part of students. Georgina Waylen sees more citation of feminist work by younger IPE scholars than when she wrote her 2006 article but not much inclusion of feminist work in their research. However, in spite of these more optimistic impressions from British feminist scholars, the only systematic study of the extent of gender courses in the UK reveals that of the 629 modules reviewed across the 16 top ranked university departments of Political Science and International Relations, there were only 12 sustained gender modules, of which only nine were being taught in 2012 (Foster et al 2013).5

In Canada, Sandra Whitworth sees openness to feminist approaches as well as to critical theory more generally in most institutions. She attributes this to a strong historical tradition of Marxism and socialism that results in greater acceptance of all types of critical theory. The level of optimism appears to be highest in Australia where there is a thriving feminist community of IR scholars. Jacqui True reports that there is now a tenured feminist IR scholar at every major university in Australia, and feminist IR scholars hold many Australian Research Council fellowships. And Laura Shepherd
reports that IR feminist scholars were able to drive the agenda at the civil society
dialogue with the Department of Foreign Affairs during Australia’s term on the UN
Security Council in 2014. In both the UK and Australia, some institutions have more than
one scholar engaged in feminist research, something that is rarely true in the United
States.

These successes may be due to less of a commitment to positivism that
increasingly is inhibiting critical scholarship of any kind from being recognized in the
United States where there is much less openness to feminist scholarship at the major
institutions. 6 And it is probably fair to say that feminist IR is still relatively rare in many
other parts of the world. Soumita Basu reports that in India there is a vibrant women’s
movement but academic work on gender is centered in disciplines, such as sociology,
politics, history and literature rather than IR. Elisabeth Prügl reports that she and one
junior scholar are the only IR feminist scholars in Switzerland. Guelay Caglar claims
that, in Germany, there are few textbooks in IR that integrate feminist theorizing and the
analytical and explanatory power of feminist theorizing is barely acknowledged. The
same appears to be true in France.

Conclusion

It has been twenty-five years since feminism was introduced into the discipline
yet steps towards its wider recognition have been painfully slow, albeit with signs of
progress in certain countries. Many feminist scholars report feeling isolated and even of
being encouraged to seek other more “fruitful” lines of research. Meghana Nayak, a
feminist scholar working in the US praised the IFJP for providing a sense of community
for feminist scholars that they often lack within academic departments (Nayak 2009). Yet, in spite of its prestige as the leading journal of feminist international politics, the *IFJP* does not carry the weight of a mainstream journal when it comes to tenure and promotion, at least in the US. Frequently scholars who teach gender courses are in junior or adjunct positions that do not come with possibilities for tenure and promotion, all serious consequences for academic careers.

Consequently many feminist scholars are moving beyond attempting to engage a discipline that still regards their work as marginal; some have left IR for more hospitable homes in Women’s Studies or other disciplines, demonstrating that there are many fruitful ways to engage the gendered politics of the international. But, wherever we choose to locate ourselves we must remain aware of feminists’ longstanding claim that all knowledge is situated in unequal structures of power. Since women’s voices, as well as voices of those on the margins more generally, have often been silenced or thought to have little worthwhile to say, whose knowledge gets validated and legitimated is a critical issue. Feminists have made a unique contribution in drawing our attention to these unequal power structures, gendered, racial and otherwise that, not only affect whose knowledge gets validated and legitimated, but also how these power structures and our willingness to confront them affect people’s everyday lives.

We see all over the world that policymakers and those who work in non-governmental institutions are beginning to recognize the importance of taking gender into consideration. Yet in many places, the academy is frustratingly slow in training students to be better equipped to deal with these issues. It is remarkable how much intellectually exciting and politically relevant work the feminist community has produced over the last
three decades. Sadly we cannot claim that this important work has changed IR’s great debates. It is high time for it to receive the recognition it deserves.
REFERENCES


I acknowledge that there are rich IR traditions outside the US dating back well before WW II. The English School would be one. Nevertheless it was the case the US agendas came to dominate after that war, a fact noted and criticized by many non-US scholars.

Over the last three years IFJP has published authors from 24 countries of which Ghana, South Africa, Mexico, Palestine, Slovenia, India and South Korea can be considered underrepresented in mainstream academia. Thanks to Laura Sjoberg for supplying this information.

Lily Ling provided this observation via personal communication. I am grateful also to Soumita Basu, Emma Foster, Guelay Caglar, V. Spike Peterson, Elisabeth Prügl, Laura Shepherd, Laura Sjoberg, Jill Steans, Jacqui True, Georgina Waylen, Sandra Whitworth, and Lauren Wilcox for providing their impressions about the recognition, or lack thereof, of feminist IR in their host countries and institutions.

The issue of data and the methods by which they are analyzed is a complex one. For a useful discussion of the pros and cons of positivist social scientific methods for feminist IR, see various articles in Politics and Gender (2009), 5 (2).

This informative study concludes that teaching gender in the UK is sidelined rather than mainstreamed and suggests that there are institutional constraints on those willing and able to offer gender courses. In courses where gender was offered for one week it was usually placed at the end of the syllabus when student attendance runs low.

A study by Thomas Biersteker (2009) of the ten top graduate programs in the United States finds that in the core IR theory course for post-graduate students at these universities, constructivist scholarship ranged from 7 to 14% of works assigned. Only two used any feminist work and then only one feminist author (Tickner); more radical perspectives hardly made it at all.