FEMINIST IR AND THE CASE OF THE ‘BLACK WIDOWS’: REPRODUCING GENDERED DIVISIONS

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Abstract – Feminism has been a marginal approach to International Relations (IR) since its inception following the Cold War, however in an effort to reinvigorate its analytical power, Charlotte Hooper demonstrated how the practice of IR actively reproduces as well as reflects gender identities in the form of hegemonic masculinity. The purpose of the following study is to challenge and extend Hooper’s argument by investigating whether or not the practice of international relations also produces a hegemonic femininity. By examining the popular portrayal of Chechen women terrorists commonly referred to as the ‘Black Widows,’ I argue that our interpretations of international events do indeed produce a hegemonic femininity that places women in the familial world of emotion and victimhood. In effect, a feminine niche is created for women who partake in traditionally masculine activities. This analysis speaks to two additional controversies in feminist literature: the effect of adding women to andocentric categories and whether or not women’s violence should be represented in feminist theories. The difficulties that feminist encounter with each of these issues is demonstrative of the need to eschew rather than clamour for a position within the strictures of mainstream IR. Instead, feminists should embrace their position on the margins of IR and the opportunity that it provides to destabilizing the hierarchies, exclusions and violence upon which it is based.

Introduction

Feminism entered the stage of International Relations (IR) as part of the ‘third debate’ between mainstream and post-positivist theorists following the end of the Cold War. Since then it has moved into a position on the margins of the mainstream, present but not often engaged. To reinvigorate traditional feminist approaches to IR that focus on the masculine gender ideology that underlies the discipline’s central concepts, Charlotte Hooper has recently published a book, Manly States, unearthing how the practice of IR itself reproduces a masculine gender identity, which is then reflected in mainstream theories. The purpose of the following study is to extend the theoretical claims of Hooper’s analysis by applying it to the discourse of popular media coverage of Chechen women terrorists and the reproduction of femininity. I question what happens when women are added to the andocentric category of warrior or terrorist – how is it reflected as part of IR? I argue that in interpreting the actions of the so-called ‘black widows’ as personal rather than political and as a result of victimization rather than agency, international relations reproduces a dominant femininity based on the masculine/feminine divide of international/domestic and private, which is the dominant femininity reflected in mainstream IR theory. The analysis demonstrates the insights that feminism brings to IR, but also reveals the

1 Diana Thorburn, “Feminism meets international relations,” SAIS Review (Summer-Fall 2000): 1. Feminist versions of IR are now present in most major introductory texts and have even generated some of their own. Moreover, the International Studies Association not only has a section on Feminist Theory and Gender Studies, but the 2004 Conference held in Montreal hosted over 100 papers examining gender and international studies.
limitations of its ability to integrate itself with the tight strictures of the mainstream, particularly because of the difficulty of adding women to andocentric categories and the reluctance of feminists to theoretically incorporate controversial experiences such as women’s violence. In conclusion I assert that instead of attempting to become part of the mainstream, which involves validating and even mimicking many of its theoretical faux pas, feminism should embrace its position at the margins and struggle against the continual reproduction of gendered divisions within IR; a task best achieved with a postmodern orientation.

Background: Feminist IR, Hooper, and the Case for the ‘Black Widows’

Like feminism in general, ‘feminist international relations’ is an elusive concept that fails to capture the profusion of methodological approaches that feminists have brought to bear on the study of the international. Rather than attempting to falsely elucidate a coherent feminist theory of international relations, I will instead illuminate the dominant trends and perspectives that have shaped the field of study. In its application to IR, feminism has followed the familiar path of making women visible, demonstrating the gendered nature of the established discipline, and re-writing IR from a feminist perspective.2 Although feminist scholars have broadly adopted the three methodological approaches outlined by Sandra Harding, namely empiricist, standpoint and postmodern, in effect there has been a blending of epistemological challenges to the andocentric claims of traditional IR, particularly realism.3 Nonetheless, the majority of IR feminists are post-positivists that challenge not only the empirical bias of mainstream theories, but also emphasize both the social construction of activities and the meanings that societies assign to them.4 In the terms of Lakatos, the commitment to gender equality is the core identity and distinctiveness of feminist theory, however this is pursed in many different ways.5 Dominant approaches perceive gender as a socially constructed idea based on hierarchical distinctions largely shaped by culture that “dichotomize identities, behaviours and expectations as masculine and feminine,” focusing on how the social phenomena of IR is embedded in unequal gender relationships.6 The general claim posited by feminism is that mainstream approaches to the international, especially realism, have been based on men’s experiences, marginalizing women by privileging the masculine over the feminism.7 IR is perceived as an exacerbation of the general public/private divide that has served to subordinate women because the international realm is conceptually situated as the furthest extreme from the private world of women and as such is instituted as a wholly masculine

3 Feminist methodology scholar Sandra Harding divides feminism into these three approaches, however she argues that empiricism and standpoint are inter-dependent and that the latter has very post-modern tendencies. Sandra Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 106, 137. For an overview of the ways in which feminists have applied these different approaches to IR, see J. Ann Tickner, Gendering world politics: issues and approaches in the post-Cold War era (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
5 Jill Steans, Gender and International Relations (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 15.
sphere. Feminists have applied this observation to a number of the core concepts in the discipline, including states, security, war and nationalism, which I invert to demonstrate that IR creates a complementary femininity through women’s participation.

Charlotte Hooper first inverted this bottom-up approach to examine how the practice of international relations actively reproduces masculine gender identity. She argues that as a field of activity conventionally dominated by men, it is an important site for the production and reproduction of masculinity, upholding both the international/domestic divide as well as the public/private divide and maintaining a hegemonic masculinity that is insulated from and dominates the feminine. This process is then replicated by dominant approaches to the discipline of IR such as realism, which rarely breach the black box of the state and never examine domestic and family life. The perspective that IR does not only reflect gendered identities but also actively produces and reproduces them based on the division of masculine/feminine and international/private is a powerful approach that goes far to explain why women have been marginalized from its practice and theories, however to validate it there should also be evidence that IR produces a complementary femininity. As masculinity and femininity are relational concepts and identities, the practice of international relations cannot produce a hegemonic masculinity without also producing a hegemonic femininity.

Generally it is assumed that the hegemonic masculinity of IR is maintained by enforcing the divide between public and private, with masculine power defined by the very exclusion of feminine values and actors in the international realm. More specifically, it has been asserted that the link between men and military participation and the exclusion of women from war is at the core of international relations. And yet women have not been excluded from either international relations generally or war in particular. Cynthia Enloe demonstrates that both war and militarism have depended on the support of women’s labour as camp followers, cooks, nurses, prostitutes, and the reproducers of men. In these domestic roles, we can appreciate how IR has been able to maintain what Jean Bethke Elshtain calls the myth of the masculine ‘Just Warrior’ and the feminine ‘Beautiful Soul.’ As such, it appears that international relations produces a hegemonic femininity by relegating women to the domestic and private sphere, out of the spotlight of international affairs. And yet this common conclusion is insufficient to declare that IR produces as well as reflects gendered identities, because we have memories of women engaging in very violent, traditionally masculine roles. Women have served as combatants in

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11 Ibid., 487.
13 Craig N. Murphy, “Six Masculine Roles in International Relations and Their Interconnection: A Personal Investigation,” in *The ‘Man’ Question in International Relations*, 94.
14 Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?*
state militaries and national-liberation movements and as terrorists, killing alongside men in the name of political goals; actions that have the potential to destabilize the gender divisions that form the basis of IR and women’s exclusion from it.

In order to examine the theoretical claims of Hooper’s approach to feminist IR, and to extend its boundaries, I question how international relations deals with the potential destabilization of women’s participation in masculine activities. In particular, what happens when women are added to the andocentric category of warrior or terrorist? The importance of this analysis lies in its engagement with several controversies in the current literature, suggesting new directions for feminist work. First, although Hooper has conducted a convincing study of the way in which IR reproduces masculinity, as Cynthia Enloe explains, it is not enough to only consider masculinity – we must always consider femininity or else risk legitimating the former at the expense of the latter, and forsake a reliable analysis of the masculine. And yet, when it comes to war, violence and militarism, feminist analysis has largely turned a blind eye to the active participation of women beyond their traditional domestic roles. Indeed, in her book *Maneuvers: the militarization of women’s lives*, Cynthia Enloe declares that because “military policy makers have depended on – and thus maneuvered to control – varieties of women, and on the very notion of femininity in all its myriad guises, …to invest one’s curiosity solely in women as soldiers is to treat the militarisation of so many other women as normal.” Nonetheless, to brush over the experiences of women in combat is to reify women as domestic and nonviolent and to overlook an opportunity to destabilize existing gender stereotypes. By failing to investigate women’s violence, feminists have upheld the myth of the innocent women described by Elshtain. As such, very little has been written on the experience of women as combatants and its effect on gender identities.

Finally, this analysis engages the controversy of adding women to andocentric categories. Peterson suggests that when ‘adding’ women to IR, we should either see women acting manly in masculine roles or we should see the masculine roles becoming more feminine to accommodate women, thus validating the often-deplored ‘add-women-and-stir’ approach. The study of popular interpretations of Chechen women terrorists, however, suggests that some categories are more resilient to gender changes than social constructionist approaches to feminism realize. As Yuval-Davis explains, militant women are threatening “unless controlled and distinguished from male soldiers by emphasizing femininity.” Increasingly, a niche seems to be appearing for women fighters that maintains the masculine/feminine dichotomy based on a public/private divide that is central to masculine IR. Overall, the analysis of popular interpretations of Chechen women terrorists supports Hooper’s argument that IR reproduces as well as reflects gendered divisions and hierarchies by demonstrating how it engenders femininity as well as

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16 Cynthia Enloe, “Gender is not enough: the need for a feminist consciousness,” *International Affairs* 80, 1 (January 2004): 96-97.
masculinity. Yet, the creation of feminine niches rather than transformation within IR categories as well as feminists’ inability to theorize all aspects of women’s experiences including their participation in violence suggests that feminism’s future within the self-enforcing strictures of mainstream IR is limited.

‘Black Widows’: Creating a Feminine Niche for Women Combatants

The current Chechen war against Russia is the second one since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first war began after Russian forces went into Chechnya in 1994 to restore order after Chechen leaders declared independence, and the second has been a dirty war waged since the fall of 1999. On June 14, 1995, Chechen fighters conducted the first it what would be a long series of terrorist attacks against Russian citizens. The Chechen Muslim culture and national traditions strictly regulate social relations between men and women in a very patriarchal society. As such, women have been particularly targeted for rape by Russian soldiers, resulting in an inability of unmarried women to marry and a likelihood that married women will be divorced. It is in this context that women terrorists have emerged. Women have been involved in fourteen terrorist attacks from June 6, 2000 to August 24, 2004. Although these women are generally portrayed as suicide bombers and many of them have been, women have also participated in other activities such as taking civilians hostages, and for this reason I refer to them as ‘terrorists’. A study of dominant international media coverage of Chechen women terrorists extends Charlotte Hooper’s argument by demonstrating that the practice of international relations also produces a version of ‘hegemonic femininity’ by interpreting their actions as part of the private sphere of families and emotion. International relations and war make not only men, but women as well.

Charlotte Hooper’s study of IR and the production of masculinity examines changes in hegemonic masculinity produced by the Economist, which she argues “…forms part of the immediate cultural context in which the predominantly Anglo-American discipline of IR operates,” targeting an international audience of elite men. The following analysis will instead focus on two British, international newspapers that are available to a wide audience via free Internet access, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Guardian, as well as the American Cable News Network (CNN). With a wide circulation, the way in which they reflect the actions of female terrorists as specifically feminine will reveal not just how elites are shaped by interpretations of international relations, but how entire societies explain the international with reference to established gendered divisions. The media is particularly useful for this task because of its framing and myth-making functions. In “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution,” the media frames an event in society’s consciousness. Moreover, in contributing to the production of myths, the media provides the stories that “make sense of a society for a society.” The following analysis will focus on the

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22 Hooper, Manly states, 117.  
23 The selection process of the articles in this study was based on searches for terms ‘Chechen,’ ‘women,’ and then refined to include references to ‘terrorism’ or ‘suicide.’ I did not specifically search for articles referencing ‘black widows’ as that would have biased the study. I did similar searches for the New York Times and the Globe and Mail and uncovered similar titles, however those articles were not available for reading without purchase.  
myth of the Chechen ‘black widow.’ Although she is arguably engaged in traditionally masculine, life taking activities, popular interpretations emphasize her feminine qualities and motivations, which reflects the representation of the feminine in the discipline of IR: absent (relegated to the domestic and private realm) and lacking agency or the status of actor.

The fact that there is such shock, controversy and interest in the ‘new’ phenomena of the female terrorist, including my own interest, speaks to the gendered constructions of our conception of war, violence, death and IR. These constructions are reproduced by women’s participation in violence and its coverage in the news media, which has predominantly used a frame generated by Chechen fighters to explain the actions of Chechen women terrorists, usually defined by suicide bombings: ‘black widows.’ This label paints the women as bereaved, victimized, and without agency. It identifies the actions of women suicide bombers as problematic not just because they are violent, but because it is distressing to see women in this role. It points to a very clear cause for this aberration in feminine behaviour: the Russian dirty war in Chechnya, which is killing and disappearing women’s families. The motivation for the ‘black widow’ is not political, but personal. She has been driven to desperation and hopelessness, and now seeks revenge on behalf of her loved ones. A moral judgment is passed against the action, which weighs as heavily if not more so against Russian violence as it does these acts of terrorism against civilians. Finally, it offers a subtle solution: ending the violence against Chechens.

In contrast, the Russian spin on female suicide bombers depicts them as victimized by two groups: Chechens themselves and international terrorists, particularly Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia. The notion that these women are seeking revenge is strictly denied. Instead, Russian news sources claim that they are forced into terrorism by being raped by Chechen fighters, drugged, kidnapped, exploited by religious beliefs, and ‘corrupted.’ Moreover, it is easy to train them to die because “they train dolphins to blow-up ships [and] it is easier to train a human being than a dolphin.” Russian authorities also claim that the presence of women suicide bombers is evidence of Chechen links to international terrorism, which funds, trains and manipulates them with religion. In these instances, reference is made to Wahhabi groups in Saudi Arabia and to al-Qaeda.

Although the meaning of the Chechen woman bomber is contested by the two sides of the conflict, the underlying gendered explanation is the same: these women are not actors in the war. Instead, they are victimized by men and die not for political reasons but for personal ones. As in realist approaches to IR, they are relegated to the private sphere and lacking agency. These two different but similar perspectives have been reproduced and uncritically accepted by the international news media.

The BBC has specifically referred to the subject of Chechen women suicide bombers six times between July 2003 and September 2004; in five of the articles the label ‘black widow’ is used. They are referred to as the wives or sisters of Chechen fighters killed in the war with Russia or of non-combatant men illegally killed or disappeared. Repeatedly they are described

27 “Dolphin-Girls.”
as desperate and seeking revenge. The only article that does not use the label ‘black widows’ perhaps most explicitly refers to what is popularly believed to be the plight of the women who are motivated to kill and to die. Steve Eke’s article, “Chechnya’s female bombers” explains that although little research has been done on the women bombers, it reveals the desperation of these women’s lives. That the cause of women suicide bombers lies with the brutal Russian military and the hopeless nature of the conflict is consistently hinted at with the repeated yet vague references to the ‘plight’ of Chechen women. One article, however, specifically states that “if there was ever a surer way of encouraging further terrorism, the Russian military has invented it.” Some credence is also given to the Russian argument that the supposed ‘black widows’ are actually forced by rebel and warlord groups to commit the bombings. Overall, the depiction of Chechen women terrorists is one of victimization by men, predominantly Russian soldiers, and hopelessness. The choice to inflict violence is portrayed as a non-choice; a force of circumstance. These women are acting out their personal, private turmoil.

The Guardian reports are similar in content to those of the BBC. In five reports discussing the actions of Chechen women terrorists, the term ‘black widow’ is used in each one. Black widows are purportedly motivated by loss of family members, and seeking revenge. Indeed, they are specifically not driven by ideology, explained by the fact that combat participation by women is not part of the traditional Chechen warrior code. Coverage by the Guardian is more torn between the two extreme representations of women bombers, however. While this popular image of the ‘black widow’ is strongly portrayed, greater consideration is given to the Russian perspective that these women are motivated not by revenge, but are instead brutalized by their own people. Rumours of being sold into terrorism, drugged, raped and kidnapped are given greater credence as are Russian claims that they are being victimized by international, particularly Wahhabi terrorist groups. Nonetheless, the message behind this depiction is similar to that of the BBC: women do not make a political choice to be terrorists – they are preyed upon by ruthless men, who are the political actors in the conflict. They are dragged from their homes (where they rightly belong) and forced into violence.

American depictions of the Chechen women bombers, as evinced by CNN, follow the British pattern of juxtaposing the two extreme representations of women brutalized by Russians and seeking revenge, and women brutalized and forced into terrorism by Chechen male fighters.

31 Eyal.
32 “Chechen ‘Black Widow’ bomber jailed.” “Inside the mind of a ‘Black Widow.'”
34 “Women motivated by family, not ideology.”
35 “Black Widows link to air crashes." “Women at heart of terror cells.”
In four reports mentioning the women bombers, they are consistently referred to as ‘black widows.’ The familiar definition of black widows being women acting out of desperation and revenge for lost family members is provided, however more emphasis is placed on Russian arguments about ties to international terrorism and victimization by Chechen terrorists. This is to be expected given the American propagation of the War on Terror, and the Chechen ‘black widows’ fit well into this second frame. Although Chechen women are engaging in terrorism, they are not depicted as the enemy in CNN’s coverage. Indeed, for women to be the enemy they would have to be rightful, political actors; they would have to be men. Instead, these women are victims of international terrorist networks, the same as the civilians whom they kill. They are targeted by a web of brutal, evil, fundamentalist men. Although they may not in fact be the ‘black widows’ that Chechen fighters portray them to be, they are still domestic pawns forced into the violence of war. They are still to be pitied.

A feminist analysis of the way in which the media coverage of women’s participation in war, the most fundamental activity in international relations, reveals the reproduction of gender roles, particularly the masculine/feminine divide of international/private and political/apolitical. Even though women are participating in men’s traditional role of combat and terrorism, and the actual definition of terrorism rests on a political motivation, they are consistently depicted as apolitical non-actors forced into violence through personal circumstances. Although this has been an examination of a single case, reference to other instances of women terrorists within coverage of the Chechen war indicates that the domestic/apolitical/victimization frame that maintains women in the private sphere and men in the public is used to explain women terrorists in general. The popular label given to Chechen women terrorists, ‘black widows,’ differentiates them from their male counterparts by invoking the familial concept of sacrifice. Even feminist coverage of Chechen terrorists falls into this trap. PeaceWomen, a feminist website sponsored by the United Nations Fund for Women, has reproduced some of the coverage in international news sources, such which emphasize the victimization stereotype of the ‘black widow’ who loses her family and also emphasizes the shame of rape that drives women’s conversion to armed struggle and sacrifice. In analyzing the ‘feminine’ that is reproduced through the practice and reporting of the Chechen war, we also see the coinciding masculinity. Whereas women are ‘black widows,’ men are ‘terrorists.’ Whereas women are victims, men are brutalizers. Whereas women are apolitical, men are political. Whereas women are instruments, men are actors. In the end, this is a war between men. Through the process of assigning meanings to the activities of IR and the means by which some actors are determined legitimate and others are not, out popular interpretations of international relations maintains the public,


37 “Russia’s Black Widows wreak terror.” “Chechnya’s Black Widow bombers.”

38 Todd. “Sisters in Jihad” by CNN asserts that the personal desperation that drives Chechen women to terrorism is not confined to Russia, but also explains women’s violence in Palestine and Sri Lanka. Giles Foden, “Death and the maidens,” The Guardian [www.guardian.co.uk/women/story/0,1000647,00.html], July 18, 2003. A link is drawn between Palestinian and Chechen women terrorists: Islam, patriarchal control and the exploitation of “personal frustrations and grievances.”

international sphere, especially war, as the exclusive purview of men, which is reflected in mainstream theories.

**Theoretical and Policy Implications: The Case for Feminism’s Post-modern Future**

With regards to mainstream IR, there are significant theoretical and practical implications that arise from the different gendered meanings ascribed to men and women’s actions. Theoretically, the fact that attention is drawn to women terrorists only in so far as they are a feminine aberration, combined with their depiction as primarily domestic, apolitical persons lacking the agency to make their own decisions, reinforces the theoretical pattern of focusing on men’s agency and experiences to understand international relations. By maintaining the international/private divide between men and women, women engaged in ‘manly’ activities may provoke interest, but they are not politically important. They are still women. Moreover, by denying their political agency and focusing on ‘personal grievances’ or rape and pillage as the sole motivation for women to become terrorists, women are victimized not once but twice. If they are victims of war, they then become victims of political manipulation whereby their experiences are used to depict the true enemy of the war – the men of the other side. Finally, by denying women’s political agency in acts of terrorism, by making it out to be a *fait accompli* of their victimization, women are denied alternative actions. This erases from memory the fact that women might have acted, and that they might have acted differently.40 The questions not being asked about women terrorists are important silences. Not all rape victims are terrorists. Not all desperate widows commit suicide and those that do usually do not kill others in the process. Terrorism is a political act, yet no one has stopped to ask what women’s political goals are. It is just assumed that they seek personal revenge – that they are acting out a vendetta. Practically, by treating women as instruments rather than agents of war, their political goals are likely to be overlooked in any future negotiations, when their presence is no longer needed.

What does this analysis reveal about feminist IR? First, feminism brings to IR insights about the gendered power dynamics of both the practice of international relations and the discipline. By illuminating how they actively produce both a masculine and a feminine and relegate one to the political realm of the international and the other to the private, apolitical world of the family, it not only explains why women are perceived as absent from IR, but how this exists as a gendered construct. Second, when we can begin to see the presence of women in the international, we can appreciate the voices that have been silenced by the masculine bias of IR and must call on both the practitioners and theorists to become more relevant to the majority of the people in the world. It is erroneous to make knowledge claims based on the limited experience of the particular men in the spotlight of mainstream IR, thus by examining women’s lives we can enhance our knowledge of international politics as it applies to both men and women.41

There are, however, limitations to a feminist analysis of IR, which this study demonstrates. The most basic limitation concerns what feminist theory tells us about IR. It does not claim to and indeed it cannot tell us everything about international relations. It is not a theory that can explain the precise cause and effects of events. As Charlotte Hooper points out,

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41 “Transgressing Boundaries,” 200.
gender both shapes and is shaped by IR, eluding a strict cause and effect analysis. Thus, while feminist analysis can demonstrate and explain the gendered dynamics of the Chechen war, it does not purport to explain the precise cause of events. For those who believe that theories must be general and parsimonious, have clear, coherent boundaries, demonstrate empirical superiority towards other work and have multicausal consistency, or in other words be rigorously positivist, feminism is not the answer. Beyond this epistemological limitation (depending on one’s perspective), the study of how IR reproduces a hegemonic gender ideology that divides the international from the private realm reveals both the limits and perhaps the folly of feminism’s aspiration to become ‘mainstream.’

Many feminists lament the marginal status of their perspective in the field of IR, however I maintain that they should instead embrace this marginal position and be wary of efforts to situate themselves elsewhere. As mentioned above, the dominant feminist, post-positivist approach to IR does not meet the established professional standards of the field, and to do so would change the power of feminism to challenge the assumptions and the silences of hegemonic theories and their gendered ideologies. Moreover, the two approaches to incorporating feminism into the mainstream and away from its position as a critique would be to add feminist analysis to existing theories, or to reconstruct IR theory from a feminist perspective; however my analysis reveals significant short-comings with both approaches. First, it is difficult to exogenously add women to andocentric categories and theories. As demonstrated with Chechen women terrorists, masculine categories can be resilient to transformation when incorporating women by forcing them into a feminine representation, maintaining a differentiation of men and women and stabilizing gender roles. This suggests an inability to achieve gender equality by adding women and the feminine where they have historically been absent, which is the approach of liberal feminist theory. It is this liberal approach of adding women or adding gender that is the dominant approach to feminist reconciliations with dominant IR theories. As Sarah Brown argues, this approach presupposes that women and gender have been historically absent from the field when in fact they have been present but silenced. Inclusion is not synonymous with gender equality, because women have always been there. Moreover, feminism is about more than women and gender; it is about a commitment to securing women’s equality. Consequently, many attempts to add women, gender, or the feminine to existing IR approaches without the political commitment to women’s empowerment produce only a chimera of feminism. Thus, feminists should rightly be concerned about co-optation by the mainstream, which often takes what it finds useful in feminist analysis while leaving behind its political project.

The alternative to entering the mainstream through the mainstream is to construct competing, feminist metanarratives of IR. There are two difficulties with this approach, namely the inability of feminists to reconstruct a coherent theory from women’s lives, and the ultimate violence that master narratives, even counter-master narratives inflict. The feminist reconstructive project, building theory from the perspective of women’s lives, stems from a

42 Hooper, Manly states, 80.
44 Steans, 17.
46 This is the approach that Robert Keohane takes in “International relations theory: contributions of a feminist standpoint,” in Gender and international relations, eds. Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newlands (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 41-50. He wants to add feminine ideas of cooperation to liberal institutionalism.
feminist standpoint approach. As Sandra Harding explains, this type of research and theorizing, based on what she terms ‘strong objectivity,’ begins from the perspective of “…those who have fewer interests in ignorance about how the social order actually works.”

There is a fine line between women’s objectivity and women’s superiority though, which is potentially in danger of advancing an essentialist notion of women’s experiences, inverting the hegemonic discourse of masculinity and mimicking the universalist claims of the mainstream. Rebuilding theory from women’s lives risks lumping all women together into a group of oppressed and objective persons without considering questions of class, race and location that differentiate women’s experiences and interests. As Chandra Mohanty explains, this approach “…conflicts the biological and the psychological with the discursive and the ideological. ‘Women’ are collapsed into the ‘suppressed feminine’ and men into the dominant ideology.”

The difficulties of this approach to reconstructive theory are evident in this study. The dominant feminist perspectives of security, the state and nationalism outlined here are dominated by Western, especially American feminist experiences that lock men and women into a dominant/dominated and oppressor/oppressed relationship that ignores the positive experiences of other women. Some women, such as those in the Nordic states, have actively participated in the contemporary structure of the state and might challenge feminist IR theories that see it as a solely masculine, oppressive and violent structure. Similarly, as Kumari Jayawardena argues, many women in developing countries had positive, empowering relationships with nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Like the mainstream, feminist reconstructive theory largely assumes if not an ahistoric notion of IR concepts such as the state and nationalism, then at least a uniform, static one that overlooks the ambiguities and changes within them, assuming that “resistances have been totally quieted” and that they “now simply are.” It is the resistances, however, that provide the openings for feminism.

Finally, the difficulty of reconstructing comprehensive IR theory from the experiences of women is apparent in the failure of feminists to adequately consider the issue of women’s violence. By not critically engaging the issue of women’s political violence, feminists themselves are reproducing the essentialist stereotype of the innocent, victimized, non-actor status of women in war. And yet dealing with the issue and incorporating it into a feminist reconstruction project poses serious challenges. As Rebecca Grant argues, the issue of women in combat or other violent roles challenges feminist theorizing that seeks to begin from the lives of women, because it undercuts the idea that women’s experience is different from men and challenges the relationship between feminist theoretical perspectives on war and the empirical record of women’s experiences. Consequently feminist theory should not value all women’s experiences equally, because the conception of the female gender role as different from the masculine must be preserved.

While the notion that women’s violence is experienced in the same way as men’s is contestable from the perspective of this analysis, a greater difficulty lies in the question of which women’s experiences should provide the basis for reconstructing a feminist IR theory? Are some women more ‘feminine’ or ‘womanly’ than others and what right do theorists have to exclude those experiences they deem unfriendly to feminism? This task

47 Harding, 154.
48 Mohanty, 261.
inevitably inflicts violence against some women. Instead of seeking acceptance in the mainstream of IR, feminists should embrace their critical position at the margins of international relations and use the variety of women’s experiences to resist hegemonic knowledge. Gender identities are not static, but as this study demonstrates, they are constantly being recreated, which means that there is opportunity for struggle and resistance.

A more postmodern approach that does not seek domination, but instead to resist domination and the recreation of gendered hierarchies is perhaps the future of feminist IR. Rather than attempting to recreate feminist theories of key IR concepts, which tend to mirror the ahistorical, static and uniform approach of the mainstream, a postmodern approach allows feminism to engage the mainstream without legitimizing it by identifying and exacerbating its own contradictions and destabilizations, as this study has demonstrated with regards to women terrorists. Many feminists shrink from postmodernism because it has the capacity to undermine all theories, not just the mainstream, and to be nihilistic, eliminating all subjects including the female one. Nonetheless, feminist postmodernism need not undermine itself, but instead can be a means of celebrating differences among women, resisting claims of universal truths and giving voice to those silenced by the production of knowledge. It need not annihilate the notion of ‘woman’ but instead prevent the violence of standpoint perspectives that seek to create a general ‘woman’s’ experience and validate the lives of some women over others in the search for feminist theory. It can help search for contradictions and openings within the mainstream, which feminist analysis can use to destabilize gendered hierarchies and work towards liberating women’s voices and perspectives.

Conclusion

Charlotte Hooper’s book Manly States examines the reproduction of masculine gender identity through the practice of international relations, as reflected in the Economist. The production of dominant or hegemonic masculinity cannot be understand in the absence of a coinciding femininity, however, which IR relegates to the private sphere of families and emotions. Indeed, the masculine/ feminine divide in international relations is based on an international/private divide that it attempts to maintain even when women actively participate in the political world of international relations. An examination of prevalent media coverage of Chechen women terrorists, popularly dubbed the ‘black widows,’ reveals two competing but similar depictions: one based on victimization by Russian soldiers and another based on victimization by Chechen fighters. Both refer to a common gendered frame that de-politicizes their actions and posits them as part of their role in the private world of the family. This analysis speaks to three controversies in feminist IR theory, suggesting that its role in displacing gender hierarchies is best served at the margins rather than the mainstream of the discipline. First, feminist analysis must always consider the women, the feminine and gender equality, which is the core of the feminist research project, making it difficult to incorporate it into masculine-biased mainstream theories. This difficulty is exacerbated by the resistance of andocentric categories to gender transformation, as evinced by the trend of differentiating or creating a niche for women terrorists based on the familial concept of sacrifice. Finally, it is difficult to reconstruct competing feminist interpretations of IR theory or concepts based on the experiences

53 Ashley, 242.
54 Steans, 28.
of women’s lives without inflicting violence upon and marginalizing some women, especially when they do not conform to our ideas of ‘feminism.’ Instead of lamenting feminism’s marginal status in IR, we should instead embrace this position and the opportunity that it provides to destabilizing the hierarchies and exclusions upon which it is based. Before trying too hard to insert feminism into the dominant streams of IR, we must ask ourselves whether or not feminism is feminism if it is not speaking from the margins. I would argue that it is not. To be mainstream, to be dominant, is to exclude and inflict violence on others; it is to mimic the injustice of those theories that feminism seeks to undermine.

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