

How is the field of international relations gendered



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Looking at the representation of war, terror and international relations, feminist scholars such as Enloe and Cohen have suggested we look beyond the politics of diplomacy and foreign policy to consider how international politics may be built around gender relations; reinforcing notions of binary masculine/feminine identity, and how patriarchy may be used to create and maintain control both nationally and internationally. I will be considering how the field of international relations is gendered and what effects have been caused by feminist responses and reactions and furthermore how these responses have challenged the issue of military control as a patriarchal tool.

To begin with, as always when discussing gender I must define what I mean by gender in the context of this essay discussing roles within international politics. I will be concentrating on the socially constructed identities of Men and Women and their associated characteristics of Masculinity and Femininity. Masculinity and Femininity are the characteristics which are taught by socialisation to Men and Women which are constructed in opposition to each other and are manifested in behaviours and attitudes, such as the masculine trait of rationality opposing the feminine trait of emotional. These constructed identities affect our perception of men and women in roles of power and also how we judge their work as good, bad, respectable or disgraceful. How we identify a person's gender will influence how we understand their political motives and objectives, and how we see differences in their policies and public acts.

For example, D'Amico and Beckman (1995) highlight a discourse within political understanding which holds that Men (people socialised as Masculine) engage in tough conflict with little cooperation as a characterised

strategy of masculine leadership, yet contrast this idea with their understanding, ' the social construct of these opposing characteristics deny the commonality of what it means to be " human": each of us can be rational and emotional, competitive and cooperative', making the former seem simplistic and essentialist. Their analysis of the social constructions of gender differences suggests it may not account for all behavioural differences as there are wide crossovers between masculine traits and feminine traits which we all experience as humans. As ' the personal is political' according to Feminist discourse, international politics are intertwined with local politics as Enloe states, ' I, of course, see the ' international" as embedded in the national and in the local..

. I also see... the ' political" in many spaces that others imagine are purely economic, or cultural, or private.

From this we can understand that the politics of gender relations are inseparable from gender relations on a local/private level because they are constructed in and perpetuated in a similar way. Walker, (1992: 197) suggests that the old sexist saying ' A woman's place is in the kitchen" is a ' metaphor of domesticity that nonetheless suggests a possible reading of at least some aspects of contemporary world politics". Here he recognises women's supporting role in politics as silent, exploited and menial, yet essential. Sylvester (1994: 166) expands this metaphor, contextualising it by relating it to contemporary world politics; ' What the woman is doing there is obliquely working amidst the unplugged freezer that is now Central Europe, ignoring the microwave that cooks and transforms everything within range.

' Here Sylvester shows the gendered divisions in International Relations; women are confined to the least visible areas of work and their efforts are undermined because of their gender such as is often seen in the domestic sphere where they are oppressed and confined to the kitchen. This role of the female as bound to the domestic is an extension of the male/female binary which also considers roles relating to the public and political sphere. Global and international politics are masculinised while femininity is confined to the local and domestic sphere. Masculine power is highly visible while feminine power is regulated. People with more valued characteristics (men) learn to see themselves as dominant, and those with less valued characteristics (women) are socialised to accept this arrangement - this is how gendered hierarchy is established and sustained.

International relations are gendered firstly in the way that most positions of power and influence are held by men, while women are usually only visible as their supporters (as the roles of secretaries, daughters, or wives.) who are expected to maintain a high level of respectability and a traditionally controllable form of femininity by serving ' their' men and therefore ' their' country. Enloe notes, ' Even in small states without the huge bureaucratic machines, the public agencies rely on women for their smooth running. If secretaries went on strike, foreign affairs would grind to a standstill". (1990: 9) Here Enloe articulates how women hold an integral role to the structure of the state, and that in their absence men would struggle to cope with managing both aspects of daily workings and long term progress; exposing the way in which international politics relies on the supportive role of women and the binary feminine ideal of passivity in order to support ideas of

rationality and courage which are associated with masculinity and male political roles. One widely recognised supportive role of women to masculine/patriarchal formations of control within international politics is the figure of the military wife, who unconditionally supports and approves of their husbands actions and involvements.

Enloe dubs this role the 'patriotic wife', which also expands to 'political wives', first ladies etc,(1990: 13), and asserts 'marriages between the elite men and patriotic wives are a building block holding up the political system... they [the husbands] expect to receive from their wives an automatic stamp of moral approval. This is the kind of marriage the state depends on. ' I asked my Mother about her experiences as a 'military wife', and she told me that when she was pregnant in 1984 with my oldest brother and was in the wards of a military hospital in Berlin to give berth, ' I was known as ' wife of. .. ' on all my medical records, it said wife of LT. Hutchinson! We were all known by who our husbands were...

it didn't say my name, like you'd expect in a normal hospital. ' So women in the role of the 'military wife' or 'patriotic wife' have their identity reduced to their supporting role of the 'elite men', and are only seen within that context. It shocked me at first but then the role of my Mother as faceless, nameless belonging of her husband seemed to fit in only too well with the observations of feminists like Enloe. ' Patriotic marriages may serve the husbands, giving them a greater sense of public importance.

.. [b]ut they don't necessarily provide the women in those marriages with satisfaction of self-esteem. ' (Enloe, 2000: 10). I asked my Mother ' How did
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it feel to be known as just ‘ somebody’s wife? ’ and she replied ‘ well, that was just how it was..

. ou just got on with it’, ‘ Patriotic wives’ are valued by the rank of who they are married to, with officer’s wives being superior and this way of classification is seen as normal. The binary role of women as passive is normalised within the context of the role of the Military wife. Women are expected to accept the role of silent supporter without any question, to ‘ just get on with it’ as it were. Another accepted role of women in politics embodying the feminized and motherly care-giving role manifests in roles within non militarised responses towards humanitarian issues. This category of political women upholds stereotypical gender images and confines women away from the masculinised area of security.

Carol Cohn, recalls ‘ in my research at the UN I’ve heard the Third Committee of the General Assembly -that’s the committee that works on social, humanitarian and cultural issues- referred to in-house as the ‘ ladies committee” (2003: 1188-1190) The casual feminised role of humanitarian support at an official level normalises gender stereotypes and undermines the seriousness of the field, recategorising it’s work to fit within the gender binaries. The title ‘ ladies committee’ offers no description of the work involved, and makes one think more towards the idea of a coffee morning or a gossip session- just think about the daytime ITV TV programme ‘ Loose Women’ where the celebrity female presenters discuss their lives, current events, media and fashion. While the show discusses politics and current events, views are rarely taken seriously beyond the sphere of ‘ women’s chat’ and the show is ridiculed when compared to its American counterpart ‘ <https://assignbuster.com/how-is-the-field-of-international-relations-gendered/>

The view', for example in this blog article from The Guardian, written by Joe Jackson in 2011: ' The View is of a different calibre to Loose Women. The former is a respected platform for discussing topical issues and has long attracted top names from sports to showbiz to politics...

The latter is widely ridiculed, from its name to its hosts' excruciatingly high-pitched back and forth " discussions". ' Here, the cast of ' Loose Women' are attacked the style of their conversation which doesn't fit the expected feminine ideals of respectability displayed in the cast of ' The View', which is regarded as more important, more valid and more legitimate. International politics is often heavily militarised and military organisations are often hyper masculinised although now women in the military are being used for their perceived feminine traits. Policy to utilise feminine roles have been formed with an essentialist view which assumes all female members of the military will think and behave the same due to their gender, and that this will allow them to connect with Afghan women; cultural differences are overlooked, regular social rules are ignored (such as protection over children from strangers). This gendering of cultural relations reduces behaviour to biological constructions of gender identity which are assumed to be experienced in a standardised homogenous way.

An article in the New York times exposes the gendered roles of US marines involved in the ' cultural awareness' aspect of international relations. Here, female marines will ' win hearts and minds' in ways by bonding over mutual femininity. Entitled ' Letting Women Reach Women'; written by Bumiller in 2010, the article explains that ' female engagement teams' are encouraged to show their pony tails out of the back of their helmets and play with

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children in order to show approachability and femininity. For their engagement with women, personnel should 'settle into a compound, hand out school supplies and medicine, drink tea, make conversation and, ideally, get information about the village, local grievances and the Taliban'. I find these aims and assumptions about femininity, human interaction and community dynamics grossly offensive; why would an Afghan woman mourning local grievances let a uniformed member of the military protected with a helmet play with her children or invite them into her home to drink her tea if the mentioned grievances might have been caused as directly or indirectly as a result of military presence? Why have stereotypical feminine values of motherhood been warped in this way and why are they assumed to apply to all women? And why do policy makers within the military assume the process of achieving cultural awareness so simple? I am slightly ashamed to admit that my father, a Major in the British Army helped to teach this course on the very camp (camp Pendleton) that was mentioned in the report.

Unfortunately his track record of cultural sensitivity does not give me much confidence supporting his role in teaching awareness to others in an institution. Recently while visiting my Brother's house in Leeds, my Father, dressed in his combat uniform greeted my brother's housemate for the first time (Peter had mentioned one of his housemates was Muslim) who he identified as middle-eastern looking with the Arabic phrase for 'peace be upon you', 'As-Salamu Alaykum' and was surprised at the hostile reaction. The cultural practices of middle class white men are assumed to be interchangeable with other cultural practices and it is on this assumption

that international relations seem to be based on. Not surprisingly, Bumiller notes in her article ' Whatever the outcome, the teams reflect how much the military has adapted over nine years of war, not only in the way it fights but to the shifting gender roles within its ranks. Women make up only 6 percent of the Marine Corps, which cultivates an image as the most testosterone-fuelled service, and they are still officially barred from combat branches like the infantry. ' This evaluation explains recognises how military is seen as an overtly masculine institution and offers an explanation to why it's presence in socially and politically unstable territory is seen as unwelcome and often tactless.

If women are to have a role in international relations such as being in a marine ' engagement team' they must fit a particular idea of femininity. Cohn recalls, ' the Security Council remains an overwhelmingly male and masculinized preserve, although there have been some very important contributions from women ambassadors in the last few years', (ibid) despite significant contributions from women, the field of security and development remains bound in a patriarchal discourse. Furthermore the formation of policy and guidance surrounding international politics on a domestic level is perpetuated by patriarchal ideas of feminine values and practices and respectability, assuming that all females will bond due to their gender and that this bond shown by playing with children and drinking tea will help the political process of peace making and using femininity as a way to gain military intelligence. The rejection of politically active women who don't fit this particular idea of feminised respectability was exposed in the way the press reported the women involved in protest camp set up on Greenham

common during the early 1980s. Enloe and Cohn agree that international politics is imbedded in the national and local (ibid) so for the group of women who set up camp outside the US RAF base set Greenham Common to protest the launch of nuclear warhead cruise missiles on their local community land, it was about a lot more than just house prices being affected. (Enloe, 2000: 76) A permanent encampment was established, and a growing number of women (and some men) arrived at the camp to occupy public land, staging a non-violent opposition to the military presence.

Their disruption to the carefully planned military way of life became a nuisance and so their femininity was publicly disputed by undermining stereotypical aspects of female heterosexuality and beauty ideals in national newspapers, in an attempt to undermine their ideological legitimacy.

Greenham protesters were described as 'irresponsible mothers, unwashed women, lesbians, politically hysterical nannies' (Jones in Enloe, 2000: 77) Yet this supposed penalty gave the Greenham women more motivation to protest while challenging ideas of femininity by showing their version in opposition to the version the press may have deemed acceptable. One local 'Tory woman' 'cut her hair short to make it clear to her husband and sons that she identified with the Greenham women' (Enloe, 2000: 77) this woman defied the stereotypical feminine heterosexual ideals of beauty, (mirroring the short hair associated with butch lesbian identity) in a blatant attempt to make her political alliances visible. In doing so she partly confirmed the media stereotypes of Greenham protesters as lesbians (in their butch appearance) but directly challenged it in her visible identity as a wife and a mother, therefore subverting the binary gendered role of women in politics

with the room for the accepted idea of 'good supportive lady' as a legitimate identity of a patriotic wife for example or illegitimate as an 'unwashed mother' with views consisting of 'excruciatingly high pitched' discussions which are dismissed as nonsense.

To conclude some of the views and observations I have discussed in this essay, the field of international relations is gendered in a number of ways but most of which involve both the amplifying of gender identity within political discourse while reducing gender identity to outdated binary characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity. As gender relations are formulated in similar ways throughout the different spheres of local, international, and global politics I have looked at examples from all of these areas to demonstrate that international relations are based on binary gender identities and characteristics which are applied to women in many political spheres in order to create and sustain a gender hierarchy which places men and the characteristics of masculinity at the top. This hierarchy is sustained by placing value on masculine characteristics like rationality and toughness but recognising and celebrating these characteristics only if they are displayed by men who hold political power. This process naturalises certain characteristics as inherently male and legitimises the invisibility of women in international relations – apart from in roles where a non-threatening display of female binary characteristics or values to male power can be accepted such as in the role of the 'patriotic wife', or a 'ladies committee' while other forms of female identity which display toughness or rationality (which would be celebrated if they were displayed by men in the political field) are kept invisible by declaring their ideas and efforts as

illegitimate by undermining their femininity such as the 'political nai?? s' and 'unwashed mothers'.

From my brief and incomplete discussion of the gendered role of women in international relations I can conclude that the field of international relations is heavily gendered in a way which limits the freedom and mobility of women, and confines their visibility to particularly insignificant roles which are shown to support men. Women's significance in international relations is undermined because of their identity as female and the threat it might hold towards men and the patriarchal structure of politics.