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Explain the relatively late arrival of feminist approaches to the study of international relations theory. What can we learn from feminist theories of world politics?

In this essay, I will be attempting to explain the relatively late arrival of feminist approaches to the study of international relations theory. In addition I will be answering the question of what can be learnt from feminist theories. I believe that there is a lot to be learnt from feminist theories because in international relations, I have not come across another theory which has covered the issues which have been covered by feminism. This essay will not only consist of my thoughts as to what can be learnt but certain facts and thoughts from other people. I will be attempting to provide you with an insight into the history of feminist; outlining when it arrived in IR. In addition, I will be providing a brief summary of the several types of feminist approaches; Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism and Radical feminism. The history of feminism in accordance with actual events will be provided to explain the late arrival of feminist approaches and several reasons will be explained to help me provide an adequate answer as to what can be learnt from feminist approaches. It is perhaps necessary to begin this essay with an insight to the introduction of feminism to IR.

International relations has been one of the last fields to open up to feminisms, which offer unique contributions to any field of research. Indeed, compared with other disciplines, the arrival of feminist perspectives in IR occurred relatively late. It was only in the late 1980's and early 1990's that several conferences and the published books created momentum for a feminist study of IR. Among the early books, now classics of the field, are Jean Bethke Eishtain's *Women and War* (1987) and Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1989).

In addition, J. Ann Tickners *Gender in International Relations: Feminists Perspectives on achieving global security* (1992) and Christine Sylevester's *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (1994) made their mark in the early 1990's. While they are all different in their approach, they are united by seeking to rethink IR's basic parameters.¹

Research into gender is now a major growth area in international relations. Gender and IR were very slow to connect historically however, and there was no feminist work to speak of until the 1980's. Two factors contributed to the slow uptake of gender concerns. Firstly, the discipline operated on the assumption of gender-neutrality, premised on the notion that the gender issues relevant in domestic politics were irrelevant to the national security concerns of states in the international arena. Secondly, second wave feminists tended to focus on the oppression of women within the domestic sphere. Consequently, while IR focused on 'the international' most feminists were responding to concerns relating to domestic policy, which did not link with the agendas of many IR scholars. Similarly, issues central to IR, such as foreign policy and the roles and functions on international organisations, appeared to have little significance for women fighting to overcome domestic violence or discriminatory employment legislation. Thus, although political theory in general was being scrutinised for gender bias during the feminist revolution of the '60s and 70s', few academics were challenging the gendered ontology's of International Relations Theory.²

Three conferences completed the launch of feminist thought onto the IR scene: the 1988 Millennium: *Journal of International Studies* conference at the London School of Economics, the 1989 conference at the University of Southern California, and the 1990 conference at Wellesley. It should also be noted that feminists in peace research had already mounted a

¹ www.watsoninstitute.org/bjwa/archive/10.2/Feminist%20Theory/Wibben.pdf

² www.leeds.ac.uk/gender-studies/epaper/rodgers.htm

challenge to bias in their field at the 1975 International Peace Research Association conference, where they highlighted gender as a variable in structure violence. They worked to bring feminist perspectives to bear on issues of peace, conflict, and war as early as the 1960's. By the late 1960's women peace researchers were analyzing power, "developing feminist conceptions of power as power to, or empowerment, rather than power over".³

Although feminists are united by their common desire for sexual justice and their concern for women's welfare, there is a wide spectrum of 'feminism'.² These can be divided into four broad groups, liberal, radical, Marxist/socialist and postmodernist. This essay however will only look at the one in more detail and give a brief description of several others.

Feminism is an ideology which has different variants, the most well known ones are Liberal feminists and Radical feminists, although all feminists' have their goal of overthrowing the patriarchal order of society, the different groups in feminism see different means of accomplishing this goal.

Feminist work on world politics has only become common since the mid 1980's. It originally developed in work on the politics of development and in peace research, but by the late 1980's a first wave of feminism, liberal feminism, was posing the question of 'where were the women in world politics'. They were certainly not written about in the main texts, such as that they appeared invisible. Then writers such as Cynthia Enloe began to show just how involved were women in world politics. It was not that they were not there but that they in fact played central roles, either as cheap factory labourers, prostitutes around military bases, or as the wives of diplomats. The point is that the conventional picture painted by the traditional international theory deemed these activities as less important than the action of statesmen. Enloe was intent

³ www.leeds.ac.uk/gender-studies/epaper/rodgers.htm

on showing just how critically important were the activities of women to the functioning of the international economic and political system. Thus, liberal feminism, as Zalewski points out is the 'add women and stir' version of feminism. Accordingly, liberal feminists look at the ways in which women are excluded from power and from playing a full part in political activity, instead being restricted to roles critically important for the functioning of things but which are not usually deemed to be important for theories of world politics. Fundamentally, liberal feminists want the same rights and opportunities that are available to men, extended to women.⁴

The first major feminist political statement was Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of women* in 1792. She argued that women should be entitled to the same rights and privileges as men on the grounds that they too were 'human beings'.⁵ She believed the key to liberating women lay in education. Education has always been advocated by liberals as a way of replacing ignorance and prejudice and liberal feminists have looked to education to widen the 'narrow mental horizons imposed on women domesticity'.⁶

Liberal feminists see men and women as equal. They criticize the exclusion of women from positions of power in international relations but do not believe that women would fundamentally change the nature of the international system. They seek to include women as subjects of study, e.g. state leaders, women soldiers and so on. In addition liberal feminists believe that when women are allowed to participate on international relations, they solve problems just the way men do, and with similar results. They believe that women can practice realism, based on autonomy sovereignty, territory, military force and all the rest just as well as man can. Furthermore, they believe that women have the same talents as men and that the

⁴ Baylis, J., *The Globalization of World Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, pg 174

⁵ Heywood, A., *Political Ideologies: an introduction*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998,

⁶ Carter, A., *The Politics of women's rights*, London, Longman, pg 52

inclusion of women in traditionally male occupations would bring additional capable individuals into those areas. They also believe that gender equality would increase national capabilities by giving the state a better overall pool of diplomats, generals, soldiers and politicians.

However, they seek to open up public to equal competition between men and women but generally do not wish to abolish the distinction between the public and private spheres of life. Reform is necessary, they argue, but only to ensure the establishment of equal rights in the public sphere; the right to education, the right to vote, the right to pursue a career and so on.⁷

Another strand of feminist theory is Marxist feminism. As the name implies the influence here is Marxism, with its insistence on the role of material, primarily economic, forces in determining the lives of women. For Marxist feminism, the cause of women's inequality is to be found in the capitalist system; overthrowing capitalism is the necessary route for the achievement of the equal treatment of women. For Marxist feminists, the focus of a theory of world politics would be on the patterns by which the world capitalist system and patriarchal system of power lead to women being systematically disadvantaged compared to men. Hierarchical class relations are seen as the source of coercive power and oppression, of all inequalities ultimately. Sexual oppression is seen as a dimension of class power.⁸

A third strand of feminist thought is radical feminism. Radical feminism, unlike Liberal and Marxist feminisms, is not drawn directly from previous bodies of 'malestream' thought. It offers a real challenge to and rejection of the liberal orientation towards the public world of men. Indeed it gives a positive value to womanhood rather than supporting a notion of

⁷ Heywood, A., *Political Ideologies: an introduction*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998, pg 252

⁸ Baylis, J., *The Globalization of World Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, pg 174

assimilating women into arenas of activity associated with men.⁹ Radical feminists argue that relations of subordination and domination between women and men constitute one of the most fundamental forms of oppression. Men seek to control women through controlling their sexuality, their roles in reproduction, and their roles in society more generally. Moreover, much of the way in which society is organised supports patriarchy, and this affects not only the ways in which the world actually operates, but even the ways in which we think about the world. In contrast to liberal feminists, then, radical feminists argue that all views are biased, and that the social sciences have been dominated by one particularly biased view, that of men. According to radical feminists, the social sciences cannot be ‘cleaned up’ simply by enlarging the categories of inquiry to include the activities of women, because the very norms and rules of social scientific inquiry used to construct even these expanded categories have been inspired by masculine thinking. Distinctions between fact and value, subject and object, rationality and irrationality – all central to traditional social scientific thought – are products of the male mind and, as such, must be transcended by feminists.¹⁰

In order to look at what has been learnt from feminist approaches to world politics, it is necessary to assess its contribution to the study of world politics. The contribution of feminism to international relations theory has been significant. The fundamental contribution of feminists in IR has been in prompting re-evaluation of the ontology’s and epistemologies of the discipline. In relation to the ontological foundation of the discipline, feminists have criticised traditional assumptions about the actors and activities relevant to analysis of international politics.¹¹ As a result of these developments in understanding of actors and agency, the

⁹ Beasley, C., *What is feminism?; an introduction to feminist theory*, London, Sage, 1999, pg 54

¹⁰ Whitworth, S., *Feminism and international relations: towards a political economy of gender*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, pg 17

¹¹ www.leeds.ac.uk/gender-studies/epaper/rodgers.htm

epistemologies of IR have also been influenced by feminist scholars. The ways of knowing' in the discipline have become much broader in recent years.

Feminism has helped international relations to expand itself to a broader audience. This has happened for several reasons. Firstly, critical theorising within the discipline (IR) has led to the expansion of its key area of interest; a broad range of actors and issues is now interpreted in IR. Thus, for example, NGO's and international organisations such as the UN, and the issue they bring to political agendas such as human rights and environmental protection, are now widely researched and studied in the discipline. As the relevance of these organisations increases; so too does the significance of valid frameworks for interpreting their roles, functions and impacts. These frameworks already exist in IR and feminist scholars have helped to develop these to reflect the multi-level activities which characterise contemporary international politics. Secondly, theorising about the nature of international affairs has become significant for scholars in other disciplines, as globalising processes and trans-national activities increase and their effects are observed and experienced. Consequently, the literature which already exists on these issues in IR, most notably on how individuals, organisations and institutions interact at multiple levels in the political process, is acquiring a new audience. In addition the significance of globalising economic practices for individuals and states has been widely analysed in IR. In these areas, the work of feminists in IR offers valuable insights on gender constructions at national, regional, international and global levels, and also links analysis of international politics and economic practices to local concerns.¹²

There have been many revolutionary changes influenced by Feminism. To think that at one time, women had nothing; their role in this world was to be the man's wife and on the

¹² www.leeds.ac.uk/gender-studies/epaper/rodgers.htm

international relation scene they were invisible; then to look at the present time where women have jobs, have highly regarded roles in government and are not the stereotypical housewives they once were, then it must be said that the contribution of feminism to international relations is quite huge. Feminism has not only contributed to society but has brought another side to international relations that no other theory has done so. There is no such a theory apart from feminism that looks at gender issues on a domestic and international level. Nowadays, we do not realise the contribution of feminism because we are brought up with men and women more or less equal. But to have greater respect for feminism, one should realise that the world we live in now wasn't like this before.

It is quite difficult to compare feminism with other theories in International Relations because they have raised different issues, which is why feminism has been a major contribution to international relations theory. Without feminism, the world and the society we live in would be completely different and possibly ruled by men.

Having feminism as a part of world politics is important as with any theory because no single approach can capture the complexity of world politics. Therefore, we are better off with a varied selection of opposing ideas rather than a single theoretical belief. Competition between theories helps reveal strengths and weaknesses and encourages improvement. Although, we should take care in understanding and interpreting world politics we should not discourage having various theories as it would be better to have a selection than none at all.

Feminists have helped to better understand world politics because they bring renewed theoretical and political insight to the field of international relations by revealing gendered nature of its foundational assumptions, the masculine identity of the core actors, structures,

defining concepts, modes and purposes of social enquiry that are premised on the exclusion of women, femininity and feminism and on the pervasive presence of global gender hierarchies. Feminist IR research exposes the male-dominance of international political-economic institutions and policy-making, the militaristic construction of masculinity in sovereign states and the dependency of men-masculinity on women and feminised others, who 'run', even if do not 'rule' the world. Most importantly, by revealing socially-constructed masculinity on women and femininity as constitutive of (sovereign) identities, (state) structures and ideologies (of nationalism, militarism, capitalist accumulation and science), feminists suggest that there are real possibilities for changing the unequal international order. Developing alternatives to this current order, however, requires challenging the normalcy of gender hierarchy, which Spike Peterson argues 'is fundamental to domination in its many guises', in part because it renders masculine domination over women, nature and feminised groups, acceptable.¹³

The future for feminist international relations is especially bright as gender analysis is extended to new and existing areas of international studies. What is now the 'sub field' of feminist IR is growing in interest and research at a rapid rate. The persistent challenge, however, is to develop 'emphatic co-operation' between non-feminist and feminist international relations.

In conclusion, I have discussed and explained reasons behind the relatively late arrival of feminist approaches to the study of international relations theory. In addition, this essay has looked at several different types of feminism and how feminism has helped to give a better understanding of world politics and contribute to the study of IR. Because there is not theory like feminism, it is hard to say that feminism as a theory is not beneficial. Giving a personal opinion, feminism as well as other IR theories, are just theories to help us make sense out of

¹³ Burchill, S., *Theories of International Relations*, London, Macmillan, 1996 pg 243

complex situations. As previously said no one theory can capture the complexity of world politics, but they all help.

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