

Revisiting Feminist International Relations Theory: Reconfiguring Gender, Power, and Global Governance in the 21st Century

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Abstract: *This article revisits Feminist International Relations (IR) theory in light of profound transformations in global governance in the twenty-first century. While mainstream IR paradigms- realism, liberalism, and institutionalism- have historically framed international politics as state-centric and gender-neutral, feminist scholars have exposed the deeply gendered foundations of global power structures. This study critically evaluates the evolution of feminist IR from its foundational critiques of militarized masculinity to contemporary engagements with intersectionality, neoliberal globalization, and global governance institutions such as the United Nations. The article argues that gender is not an auxiliary analytical category but a constitutive dimension of international political order. Although feminist interventions have reshaped debates on security, peacebuilding, and representation, persistent structural hierarchies continue to constrain transformative change. By synthesizing classical feminist IR scholarship with emerging global challenges- including digital diplomacy, securitization, and multipolarity- this article proposes a renewed theoretical agenda for feminist IR. It concludes that feminist theory must move beyond inclusionary frameworks toward structural reconfiguration of global power relations.*

Keywords: Feminist IR, global governance, gendered power, intersectionality, security, neoliberalism

1. Introduction

The architecture of global governance in the twenty-first century presents a paradox. On the one hand, international institutions, multilateral organizations, and transnational networks formally endorse gender equality as a normative principle. Gender mainstreaming frameworks, women's representation initiatives, and global policy commitments appear to signal progressive transformation. On the other hand, the underlying structures of power within global governance remain deeply gendered, hierarchically organized, and resistant to substantive redistribution of authority. This paradox raises a fundamental question: Has global governance genuinely transformed through feminist interventions, or has it merely absorbed gender language without restructuring power?

Feminist International Relations (IR) theory provides a critical lens through which this question can be examined. Since its emergence in the late twentieth century, feminist IR has challenged the epistemological and political foundations of mainstream international theory. It has demonstrated that global governance institutions—particularly the United Nations and affiliated multilateral bodies—are not gender-neutral arenas of cooperation but sites where masculinized norms of authority, security, and rationality are institutionalized and reproduced.

Global governance today extends beyond formal interstate diplomacy. It encompasses international financial institutions, transnational regulatory regimes, security alliances, development agencies, digital governance platforms, and global civil society networks. These structures collectively shape economic redistribution, conflict management, climate policy, migration regimes, and technological standards. Yet, despite the proliferation of gender equality discourse within these domains, women and marginalized groups remain

underrepresented in decision-making hierarchies, and gendered inequalities persist in policy outcomes.

This article argues that gender is not simply a variable within global governance; it is constitutive of how governance itself operates. The norms of leadership, the framing of security threats, the valuation of economic productivity, and the hierarchy of policy priorities are structured through historically embedded gendered assumptions. Feminist IR theory initially focused on revealing women's exclusion from international politics. However, in the twenty-first century, the analytical task is more complex. It requires interrogating how global governance incorporates feminist language while preserving dominant geopolitical and economic hierarchies.

The contemporary global order is marked by multipolarity, neoliberal economic restructuring, securitization of development, digital transformation, and intensifying global crises. Each of these processes has gendered implications. Economic austerity measures disproportionately affect women's labor and care responsibilities. Security discourses invoke the protection of women while legitimizing militarized interventions. Climate governance negotiations frequently marginalize grassroots women's voices, particularly from the Global South. Digital governance spaces reproduce gendered harassment and algorithmic bias. These dynamics suggest that inclusionary reforms alone are insufficient to transform the deeper structures of governance.

Revisiting Feminist International Relations theory, therefore, is not merely an exercise in disciplinary reflection; it is a necessary intervention into ongoing debates about power, legitimacy, and justice in global governance. This article contends that feminist IR must move beyond a politics of representation toward a politics of structural reconfiguration. Rather than asking solely how women can be included within existing institutions, the more pressing question is how the foundational assumptions of global governance- sovereignty,

security, authority, and economic rationality- can be reimagined through a gender-transformative lens.

By synthesizing foundational feminist scholarship with contemporary debates on global governance, this study seeks to reconceptualize the relationship between gender and international power. It proceeds in three stages: first, by revisiting the theoretical foundations of feminist IR; second, by critically evaluating the incorporation of gender within global governance institutions; and third, by proposing a renewed feminist framework capable of addressing emerging global challenges.

2. Review of Literature

Feminist International Relations (IR) scholarship has profoundly reshaped the theoretical and empirical contours of global political analysis. Emerging in the late 1980s, feminist interventions challenged the foundational assumptions of mainstream IR theories, arguing that international politics is neither gender-neutral nor epistemologically objective. Instead, it is structured through historically embedded hierarchies that privilege masculinized norms of authority, rationality, and security.

1) Foundational Interventions: Gendering International Theory

Early feminist scholars exposed how realism and liberal institutionalism naturalized competitive, militarized, and state-centric conceptions of power. J. Ann Tickner critically reformulated classical realist principles to demonstrate how the discipline privileged autonomy, domination, and military strength as markers of political legitimacy. Tickner's work destabilized the assumption that security could be equated solely with state survival, arguing instead for a broader conception encompassing economic justice and human well-being.

Similarly, Cynthia Enloe expanded the analytical lens of IR by examining the gendered labor and social relations underpinning global politics. By tracing the roles of women in diplomatic culture, militarized economies, and global production chains, Enloe illustrated that women are not peripheral to international politics but central to its operation. These foundational contributions reframed gender as constitutive of global power rather than supplementary to it.

Together, early feminist IR scholarship established two enduring claims: first, that international institutions reproduce gender hierarchies; and second, that knowledge production within IR is itself shaped by masculinist epistemologies.

2) Theoretical Diversification and Expanding Analytical Frames

As feminist IR evolved, it diversified into multiple strands, enriching the discipline while generating internal debates about methodology and political strategy.

Liberal feminist approaches emphasized institutional reform and representation, advocating for women's increased participation in diplomacy, peace negotiations, and global governance bodies. This strand aligns with policy-oriented frameworks that seek to integrate gender perspectives into

multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. While these interventions achieved significant normative visibility, critics argue that numerical inclusion alone does not dismantle structural hierarchies of authority.

Radical feminist perspectives shifted attention toward systemic patriarchy embedded within militarism and global capitalism. This scholarship highlights how war, economic exploitation, and environmental degradation are sustained by gendered power structures. Rather than focusing solely on institutional access, radical approaches interrogate the broader political economy of global order.

Poststructural feminist scholars further expanded the field by analyzing discourse and identity construction. They contend that global politics is constituted through narratives that normalize masculine leadership and feminize vulnerability. Security discourse, for instance, frequently frames states as rational protectors and populations as passive subjects requiring defense. This discursive framing shapes policy priorities and legitimizes coercive interventions.

Postcolonial and intersectional feminists deepened these critiques by challenging Western-centric assumptions within both mainstream and feminist IR scholarship. Drawing upon intersectionality theory articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, scholars emphasized how gender interacts with race, class, colonial history, and geopolitical hierarchy. They argue that universalizing narratives about "women's oppression" risk obscuring diverse lived experiences, particularly in the Global South.

While this theoretical diversification has strengthened feminist IR's analytical range, it has also raised questions about coherence and strategic direction in the face of evolving global governance structures.

3) Feminist IR and Global Governance Institutions

The post-Cold War expansion of global governance provided new terrain for feminist analysis. The incorporation of gender mainstreaming within multilateral institutions signaled an apparent normative shift. Gender equality became embedded within development goals, human rights regimes, and peacebuilding initiatives.

However, critical scholarship reveals persistent tensions between normative commitment and institutional practice. Gender mainstreaming often operates within technocratic frameworks that translate structural inequalities into managerial objectives. As a result, feminist scholars increasingly question whether global governance reforms represent substantive transformation or strategic adaptation.

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda illustrates this tension. While it acknowledges women's participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, implementation remains uneven. Scholars argue that the securitization of gender concerns sometimes aligns feminist rhetoric with militarized state strategies, thereby limiting transformative potential.

This body of literature demonstrates that global governance institutions may absorb gender language without

fundamentally altering power relations. Consequently, the analytical focus shifts from inclusion toward structural interrogation.

4) Gendered Political Economy and Neoliberal Governance

Another significant strand of scholarship situates feminist IR within global political economy. Researchers highlight how neoliberal restructuring, austerity policies, and privatization disproportionately impact women's labor and social reproduction responsibilities. Export-oriented economies frequently rely on feminized labor sectors characterized by precarious conditions and wage disparities.

Feminist political economists critique the instrumental framing of gender equality as economically efficient. Empowerment initiatives are often justified in terms of productivity gains rather than justice or redistribution. This shift risks depoliticizing feminist demands and embedding them within market-driven governance logics.

The literature thus underscores the need to examine how economic governance frameworks shape gendered hierarchies at the global level.

5) Emerging Debates: Multipolarity, Digital Governance, and Crisis Politics

Recent scholarship identifies new challenges for feminist IR in a rapidly transforming global order. The rise of multipolar geopolitical configurations complicates earlier assumptions about Western institutional dominance. Authoritarian backsliding and anti-gender movements further challenge normative commitments to equality.

Digital governance introduces additional dimensions of power. Online diplomatic engagement, algorithmic decision-making, and cyber governance structures reproduce gendered exclusions and harassment patterns. Meanwhile, global crises- including climate change and pandemics- expose how vulnerability is unevenly distributed along gendered lines.

These developments suggest that feminist IR must adapt its analytical tools to address new modalities of authority and control.

3. Research Gap

Although feminist IR has successfully critiqued masculinist epistemologies and influenced institutional discourse, three gaps persist in the literature:

- 1) **Structural Depth:** Much scholarship emphasizes representation and mainstreaming without fully theorizing how governance architectures themselves are gendered.
- 2) **Integrated Intersectionality:** Intersectional insights remain insufficiently integrated into analyses of global governance power structures.
- 3) **Contemporary Governance Complexity:** Emerging forms of authority—digital, corporate, and transnational—require deeper feminist theorization.

This article builds upon existing scholarship while addressing these gaps. It argues that revisiting feminist IR theory in the

twenty-first century requires moving beyond inclusionary strategies toward reconfiguring the structural foundations of global governance itself.

The Intellectual Foundations of Feminist IR

Gendering the Discipline

Feminist IR emerged as a sustained critique of the discipline's masculinist epistemology. Classical realism conceptualized power as material capability, military strength, and strategic competition. Liberal institutionalism emphasized rational cooperation among sovereign states. Both paradigms treated the state as a gender-neutral actor.

Scholars such as J. Ann Tickner demonstrated that these theoretical traditions were embedded in gendered assumptions. Tickner's reformulation of realist principles revealed how security discourse privileged militarized masculinity while marginalizing relational and cooperative forms of power.

Similarly, Cynthia Enloe expanded the empirical boundaries of IR by tracing the gendered labor underpinning global politics. By examining diplomatic households, military bases, and global production chains, Enloe demonstrated that international systems rely upon women's often invisible work.

These foundational interventions established three core claims:

- International politics is structurally gendered.
- Power operates through both material and symbolic hierarchies.
- Knowledge production in IR reflects gendered epistemologies.

4. Theoretical Diversification and Internal Debates

As Feminist International Relations (IR) scholarship consolidated its intellectual presence, it evolved into a constellation of distinct yet overlapping theoretical strands, each offering a different analytic entry point into global politics. Liberal institutional feminism concentrated on questions of representation, legal reform, and women's participation within governance structures, arguing that expanding access to decision-making arenas could mitigate entrenched gender biases in international institutions. This strand often engaged policy frameworks within bodies such as the United Nations, emphasizing gender mainstreaming, accountability mechanisms, and normative reform. In contrast, radical and structural feminist approaches shifted attention from institutional access to the deeper architectures of patriarchy embedded in militarism, state sovereignty, and global capitalism. For these scholars, gender inequality was not a deficit of representation but a structural condition reproduced through war economies, extractive development, and hierarchical security regimes.

Post structural feminism further expanded the terrain by interrogating how discourse, identity construction, and narrative authority constitute international politics itself. Rather than treating gender as a fixed category,

poststructuralists analyzed how meanings of “security,” “protection,” and “threat” are produced through language and symbolic practices that normalize particular forms of power while marginalizing others. Building on these critiques, postcolonial and intersectional feminists challenged the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in much early feminist IR. Drawing upon the concept of intersectionality developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, they emphasized how gender operates through overlapping hierarchies of race, class, coloniality, and geopolitical location. This body of work foregrounded Global South experiences and questioned the universalization of Western feminist agendas within international governance.

While this diversification significantly enriched feminist IR by broadening its analytical scope and methodological tools, it also generated productive tensions regarding political strategy and normative ambition. Debates emerged between reformist approaches seeking inclusion within existing institutions and transformative projects demanding structural reconfiguration; between incremental legal change and systemic disruption; and between participation in governance frameworks and critique of the very logics that sustain them. These tensions do not signal fragmentation so much as the dynamic evolution of feminist IR- an ongoing negotiation over how best to confront and reimagine the gendered foundations of global power.

Feminist IR and Global Governance Institutions

Gender Mainstreaming

The incorporation of gender mainstreaming into global governance marked a significant normative shift. Within the United Nations framework, gender equality became integrated into development goals and peacebuilding agendas.

Yet mainstreaming often functions within technocratic governance logics. It translates structural injustice into performance indicators, risk assessments, and budget allocations.

Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)

The WPS agenda symbolized a breakthrough in linking gender and security. However, implementation reveals contradictions: while women’s participation is encouraged rhetorically, militarized security paradigms remain dominant.

This reveals a pattern of discursive incorporation without structural reorientation.

Neoliberal Political Economy and Feminist Critique

Neoliberal globalization restructured labor markets, social welfare systems, and governance authority. Feminized labor sectors expanded within export economies, while austerity policies disproportionately affected women’s caregiving responsibilities.

Gender equality became framed as economically efficient rather than normatively imperative. This instrumentalization embeds feminist agendas within market-driven rationalities, limiting transformative potential

Securitization and the Militarization of Gender

Post-9/11 global security discourse increasingly incorporates gender language. Appeals to protect women have been invoked to legitimize military interventions.

Such dynamics risk co-opting feminist concerns into coercive state strategies. Rather than dismantling militarism, securitized feminism may reinforce geopolitical hierarchies.

Multipolarity and the Reconfiguration of Global Power

The shift toward multipolar geopolitics complicates earlier liberal institutional assumptions. Rising powers articulate alternative governance models, while anti-gender movements challenge normative equality frameworks.

Feminist IR must therefore engage non-Western governance structures critically, avoiding both universalism and cultural relativism.

Digital Governance and Algorithmic Authority

Digital transformation introduces new domains of power: platform governance, artificial intelligence regulation, cyber diplomacy. Algorithmic systems often reproduce structural bias.

Feminist IR must extend analysis beyond state institutions to examine technological authority as a site of gendered power reproduction.

Toward A Structural Reconfiguration Framework

This article proposes three recalibrations:

- 1) **Epistemic Reorientation** – Redefining power beyond militarized and market-centric metrics.
- 2) **Multi-Level Governance Analysis** – Examining corporate, digital, and transnational actors.
- 3) **Intersectional Structuralism** – Integrating race, class, coloniality, and gender into unified analysis.

Such a framework moves feminist IR from integration to transformation.

5. Conclusion

Feminist International Relations was never intended to be a supplementary voice within international theory; it was conceived as a disruptive project aimed at exposing and dismantling the gendered architecture of global power. Yet the contemporary institutionalization of “gender equality” reveals a troubling reversal: feminism has been incorporated into global governance in ways that stabilize rather than unsettle existing hierarchies. The paradox is stark. Gender is everywhere in policy discourse, yet structural domination persists with remarkable continuity.

The diffusion of gender mainstreaming within institutions such as the United Nations has produced a vocabulary of empowerment while leaving intact the political economy and geopolitical asymmetries that structure vulnerability. Gender has been rendered measurable, auditable, and technocratically manageable—transformed into a compliance metric rather than a redistributive demand. In this translation, feminist critique risks neutralization. What was once a challenge to

sovereignty, militarism, and capitalist extraction is recast as institutional best practice.

To revisit feminist IR in the twenty-first century, then, is to refuse this domestication. Gender cannot be reduced to an additive category within governance frameworks; it is constitutive of the very logics through which authority is organized and violence legitimized. Contemporary global politics—from humanitarian intervention to financial governance and digital surveillance—continues to reproduce differentiated precarity along gendered and racialized lines. Crisis narratives, securitization agendas, and development orthodoxies repeatedly mobilize protectionist tropes that reinscribe hierarchies under the guise of stability.

A radical feminist IR must therefore shift its analytic lens from representation to structure, from participation to redistribution, and from inclusion to transformation. This entails confronting the entanglement of global governance with neoliberal accumulation, extractive economies, and militarized security regimes. It also requires dismantling epistemic hierarchies that privilege Euro-Atlantic theoretical authority while marginalizing Global South feminist knowledge production. Multipolarity alone does not guarantee justice; without structural change, power merely rearticulates itself in new configurations.

The task ahead is not to celebrate the visibility of gender within international institutions but to interrogate the conditions under which such visibility becomes politically harmless. Feminist IR remains urgent precisely because global governance continues to be organized through unequal distributions of life chances, bodily security, and political voice. The promise of feminist theory lies not in its integration into existing architectures, but in its capacity to imagine and demand alternative ones.

Reclaiming that transformative horizon requires renewed theoretical audacity. Feminist International Relations must resist technocratic capture, refuse depoliticization, and sustain its commitment to structural critique. Only then can it move beyond inclusion without transformation and contribute to the radical reconfiguration of global governance in the twenty-first century.

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