

The Potential of Positioning: assessing new directions for an integrated, feminist International Political Economy

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Abstract

Feminist analyses of International Political Economy (IPE) currently face a significant epistemological challenge. By seeking to engage with mainstream political economists, feminist IPE scholars have narrowed the interdisciplinary approach that is common in most contemporary feminist scholarship to instead focus almost exclusively on the effects of neoliberal globalization. However, this focus has proved unsuccessful in garnering the interest of most mainstream international political economists and has isolated these scholars from feminist research in other disciplines. This paper argues that feminist IPE could gain significant leverage within its field by employing an interdisciplinary approach that links broader feminist issues such as violence against women to political economy. This is examined by reviewing some of the major feminist works in IPE and assessing their reception within the field of IPE. Next, the potential for broader feminist issues to garner mainstream attention in IPE is assessed by evaluating the economic implications of violence against women. In altering their epistemology to include a broader feminist analysis, feminist IPE scholars can effectively illustrate the need for feminist analysis in IPE while also wedding their research to the rich, interdisciplinary research of feminists in other fields.

Feminist scholarship is problematically positioned within International Political Economy. In seeking to deconstruct and transform the current neoliberal capitalist system, they employ a non-positivist epistemology that has distanced these scholars from mainstream IPE theorists (Griffin, 2007; Peterson, 2005). However, their almost exclusive focus on economics and neoliberal globalization has also distanced them from feminist scholars in other disciplines, who tend to view capitalism as but one of several important sources of patriarchy (Jackson, 2008; Walby, 1990). Feminist IPE, then, faces a dilemma: in seeking to advance a feminist agenda within IPE, they are largely ignored by mainstream economists; however, in seeking to better engage with the narrow, economic discourse of mainstream IPE, they must disengage with the rich, interdisciplinary approach that most feminist social scientists employ. Fortunately, these two problems are not necessarily antithetical. This paper will argue that feminist scholars can both attract more attention from mainstream IPE *and* incorporate an interdisciplinary approach by integrating an economic analysis of women's rights issues such as gender-based violence.

Feminist IPE and its discontents: a theoretical overview

Feminist scholars have used different epistemologies and approaches in their efforts to address gender within IPE. Peterson (2005) makes the useful distinction between positivist feminist approaches and critical feminist approaches within the field. The former approaches operate within a mainstream, positivist epistemology and seek to demonstrate how gender impacts one's position in the economic system and one's ability to change this system. The latter approaches, by contrast, employ gender as an analytical category in order to demonstrate how masculinity and femininity are mutually constituted within the economic system. While positivist feminist scholarship has been somewhat successful in interacting with the mainstream

(Jackson, 2008: 148), most contemporary feminist scholars object to this empirical approach, arguing that positivist epistemologies implicitly reify the pillars of the contemporary neoliberal order (Griffin, 2007; Peterson, 2005). Instead, they advocate for a constructivist and/or critical approach to IPE, which, in the words of Peterson:

Opens inquiry to new questions, not least for present purposes, how masculinist (and other) ideologies shape what we study and how we study it. . . this goes beyond simply adding women as an empirical category and has the potential for altering existing theoretical frameworks. (Peterson, 2005: 502)

A critical approach, then, can serve as an effective antidote to the “add women and stir” mentality that has often emerged from positivist gender analyses (Saunders, 2002: 9). Instead, critical feminist theorists seek to deconstruct the system and explore questions related to agency, culture, norms, gender and race (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Griffin, 2007; Youngs, 2000). Such an approach is vital to feminists’ ultimate goal of transforming patriarchal systems, as it can provide a sophisticated critique of neoliberal institutions while also mapping out opportunities for agency. However, this strength can also be considered a significant weakness of critical feminist IPE given that few mainstream economists have been receptive to research that questions the fundamental rationale of their discipline (Griffin, 2007; Peterson, 2005).

Peterson (2005: 502) counters this criticism by arguing that constructivist approaches do not necessarily present an inherent threat to the mainstream and that their focus on identity and agency can be easily integrated into the mainstream literature. This assertion is supported by a growing field of literature that illustrates how feminism and neoliberalism are not necessarily adverse perspectives. Feminists who have studied gender empowerment in Chile have partially attributed rising levels of gender equality to neoliberal reforms (Schild, 1998: 110). Similarly, several feminist scholars have highlighted the impact of “femocrats” who, by working within the positivist framework of governments and multilateral aid agencies, have secured significant funding and policy gains for women’s issues worldwide (Alvarez, 1998; Jackson, 2008).

However, this field of literature is fairly small in comparison to the feminist IPE scholarship that positions the neoliberal system as an adversary of feminist work. This is perhaps most evident in the work of Bergeron, who refers to the global women’s movement as the “only possible source of effective resistance” against neoliberal globalization (Bergeron, 2001: 996). This belief that feminism and neoliberal globalization are necessarily in conflict is also apparent in a new wave of feminist scholarship that advocates for a transnational feminist movement to combat the oppressive, global capitalist system (Kerr, Sprenger and Symington, 2004; Mohanty, 2003; Porter, 2007). Thus, while most feminist IPE scholars seem to agree that a feminist epistemology must address issues that were previously ignored by a conventional economic analysis, there is considerable disagreement concerning whether these approaches can and should be folded into mainstream economic thought.

Perceptions of feminist IPE by interdisciplinary feminists and mainstream economists

However, while feminists may disagree on how their work should be integrated into positivist IPE theory, most mainstream IPE theorists have quite clearly demonstrated an aversion to integrating a rigorous feminist analysis. For example, despite numerous feminist studies of the differential effects of structural adjustment on men and women in the early 1980s, it was not until 1994 that this topic was addressed in a policy paper by the World Bank (Wood, 1999). It appears that many multilateral agencies and economists began to acknowledge the importance of

gender as an area of study following the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 (Alvarez, 1998: 205; Peterson, 2005: 499). This new focus, however, has been dominated by positivist, feminist literature that acknowledges the importance of tackling gender issues without addressing the gendered biases of the system as a whole. While this new focus is certainly a welcome change from the gender-neutral policies that originally emanated from these institutions, it is also seen as insufficient, if not damaging, by critical feminist scholars who wish to address gender as an analytical category (Peterson, 2005: 501). Thus, while mainstream economists have begun to address the importance of gender, such analysis can only provide marginal gains for women if this attention is restricted to positivist analysis that legitimizes the neoliberal economic system. Consequently, many feminists see the marginal inclusion of gender as an inadequate first step to gender analysis by mainstream IPE scholars.

Feminist IPE has also been criticized by feminist scholars in other academic disciplines for having emphasized economics and neglected other vital issues related to gender. Women's studies/gender studies were created as an inter-disciplinary field because of the feminist belief that different forms of oppression and tools of analysis were required to advance women's issues (Allen and Kitch, 1998). For example, research concerning gender in development has sought to analyse gender through a number of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, geology, political science, and economics (Saunders, 2002: 12). Feminist IPE, by contrast, has focused exclusively on how gender issues relate to the economy. Such an analysis has contributed to IPE by emphasizing agency, establishing the importance of the informal economy and the private sphere, and challenging statist assumptions in IPE (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Peterson, 2008; Youngs, 2000). However, this method also risks overemphasizing neoliberal hegemony and underemphasizing other women's issues and sources of oppression. Feminist scholars in other disciplines have been quick to acknowledge that patriarchy manifests itself through various sources that include, but are not limited to, capitalism (Walby, 1990). Within feminist IPE literature, by contrast, sources of patriarchy such as culture, race and socialization are often neglected or considered less important than the forces of capitalism (for example, Bergeron, 2001; Mies, 1998). This can be detrimental to feminists' goal of promoting gender empowerment, as some of the vital sources of patriarchy and sites for change risk being neglected within an exclusively economic framework. For example, gender-based violence and reproductive rights have drastic economic consequences but require an analysis of patriarchal state policies and national cultures if they are to be effectively addressed (Sen, 1998).

Thus, while feminism has been successful in having gender recognized within mainstream IPE literature, the potential of feminist IPE is largely compromised by its positioning as both feminist (i.e. critical, reflexive, and interdisciplinary) and economic (i.e. constrained by a positivist framework that legitimizes neoliberalism). However, this tension can in fact serve as an effective leverage tool if feminist IPE scholars integrate some of the complex and less explicitly economic problems affecting women into their research. This strategy can both attract mainstream attention by illustrating the economic ramifications of women's rights issues and, once this attention has been garnered, employ critical and interdisciplinary methods to explain these phenomena. The potential of blending interdisciplinary feminism with economic rationalism will be illustrated below with the example of domestic violence.

From practice to theory: the benefits of women's rights issues to feminist IPE

Domestic violence is an issue that affects women, families, and communities worldwide. While global statistics on this phenomenon are still quite primitive, cross-cultural studies have

shown that domestic violence exists at alarming levels in most countries, with approximately 10-50% of women having reported being hit or assaulted by an intimate partner (Watts and Zimmerman, 2002: 1234). In order to illustrate the economic impacts of domestic violence in a more concise manner, this paper will use Nicaragua as a case study. Ellsberg's (2000: 1599) research in this country indicates that 52% of Nicaraguan women have reported experiencing physical violence, an alarmingly high figure given that the researchers believe underreporting was quite probable. In addition to the obvious ethical questions that such statistics elicit, the economic ramifications of domestic violence in Nicaragua are considerable. The costs of such violence are borne not only by the women affected, but also by their children (who become much more likely to perpetrate or experience domestic violence upon having witnessed it) and by the public sector, given that violence results in lost days at work and an increased need for health care, emergency housing, legal assistance, and other state services (Sen, 1998: 10-12). Indeed, it was estimated in 1996 that women who were victims of domestic violence earned 267 million córdobas (1.6 % of Nicaragua's GDP for that year) less as a result of this violence (Morrison and Beatriz Orlando, 2001: 57-59).

While there are few extensive statistics on domestic violence worldwide, the research that does exist seems to indicate that the economic consequences of domestic violence are equally significant in other parts of the world. For example, in the World Bank's 1993 World Development Report, it was estimated that rape and domestic violence are responsible for at least 5% of the diseases contracted by women aged 15-44 in developing countries, and it can be presumed that the health care usage by victims of domestic violence increases dramatically when factors such as physical harm and psychological harm are also taken into account (World Bank, 1993: 52; Sen, 1998: 10). International financial institutions, aid agencies such as Oxfam, and local grassroots activists have responded by rallying for an end to domestic violence (Sen, 1998: 10; Staveren, 2008: 299). Curiously, however, most feminist IPE scholars have either neglected this issue altogether or have only addressed violence when it can be linked to neoliberal capitalism. The former reaction has resulted in an under-theorization of domestic violence, as the activists and institutions that explore this issue lack the theoretical underpinning required to undertake effective action (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 170). For example, the 2008 Honduran Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper acknowledged the problem of violence against women after Honduran grassroots feminists lobbied for its inclusion. However, the connection between violence and poverty was not clear to the policy analysts, which resulted in violence being framed as an issue that did not relate to poverty and consequently, did not receive the attention necessary (Staveren, 2008: 299).

The latter reaction of addressing domestic violence as a consequence of capitalism is both problematic and exceedingly common. For example, in her work *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1998: 27) Mies claims that "if violence against women is not accidental but part of modern capitalist patriarchy, then we have to explain why this is so. If we reject a biologicistic explanation- as I do- we have to look for reasons which are central to the function of the system as such." In doing so, Mies effectively dismisses the rich body of feminist literature on the causes of domestic violence by constructing a simplistic and arbitrary dichotomy in which violence is either inherent/biological or a product of capitalism. Bergeron (2001), David (2008), and various other scholars in IPE have similarly portrayed domestic violence as a direct result of neoliberal capitalism.

These assertions are misleading, however, as patterns of correlation and causation between neoliberal reforms and violence are uncertain and contestable. For example, while many

feminist IPE scholars assert that increased poverty leads to stress, strains in familial relations and violence (Mies, 1998: 30; David, 2008; Bergeron, 200: 990), recent studies in Latin America have been unable to find a statistically significant link between household poverty and violence. Instead, these studies have suggested that non-economic factors such as support networks, culture, religion, and state policy play more influential roles in determining levels of violence (Gonzales de Olarte and Gavilano Llosa, 1999; Morrison and Beatriz Orlando, 1999). This is supported by Sen's assertion that domestic violence is only weakly correlated to class and to economic status (1998, 15). One of the most popular approaches to understanding domestic violence, the ecological model, identifies four different levels of factors (individual, contextual, social, and cultural) that interact to create situations in which domestic violence is likely (Ellsberg, 2000: 1601). While this and most other models do identify economic factors as significant potential aggravators of violence, it is regarded as but one of several intersecting and mutually constituted factors.

If feminist IPE scholars were to extend their analysis of violence beyond a critique of global capitalism, they could better assess how domestic violence can be altered. Such an approach would require various tools of analysis that would extend beyond economic research into politics, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines. In doing so, feminist IPE scholars could thus partially bridge the problematic gap that has existed between IPE and women's studies more broadly. While such analysis will be more complex and less parsimonious than is typically desired in mainstream economics, feminist IPE scholars could likely be granted this flexibility if they are first able to illustrate the economic ramifications of these processes. For example, the World Bank, upon having acknowledged the impact of gender inequality on economic growth, has integrated feminist scholars from economics as well as disciplines such as social anthropology in an attempt to better understand the causes of gender inequalities (Jackson, 2008: 150).

While many critical feminist IPE scholars would object to working within the system rather than subverting it, this paper argues that the divide between positivism and critical theory/constructivism is fluid rather than dichotomous and that significant transformations are possible within such a framework. This can first be seen through the collaborations of positivist and critical feminists in practice through the transnational feminist network. For example, while there was a definite divide between "ethical-cultural" feminists and positivist feminists at the UN Beijing Conference on Women in 1995, these women collaborated extensively and created heterogeneous, "political-communicative" networks to continue cooperating after the conference (Alvarez, 1998: 316). What's more, while many feminist IPE scholars have questioned the likelihood of achieving gender equality within a patriarchal, neoliberal framework, international financial institutions such as the World Bank *have* proven to be increasingly receptive to complex gender policies that challenge conventional theory (Jackson, 2008: 161).

Conclusion: transcending dichotomies and empowering women worldwide

Feminist IPE scholars straddle two distinct fields by covering the interdisciplinary, normative study of gender and the narrow, rationalist study of economics. However, the two epistemologies that arise from this positioning are not necessarily antithetical and can be played against each other to great effect. One of the most promising methods of doing so is to first cloak gender issues such as domestic violence as economic problems that inhibit growth and then explore how such problems should be addressed with an interdisciplinary approach. This is not to suggest that feminist IPE's goal of transforming global capitalism should be neglected. Rather,

the relationship between positivist and critical feminisms in IPE must be deconstructed such that collaboration, when necessary, can occur. Given that feminist scholarship is concerned with addressing and not simply discussing issues of gender inequality, this approach is most desirable for its ability to transcend exclusionary, academic debates to the benefit of scholars and the agents that they seek to empower.

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