

1993

Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory

Hilary Charlesworth

University of Adelaide Law School

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.law.umich.edu/mjil>

 Part of the [International Law Commons](#), [Law and Gender Commons](#), and the [Law and Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hilary Charlesworth, *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory*, 14 MICH. J. INT'L L. 440 (1993).

Available at: <http://repository.law.umich.edu/mjil/vol14/iss3/3>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Journal of International Law by an authorized editor of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact mlaw.repository@umich.edu.

GENDERED STATES: FEMINIST (RE)VISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

Edited by V. Spike Peterson. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992. xiv + 225 pp.

*Reviewed by Hilary Charlesworth**

International lawyers rarely delve into the field of international relations, although it is closely related to their own. This detachment may reflect the traditional legal mythology that law operates in a realm quite separate from political action. Whatever its cause, the failure of communication between lawyers and political scientists has impoverished both disciplines. This book, a collection of revised papers originally delivered at a conference on Gender and International Relations held at Wellesley College in 1990, offers, among other things, a feminist bridge across the international law/politics divide.

Feminist perspectives have been remarkably slow to influence theories of both international relations and international law. In the last twenty years, many areas of inquiry have been scrutinized by scholars insisting that issues of gender must be taken seriously. These scholars have described the masculine cast of the "objectivity" claimed by various disciplines and encouraged a rethinking of accepted canons. The disciplines of political science and law generally have sustained strong feminist challenge, but their international wings have maintained a lengthy immunity to the debate. This is due to a number of causes. First, very few women scholars and practitioners work in these areas. Second, institutional inertia impedes progress, as described by Fred Halliday: "[a]s long as a virtually complete silence on the [gender] issue exists those concerned with it are either discouraged from working on it, or choose to do so in extra-academic contexts or within other, more receptive, academic disciplines."¹ The third reason is the "selective insulation"² of both international relations and international law from developments in the social sciences. Finally, gender appears irrelevant to the common stuff of the two areas—statehood and sovereignty.³

* Professor of Law, University of Adelaide Law School, Australia; University of Melbourne, B.A. (1977), L.L.B. (1979), Harvard Law School, S.J.D. (1986).

1. Fred Halliday, *Hidden From International Relations: Women and the International Arena*, 17 *MILLENNIUM* 419 (1988).

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.* at 419–20.

The myopia is slowly lifting (more quickly, however, in international relations than in international law).⁴ This is one reason at least why international lawyers have much to learn from *Gendered States*. Its aim, says editor V. Spike Peterson of the University of Arizona, is to explore “‘feminist-IR’ conversational openings,”⁵ a deliberately tentative term. On the one hand, international relations theory has to rethink its epistemology in light of feminist critiques. On the other hand, feminist theory can be developed through its application to international relations, in particular through observing how “adding women,” taking women’s experiences into account, has a fundamentally transformative effect on androcentric disciplines. The conversations begun in this book vary widely. The book contains essays on a range of topics, from women and revolution to the notions of autonomy and obligation in international relations. Some are more accessible to those unfamiliar with the specialized vocabulary of international relations than others. The overarching theme in all the essays is the gendered nature of the state. Peterson’s introduction offers a useful guide to the development of thinking about the state in non-feminist scholarship, which is the implicit point of departure for all the other contributions. The state is presented as autonomous, internally lacking in unity, Janus-faced (presenting different visages domestically and internationally), and a dynamic process, rather than a static object.⁶ Feminist concerns with the state are quite different, for example, documenting the dependence of the state on a gendered division of labor and power, studying the implications of the overwhelmingly male worlds of state and international politics and the exclusion of women’s experience in the understanding of international politics.

Peterson’s chapter on *Security and Sovereign States: What Is at Stake in Taking Feminism Seriously?* investigates the contradictory nature of the notion of national security for women: while the sovereign state system is complicit in structural violence against women, states also offer important forms of protection for women. In *The Quagmire of Gender*

4. The first journal articles on gender and international relations of which I am aware are contained in a special 1988 issue of *Millennium*, a journal of international relations published by the London School of Economics. The first collection of feminist analyses of international law appeared in volume 12 of the *Australian Yearbook of International Law* in 1992. See also Hilary Charlesworth et al., *Feminist Perspectives on International Law*, 85 AM. J. INT’L L. 613 (1991).

5. V. Spike Peterson, *Introduction*, in GENDERED STATES: FEMINIST (RE)VISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY 1, 16 (V. Spike Peterson ed., 1992) [hereinafter GENDERED STATES].

6. *Id.* at 3–4.

and *International Security*, Rebecca Grant offers an elegant and perceptive study of whether women's experience can always be the defining feature of feminist epistemology, using women in combat as a case study. She underlines the ambiguities in women's experience of combat, which suggests that it is not distinctively different from men's. "Women soldiers . . . become a category difficult to interpret in feminist scholarship There is a taste of power and perhaps a thread of enlightenment in the idea of women acting outside their socialized feminine identity. The feminist premise, however, that values like care and affectivity have a distinctive place in women's experience, does not come through unscathed."⁷ Grant concludes that the feminist perspective must adapt to its context and, at least in the field of international relations, go beyond women's experience.

While many of the essays in *Gendered States* suggest the radical transformation of the traditional notion of the state, there are also some defenses of the much maligned liberal state. In a lively and readable chapter, *What Exactly Is Wrong with the Liberal State as an Agent of Change?*, Mona Harrington argues that the feminist project of replacing the liberal state is misconceived. She proposes a "more morally spacious"⁸ understanding of liberalism than the patriarchal form rejected by feminists, so that the liberal state has as its primary object the protection of the most vulnerable groups in society. On this analysis, the role of the state is to recognize difference and to privilege the voice of groups subordinated by "unchosen group identity."⁹ This approach emphasizes the value of domestic political fora over international fora in reducing oppression. Jean Bethke Elshtain also counsels working within the state structure, taming and limiting the demands of sovereignty. She describes a "postsovereign" politics, which emphasizes an ethic of responsibility, rather than one of sacrifice in our relationship to the state.

A significant gap in this book is the absence of views of feminists from non-Western societies and the absence of reflection on why this is important. Any discussion of feminism in an international context raises the question of the significance of race, culture, and wealth in creating women's powerlessness. All the authors are from the United States and

7. Rebecca Grant, *The Quagmire of Gender and International Security*, in *GENDERED STATES: FEMINIST (RE)VISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY* 83, 91 (V. Spike Peterson ed., 1992).

8. Mona Harrington, *What Exactly Is Wrong with the Liberal State as an Agent of Change?*, in *GENDERED STATES: FEMINIST (RE)VISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY* 65 (V. Spike Peterson ed., 1992).

9. *Id.* at 75.

Canada and the inevitable partiality of this privileged viewpoint requires explicit acknowledgment. There is occasional reference to the problem of ethnocentrism in the formulation of a feminist international relations theory,¹⁰ but this issue is not explored by any contributor in adequate depth.

How can international lawyers profit from the energy and stimulation of this book? There is little explicit engagement with international lawmaking or principles. The most direct "conversation" with international law is in Harrington's essay reconstructing the liberal state as an agent of feminist change, as protector of the weak. She describes a "feminist liberal international order" where the sanctity of sovereignty would be questioned: "Nations would rightly call for sacrifice by their people to aid other people whose truly liberal, democratic regimes were threatened, where orders protective of vulnerable groups were threatened."¹¹ This is assumed to be an exceptional state of affairs, and Harrington sees the major focus of nationhood as directed inwards to its domestic order. Harrington's notion of the state as guardian of the vulnerable contrasts with what she perceives as the traditional international legal notion of "state as thug"—"chronically disrupting the law and order that would be possible in a political environment organized by universal standards and rules."¹² She concludes that international legal norms must come, not from states, but "from the ground up." Their aim must be "to identify and alleviate sources of oppression . . . [and to] protect[] the vulnerable."¹³ International law, then, would involve "an ongoing formulation of rules responding to the particular shape of problems as they arise" and devised democratically, rather than a more abstract, universal set of prescriptions created by sovereign states.¹⁴

It is questionable whether the current international legal order constructs the state as "a generic misfortune."¹⁵ Indeed, the consensual basis of international law is its distinctive characteristic, making law makers and law addressees identical.¹⁶ Harrington's vision of a feminist

10. See, e.g., R.B.J. Walker, *Gender and Critique in the Theory of International Relations*, in *GENDERED STATES: FEMINIST (RE)VISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY* 179, 183 (V. Spike Peterson ed., 1992).

11. Harrington, *supra* note 8, at 79.

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.* at 81.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.* at 79.

16. See generally ANTONIO CASSESE, *INTERNATIONAL LAW IN A DIVIDED WORLD* (1986).

international legal order is an intriguing one, however, and is worth further development. It raises difficult questions familiar in debates over the notion of humanitarian intervention in international law. For example, who would determine when a democratic regime was under threat? What does "aiding" the inhabitants of such a polity entail? Moreover, what structures are likely to deliver a truly *democratic* international legal process? Is democracy measured on a national or international scale? What methods of implementation are appropriate to a feminist, contextualized international lawmaking?

All the papers in *Gendered States* contain fresh and provocative insights into areas inhabited by international lawyers. Ann Sisson Runyan, for example, in *The 'State' of Nature: A Garden Unfit for Women and Other Living Things*, discusses the complex relationship between nature and sovereignty, providing a useful basis for feminist analysis of international environmental law. Occasionally, international lawyers may be daunted by the dense vocabulary of IR specialists displayed in this book. But overall, we should take courage and inspiration from our feminist IR colleagues. We should also work collaboratively with them on the task of humanizing our disciplines, both of which are covered by R.B.J. Walker's description of IR in this book: "one of the most gender-blind, indeed crudely patriarchal, of all the institutionalized forms of contemporary social and political analysis."¹⁷

17. Walker, *supra* note 10, at 179 (citation omitted).