

On International Anarchy and Women: The Case for Neorealist Feminism

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Abstract

This article connects neorealist and feminist approaches to International Relations. I claim that neorealism's main assumption, anarchy, and its main variable, the distribution of power, can offer insights into women's and gender-related problems. First, I argue that neorealism's core concepts and theories (anarchy and the balance of power) can help explain how culture forms, how international politics impact women's lives, and even have predictive power concerning the feminist movement itself. Second, I theorize how and when balance-of-power politics may influence women's societal position and introduce a few examples to support my case. Hence, this paper proposes a neorealist feminist synthesis and is an

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attempt at inter-paradigm dialogue that could prove fruitful for International Relations theory at large.

Keywords: Balance of Power and Gender, Feminism, International Relations Theory, Neorealism, Power Politics

I. Introduction

Few International Relations (IR) approaches look more irreconcilable than feminism and neorealism. Cross-fertilization is close to nil. Neorealists are primarily interested in the distribution of material power, while feminists focus on gender, and both sides usually have few occasions to cross paths. Yet, this article attempts to show that feminism and neorealism can profitably mix to produce new insights. In other words, neorealism's core assumption (anarchy) and independent variable (the distribution of power) can help shed light on feminism's main research focus — gender. Therefore, this paper makes a case for a new neorealist feminist approach.

Writes Wohlforth, “much of the modern history of international relations scholarship can be written as a sustained argument between realists and their critics.”¹ Indeed, feminism and critical theories at large emerged as major IR approaches at the turn of the 1980s and primarily took aim at realism.² Hoffman notices that “internally, the development of critical theory was driven by a reaction to the rearticulation of Realism in Kenneth

¹ William C. Wohlforth, “Realism and Great Power Subversion,” *International Relations* 34, no. 4 (2020): 460, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820968858>.

² A history of IR feminism is Eric M. Blanchard, “Gender, International Relations, and the Development of Feminist Security Theory,” *Signs* 28, no. 4 (2003): 1289–1312, <https://doi.org/10.1086/368328>.

Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*.”³ IR feminism has been critical of neorealism since its inception. Runyan and Peterson denounce the “patriarchal ideology of realism,”⁴ while Whitworth sees “little in realism that seems conducive to theorising about gender.”⁵ Shepherd summarizes that “the critiques of IR offered by feminist scholars are grounded in a rejection of neo-realism/realism as a dominant intellectual framework for academics in the discipline and policy makers alike.”⁶ However, a few instances of realist-feminist rapprochements exist.

True posits that neoclassical realism can accommodate feminist concerns.⁷ Nevertheless, neoclassical realism is not a neorealist theory per se but an eclectic approach that combines neorealism's top-down structural explanations with bottom-up,

³ Mark Hoffman, “Critical Theory and the Inter-Paradigm Debate,” *Millennium* 16, no. 2 (1987): 236, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298870160022801>.

⁴ Anne Sisson Runyan and V. Spike Peterson, “The Radical Future of Realism: Feminist Subversions of IR Theory,” *Alternatives* 16, no. 1 (1991): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437549101600103>.

⁵ Sandra Whitworth, “Gender in the Inter-Paradigm Debate,” *Millennium* 18, no. 2 (1989): 267, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298890180020201>.

⁶ Laura J. Shepherd, “Gender, Violence and Global Politics: Contemporary Debates in Feminist Security Studies,” *Political Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (2009): 215–216, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9299.2009.00180.x>.

⁷ Jacqui True, “Feminism and Realism in International Relations,” in Annette Freyberg-Inan, Ewan Harrison, and Patrick James, eds., *Rethinking Realism in International Relations: Between Tradition and Innovation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 219–232.

domestic-level variables like liberalism.⁸ Sjoberg tries to bring neorealism and feminism closer by associating the neorealist focus on structure with feminist arguments.⁹ But this attempt remains mostly a critical work that does not propose a workable theory of international politics.

First of all, definitions of feminism and neorealism are in order. The primary interest of feminism is gender inequality — gender being the cultural construction of masculinity and femininity.¹⁰ These gender constructions are formed and maintained through social discourses. Feminists point out that masculinity is often discursively associated with concepts such as

⁸ Kevin Narizny, “On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics: A Critique of the Newest Realism,” *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017): 155–190, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00296; and Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ Laura Sjoberg, “Gender, Structure, and War: What Waltz Couldn’t See,” *International Theory* 4, no. 1 (2012): 1–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297191100025X>; also, Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and Laura Sjoberg, “The Invisible Structures of Anarchy: Gender, Orders, and Global Politics,” *Journal of International Political Theory* 13, no. 3 (2017): 325–340, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1755088217711458>. Another of such attempt is Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Woman, the State, and War,” *International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2009): 289–303, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809104640>. Note that ‘realist feminism’ has been used to designate the work of Laura Sjoberg: Sara Meger et al., “Gender and Politics: A Discussion of Laura Sjoberg’s *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 1 (2014): 168–180, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592713003459>.

¹⁰ Marysia Zalewski, “Well, What Is the Feminist Perspective on Bosnia?” *International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (1995): 340–342, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2623438>.

rationality, science, and strength, while femininity is associated with emotion, kindness, and vulnerability.¹¹ Also, masculinity occupies the public sphere while femininity is pushed back to the private sphere. Masculinity dominates the fields dealing with international relations (like diplomacy, the military, or academia) and puts power politics and aggressive foreign policies at the forefront. To feminists, thusly aggressive and militaristic states threaten other states and even their own population, especially the female citizenry.¹²

There are several streams of feminism. Among them, one can be called ‘constitutive feminism’ (to borrow Sjoberg’s wording) and is considered as either a critical or constructivist approach — meaning that the concepts of discourse and identity are central.¹³ Some may favor calling it postmodern feminism. Another one is

¹¹ Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” *Signs* 12, no. 4 (1987): 687–718, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494362>.

¹² J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), chap. 1.

¹³ Laura Sjoberg, “Introduction to *Security Studies*: Feminist Contributions,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 2 (2009): 195, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410902900129>; also, J. Ann Tickner, “You Just Don’t Understand: Troubled Engagements Between Feminists and IR Theorists,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1997): 614–615, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2478.00060>. A criticism of the proximity between constructivism and critical approaches is J. Samuel Barkin and Laura Sjoberg, *International Relations’ Last Synthesis? Decoupling Constructivist and Critical Approaches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). For the opposite view: Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, “Dangerous Liaisons?: Critical International Theory and Constructivism,” *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 3 (1998): 259–294, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066198004003001>.

feminist empiricism. It differs from constitutive feminism primarily due to its commitment to positivism and theory-building.¹⁴ To feminist empiricists, gender serves as a research variable.¹⁵ In contrast, for constitutive feminists, gender is more a lens or a focal to observe the world through because “post-positivist critiques do not offer ‘the answer’ but insist upon and provide new spaces for the rethinking required ‘to deal with

¹⁴ Marysia Zalewski, “Feminist Standpoint Theory Meets International Relations Theory: A Feminist Version of David and Goliath?” *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 17, no. 2 (1993): 15–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45288849>; also, Cynthia Weber, “Good Girls, Little Girls, and Bad Girls: Male Paranoia in Robert Keohane’s Critique of Feminist International Relations,” *Millennium* 23, no. 2 (1994): 337–349, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298940230021401>. A review of the gender hypothesis-testing literature is Dara Kay Cohen and Sabrina M. Karim, “Does More Equality for Women Mean Less War? Rethinking Sex and Gender Inequality and Political Violence,” *International Organization* 76, no. 2 (2022): 414–444, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818321000333>.

¹⁵ For instance: Valerie M. Hudson et al., “The Heart of the Matter: The Security of Women and the Security of States,” *International Security* 33, no. 3 (2009): 7–45, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2009.33.3.7>.

the enormous issues of praxis that we confront in global life’.”¹⁶ Three main constitutive feminist criticisms of realism stand out.¹⁷ The two firsts emanate from traditional liberal and constructivist criticisms, while the last originates more clearly from critical studies.

State centrism. Realism is an approach centered on the state. It ignores many phenomena like civil society, non-governmental

¹⁶ V. Spike Peterson, “Transgressing Boundaries: Theories of Knowledge, Gender and International Relations,” *Millennium* 21, no. 2 (1992): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298920210020401>; also, Molly Cochran, “Talking with Feminists About What We Can Know in IR,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 12, no. 2 (1999): 46–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557579908400241>; Robert O. Keohane, “International Relations Theory: Contributions of a Feminist Standpoint,” *Millennium* 18, no. 2 (1989): 248–250, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298890180021001>; and Elisabeth Prügl, “Feminist Methodology Between Theory and Praxis,” *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 3 (2020): 304–314, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000482>. An overview of feminist methodology is J. Ann Tickner, “What Is Your Research Program? Some Feminist Answers to International Relations Methodological Questions,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2005): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-8833.2005.00332.x>.

¹⁷ Gülşen Aydın, “Feminist Challenge to the Mainstream IR,” *European Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 5 (2016): 63–64, <https://doi.org/10.26417/ejms.v2i1.p62-69>; Johanna Kantola, “The Gendered Reproduction of the State in International Relations,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 9, no. 2 (2007): 270–283, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856x.2007.00283.x>; Christine Sylvester, “Feminists and Realists View Autonomy and Obligation in International Relations,” in V. Spike Peterson, ed., *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 155–177; and J. Ann Tickner, “Hans Morgenthau’s Principles of Political Realism: A Feminist Reformulation,” *Millennium* 17, no. 3 (1988): 429–440, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298880170030801>.

organizations, and the importance of the individual because it focuses only on states. Therefore, realism participates in sustaining an international life that ignores many essential levels of analysis, notably human beings themselves, especially women.

Faulty definition of the national interest. Realism defines the national interest in a too-narrow fashion. It overlooks gender inequalities in society by focusing exclusively on the international balance of power. Also, the numerous social, economic, and environmental issues that plague the international community pushed states away from a competitive balance-of-power focus towards a more cooperative society of states.

Gender blindness and support for patriarchy. The realist discourse leaves no place for women, their experiences, and concerns. The earmark realist concept of ‘rationality’ is masculine-centered rationality that excludes women. Therefore, realism is not a mere descriptive theory but the discourse that enables the international system we live in. It justifies oppressive

state power and militarism and helps maintain masculine domination.¹⁸

Although many strands of realism exist, I focus here on the two main types of neorealism: defensive and offensive realism.¹⁹ Beyond their differences, both theories tell, to an extent, a similar story. Under anarchy, no world government ensures the survival of the states, which are reduced to self-help. States are unsure of the intentions of the other states, which all possess military capabilities. Therefore, they have an obvious incentive to build formidable military forces because it is the safest way to survive. Maintaining a balance of power is essential since a rival stronger

¹⁸ I do not discuss here Fukuyama's 'feminine peace theory' because it has fallen out of fashion in contemporary feminist scholarship. Francis Fukuyama, "Women and the Evolution of World Politics," *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 5 (1998): 24–40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20049048>; also, J. Ann Tickner, "Why Women Can't Run the World: International Politics According to Francis Fukuyama," *International Studies Review* 1, no. 3 (1999): 3–11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1521-9488.00162>; and Sandra Whitworth, *Feminism and International Relations: Towards a Political Economy of Gender in Interstate and Non-Governmental Institutions* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 16–20.

¹⁹ For defensive realism: Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1979); for offensive realism: John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014). Other schools are neoclassical realism: Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*; hegemonic realism: Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and classical realism: Raymond Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations* [Peace and War Among Nations] (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2004); and Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).

than oneself is an existential threat. These tendencies imposed by the international state of anarchy are called systemic incentives. Neorealism's core causal variable is material power. No realist would argue that only material power exists on the international scene. Economic intercourse, cultural connections, or environmental issues are important, and power is rarely a state's sole and unique concern. But because power underpins the state's survival and ability to act, it is never far from decision-makers' minds and permeates all other matters. Thus, neorealism takes the liberty of ignoring all other potential pursuits and focuses instead on relative power for the sake of theory-building.

Neorealism has the further advantage of eschewing classical realism's pessimistic ontology. Many feminist scholars are bothered by the seeming commitment of realist theories to a pessimistic ontology. The main issue at hand is the grounding of classical realism into Hobbes's "war of all men against all men."²⁰ This point is important because feminists are often committed to a transformative approach, which cannot bode well with classical

²⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 12; also, Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Edwin Curley trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 76. Actually, Hobbes himself did not believe most people to be evil in nature. Bernard Gert, "Hobbes and Psychological Egoism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28, no. 4 (1967): 503–520, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708526>; and Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 11.

realism's static and pessimistic view of the human condition.²¹ However, a preeminent neorealist scholar recently threw Hobbes out the window. Mearsheimer argues that people naturally bond to form tribes, cities, and eventually nations because human beings are inherently social creatures.²² The theoretical implications are clear: neorealism works well without assuming human malevolence or fundamental egoism.²³ That answers those who believe the evil-human-nature assumption remains buried under neorealism's structural argument.²⁴ By explicitly removing any potential rest of human-nature assumption, Mearsheimer disposed

²¹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Reflections on War and Political Discourse: Realism, Just War, and Feminism in a Nuclear Age," *Political Theory* 13, no. 1 (1985): 39–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591785013001004>. A recent discussion of pessimism and feminism is Caron E. Gentry, *This American Moment: A Feminist Christian Realist Intervention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), chap. 2.

²³ Aron made a similar point before: Raymond Aron, "The Anarchical Order of Power," *Daedalus* 95, no. 2 (1966): 481–483, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027309>; also, Aron, *Paix*. See, also, Davide Fiammenghi, "'Anarchy Is What States Make of It': True in a Trivial Sense; Otherwise, Wrong," *International Politics* 56, no. 1 (2019): 17–32, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-018-0169-6>.

²⁴ Neta C. Crawford, "Human Nature and World Politics: Rethinking 'Man'," *International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2009): 271–288, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809104639>; Annette Freyberg-Inan, "Rational Paranoia and Enlightened Machismo: The Strange Psychological Foundations of Realism," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 9, no. 3 (2006): 247–268, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jird.1800093>; and Annette Freyberg-Inan, *What Moves Man: The Realist Theory of International Relations and Its Judgment of Human Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

of ontological pessimism for good.²⁵ This salutary move leaves room for convergence between feminist and neorealist approaches. Indeed, both tell the story of generally well-intentioned people encountering a power structure that often imposes less-than-ideal outcomes on them.²⁶

The remainder of this article unfolds into two parts. In the first part, I associate neorealist insights with feminist concerns to increase both approaches' explanatory and predictive power. I claim that one of the main focuses of feminism, social and cultural militarization, finds its necessary precondition in the international anarchy. Also, feminism itself, as a movement and a scholarship, is deeply affected by the balance of power. In the second part, I theorize that power competition may impact women's condition, positively or negatively, depending on the balance of power. Therefore, the main contribution of this article is to show that neorealism can serve to theorize about gender and that further research promises intriguing results.

²⁵ For a defense of neorealism against this criticism: Zhichao Tong, "State of Nature Versus States as Firms: Reassessing the Waltzian Analogy of Structural Realism," *International Relations*, advance online publication (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178221140086>.

²⁶ Jennifer Sterling-Folker and Rosemary E. Shinko, "Discourses of Power: Traversing the Realist-Postmodern Divide," *Millennium* 33, no. 3 (2005): 637–664, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031801>. For a discussion of realism's proximity to critical theories: Rodger A. Payne, "Neorealists as Critical Theorists: The Purpose of Foreign Policy Debate," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (2007): 503–514, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707071514>.

II. Neorealist insights and feminist concerns

A. Anarchy and gender

This section argues that anarchy influences how culture, and thus gender, forms. This assertion allows envisioning neorealist theories of gender outcomes in international politics. Constructivism and other discursive theories usually assume the contrary: discourses shape practices. Indeed, for Wendt, “the realist-rationalist alliance denies or brackets the fact that competitive power politics help create the very ‘problem of order’ they are supposed to solve — that realism is a self-fulfilling prophecy.”²⁷

Yet, the constructivist argument leads to a puzzle. Most leaders worldwide have despised realist and balance-of-power thinking as immoral and outdated for decades.²⁸ Realism is largely unheard of in public discourses.²⁹ Although realism is arguably an influential school within academia, it is nearly absent in the mouths of policymakers, contrary to liberalism. Most

²⁷ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 410, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764>; also, Freyberg-Inan, *What Moves Man*, chap. 8.

²⁸ Discussions of realist ethics are Duncan Bell, “Political Realism and the Limits of Ethics,” in Duncan Bell, eds., *Ethics and World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 93–110; and Joseph S. Nye, “What Is a Moral Foreign Policy?” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 1 (2019): 96–109.

²⁹ Heather-Leigh Kathryn Ba and Timothy McKeown, “Does Grand Theory Shape Officials’ Speech?” *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 4 (2021): 1218–1248, <https://doi.org/10.1177/135406612111012060>.

Western foreign policy elites consider that power politics has been relegated to the museum since at least 1991 and that we live in the age of the “international community.” As asserted by Bill Clinton, in our era, “the cynical calculus of pure power politics simply does not compute.”³⁰ Chinese leaders similarly claim that balance-of-power politics is nothing more than “Cold War mentality.”³¹ Among the great powers, only Russia speaks overtly in realist terms.³² Logically, a minority scholar discourse is unlikely to shape the destinies of the world.³³ Therefore, in opposition to discursive approaches, realists believe that what they say matters little in the grand scheme of things. Although prominent realists often intervene in policy debates to attempt damage control (generally against unnecessary commitments and wars), they believe most states behave in realist ways when vital

³⁰ New York Times, “The 1992 Campaign; Excerpts from Speech by Clinton on U.S. Role,” October 2, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/02/us/the-1992-campaign-excerpts-from-speech-by-clinton-on-us-role.html>.

³¹ CNBC, “China Sees ‘Cold War Mentality’ in U.S., British, Australia Security Pact,” September 15, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/16/china-sees-cold-war-mentality-in-us-uk-australia-security-pact.html>.

³² Sumantra Maitra, “Realism in Russian Foreign Policy: The Crimean Case,” *CLWS Journal* 8, no. 2 (2014): 116–128.

³³ Brian C. Schmidt and Michael C. Williams, “The Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War: Neoconservatives Versus Realists,” *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 191–220, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802098990>.

national interests are involved, whatever the dominant foreign policy discourse is.³⁴

The difference between constructivist or critical and neorealist structures is that the former is socially *created* while the latter is *uncreated*. In other words, neorealism posits a spontaneous order: “all international systems have been an-archival, in the strict sense of the term: they have not been subjected to an *archē*.”³⁵ According to Johnson and Thayer, prehistoric humans and even chimpanzees exhibit ‘realist’ behaviors.³⁶ War reoccurs regardless of time, place, and social constructions. Whatever the nature of the actors, anarchy tends to

³⁴ States are of course free to totally ignore systemic incentives, but they will be ‘punished’ over the long run. The lack of well-crafted foreign and defense policies will ultimately lead to bullying, attacks, decline, and sometimes destruction. Waltz, *Theory*.

³⁵ Aron, “The Anarchical Order,” 483.

³⁶ Dominic D. P. Johnson and Bradley A. Thayer, “The Evolution of Offensive Realism: Survival Under Anarchy from the Pleistocene to the Present,” *Politics and the Life Sciences* 35, no. 1 (2016): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/pls.2016.6>.

produce similar results.³⁷ It appears unlikely that the Assyrians, the Aztecs, or the Romans received much inspiration from the realist discourses of Morgenthau, Waltz, and Mearsheimer.³⁸ People were debating security statecraft and great power competition in ways that would be familiar to today's readers already one millennium before Thucydides.³⁹ For neorealists, power politics would continue unabated even if their theory was

³⁷ Jack Snyder, "Anarchy and Culture: Insights from the Anthropology of War," *International Organization* 56, no. 1 (2002): 7–45, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081802753485124>; also, Dylan Motin, "Great Power Politics in World History: Balance of Power and Central Wars Since Antiquity," *Korean Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 2 (2022): 175–212, <https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2022.08.20.2.175>. Contrary to a widespread misconception, realists are not solely concerned with modern, 'post-Westphalian' states, because "it does not matter what kind of political units make up the system, as long as it is anarchic and the threat of violence is ever present." Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, 270, n. 52. As put by Waltz, "states with every imaginable variation of economic institution, social custom, and political ideology have fought wars. More strikingly still, many different sorts of organizations fight wars, whether those organizations be tribes, petty principalities, empires, nations, or street gangs." Waltz, *Theory*, 66.

³⁸ Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Barry L. Isaac, "The Aztec 'Flowery War': A Geopolitical Explanation," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 39, no. 4 (1983): 415–432, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jar.39.4.3629865>; and Stuart J. Kaufman and William C. Wohlforth, "Balancing and Balancing Failure in Biblical Times: Assyria and the Ancient Middle Eastern System, 900–600 BCE," in Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 22–46.

³⁹ Alex Ilari Aissaoui, "Was There a Balance of Power System in the Ancient Near East?" *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 30, no. 3 (2019): 421–442, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2019.1641916>; and Paul Edgar, "Diplomacy Shaken not Stirred," *War on the Rocks*, August 20, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/diplomacy-shaken-not-stirred/>.

totally erased from human knowledge. Hence, the disappearance of realism would not lead to the end of power politics and war.

Anarchy and the universality of the alternation of war and peace throughout world history can serve to theorize about gender. States must always prepare for the fateful moment of war, the ultima ratio of interstate relations, or the system will punish them. This is why the same patterns of interactions recur endlessly throughout history.⁴⁰ Yet, as Enloe remarks, “notions of masculinity are not identical across generations or across cultural boundaries.”⁴¹ While gender relations differed in each civilization, war is a universal phenomenon. Few, if any, societies were spared by it. Gender identities in B.C. Assyria, fifteenth-century Mesoamerica, and twentieth-century Europe were obviously unlike. Yet, all these regions experienced the alternate between war and peace. If power competition is a historical constant, but gender is not, a research program explaining its variations is warranted.

⁴⁰ Herbert Butterfield, “The Tragic Element in Modern International Conflict,” *Review of Politics* 12, no. 2 (1950): 147–164, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034670500044983>.

⁴¹ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 31.

B. Social impact of anarchy or anarchy as a necessary variable

This part claims that neorealism can help explain phenomena of interest to feminists. As suggested above, anarchy profoundly influenced how states, and thus societies, have evolved through time. Writes Waltz, “so long as anarchy endures, states remain like units.”⁴² International anarchy affects states like the market affects companies; it forces them to adopt ‘best practices’ by imitation and socialization. This explains why most states have developed since millennia forms of government able to extract resources from society to generate military power. International competition profoundly shaped political history and the human experience in general.⁴³

Anarchy affects cultural patterns deeply by forcing the costs of power politics and war on societies. The “armament culture” experienced through movies, video games, books, and language is deeply connected to it.⁴⁴ The armament culture may not be a *necessary* outcome, but it is at least a *logical* outcome of

⁴² Waltz, *Theory*, 93.

⁴³ For example, Ernesto Dal Bó, Pablo Hernández-Lagos, and Sebastián Mazzuca, “The Paradox of Civilization: Preinstitutional Sources of Security and Prosperity,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 1 (2022): 213–230, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542100071X>.

⁴⁴ Robin Luckham, “Armament Culture,” *Alternatives* 10, no. 1 (1984): 1–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437548401000102>; also, Cohn, “Sex and Death.”

anarchy.⁴⁵ Anarchy does not force filmmakers and game designers to create war-related content. It does not compel toy companies to sell replicas of assault rifles. However, anarchy makes war an ever-present possibility and exerts such a toll on generation after generation that the armament culture has become deeply ingrained into the human mind and the world's cultures.⁴⁶

Consequently, coupling neorealist and feminist insights is more straightforward than many may assume at first. The extensive effects of anarchy on gender issues are implicit throughout a big part of the IR feminist scholarship. For example, Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, a precursory text of IR feminism, describes many instances where power politics appears as a necessary precondition — the need to possess military bases abroad — for understanding the fate of women embroiled in security competition. Enloe's object of inquiry would not exist if there were no security competition and no bases abroad in the first place. In her study, women's fates are tied to power politics.

Similarly, Moon's *Sex Among Allies* explains that the Korean government used Korean prostitutes as assets to reinforce its

⁴⁵ For example, Steve Carlton-Ford et al., "Guns and Butter: Child Mortality and the Mediators of Militarization," *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no. 1 (2019): 177–197, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X18758288>.

⁴⁶ For example, Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Sovereignty, Identity, Sacrifice," in V. Spike Peterson, ed., *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 141–154; and Nicole Wegner, "Ritual, Rhythms, and the Discomforting Endurance of Militarism: Affective Methodologies and Ethico-Political Challenges," *Global Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab008>.

alliance with the United States.⁴⁷ In that case, the existential threat from North Korea and the Soviet Union pushed South Korea and the United States to ally. Since Cold War South Korea could hardly have survived without American support, it was ready to use all means necessary to bolster U.S. military commitment. Hence, balance-of-power calculations directly impacted many Korean women's lives.

Neorealism also helps comprehend why man and woman leaders behave similarly. Data show that women and men leaders tend to use armed force in similar proportions.⁴⁸ The authors argue that women 'turn realist' because they evolve in decision-making environments dominated by men who see violence favorably and thus brandish force to gain their support. Yet, a more straightforward interpretation of this result is possible: men and women face the same international system and the same incentives and thus act in similar ways to safeguard the national interest, regardless of gender.

The absence of women aboard submarines in many navies of the world illustrates how systemic incentives interact with gender

⁴⁷ Katharine H. S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁴⁸ Madison Schramm and Alexandra Stark, "Peacemakers or Iron Ladies? A Cross-National Study of Gender and International Conflict," *Security Studies* 29, no. 3 (2020): 515–548, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1763450>.

issues.⁴⁹ Anarchy and security competition explain why states field navies, while the details of the balance of power explain why some states procure submarines. Military forces are always looking for the highest efficiency of their personnel to maximize their strength, not unlike companies striving for the highest productivity of the workforce. This is the system-induced part of the problem. Then enters a domestic-level societal influence: the belief that integrating women aboard submarines could lead to friction and tension among the crew.⁵⁰ Systemic incentives impose on the naval forces to strive for efficiency; gender images lead to thinking that women on board would diminish efficiency. Feminist insights are integrated as an intervening variable.⁵¹ Thus, many navies do not employ women aboard submarines (see *Figure 1*).

⁴⁹ Lindal Buchanan, "A Few Good (Wo)Men: Integrating the US Submarine Force," *Rhetoric Review* 35, no. 1 (2016): 35–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2016.1107826>; and Heather D. Hellwig and Paulette T. Cazares, "Women, Ships, Submarines, and the US Navy," in Elspeth Cameron Ritchie and Anne L. Naclerio, eds., *Women at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 120–133.

⁵⁰ On the larger issue of the absence of women in the military: Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁵¹ Elias Götz, "Neoclassical Realist Theories, Intervening Variables, and Paradigmatic Boundaries," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa026>.

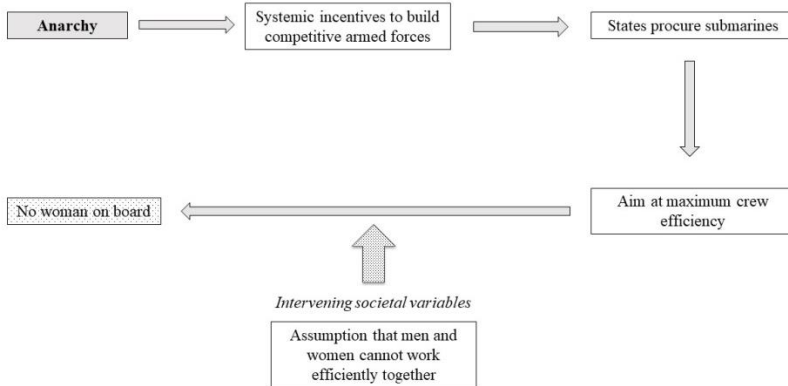


Figure 1. Systemic incentives and gender. Source: The author.

This approach has the merit of reconciling neorealism and feminism in a single framework. Feminism has little to say about why states field navies and submarines and strive for efficiency aboard vessels. Neorealism cannot explain why women could not board submarines. Therefore, a research program that describes the interaction between international structural incentives and gender representations will likely yield intriguing outcomes. Indeed, evidence supports this argument. For instance, Kang and Kim find that states under a direct foreign threat are more likely to have male than female leaders.⁵² Voters' gender stereotypes encourage them to believe that men will be 'tougher' and more capable on defense issues than women. International threats push

⁵² Alice J. Kang and Nam Kyu Kim, "Territorial Threat and Women's Legislative Representation," *Democratization* 27, no. 2 (2020): 340–358, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1700953>.

voters to elect efficient, competent leaders, while societal gender images lead them to favor male leaders. Going one step further, one could even couple neorealist and feminist insights to make predictions about women's lives.

Consider Moon's argument that a state can improve the working conditions of prostitutes around foreign military bases to push the foreign government to maintain its military presence and prevent abandonment.⁵³ Adding that insight to realism's predictive power would allow for forecasting. The United States maintains forces most notably in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Yet, changing balances of power are forcing Washington to refocus its military efforts towards Asia and China, the pacing threat. Because there is no great power competitor in the Middle East, the Americans are constantly under pressure to reduce their presence there. Europe has a great power competitor, Russia, but it appears too weak to inflict a decisive, catastrophic defeat on NATO and thus is a lesser priority than China. Knowing that, European and Middle Eastern states have a deep-seated interest in pushing the Americans to maintain their security guarantees despite their growing focus on China. In that case, Moon's findings would suggest that European and Middle Eastern governments will try hard to improve and sanitize the conditions of the prostitutes living around U.S. bases to entice American forces to remain. Conversely, most Asian governments face less

⁵³ Moon, *Sex Among Allies*.

such incentive since U.S. forces are likely to stay regardless of the prostitutes' condition.

C. Feminism itself as an outcome variable

In that section, I suggest that neorealism's predictive power can give clues about the future of feminism. Indeed, the ultimate test for a theory is to predict the future successfully. For example, Mearsheimer predicted in his 2001 volume that as China grew economically, it would pour more money into its military. Consequently, tensions would rise throughout Asia, and the United States would fear a potential Chinese regional hegemony. Many Asian states would coalesce around the United States, and intense security competition with China would ensue.⁵⁴ There is little doubt that this prediction came to be, while almost all other IR approaches predicted greater China-U.S. cooperation due to economic interdependence and common global challenges.⁵⁵

The distribution of power can be either a permissive or hindering factor for feminism as a movement and a scholarship.

⁵⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), chap. 10; also, Denny Roy, "Hegemon on the Horizon? China's Threat to East Asian Security," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 149–168, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539151>. To the contemporary reader, this may appear as obvious and common-sensical expectations. However, one needs to remember that discussions on how power politics had disappeared and benign great powers would lead the world for the better were mainstream during the 1990s and 2000s.

⁵⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (2021): 48–59.

This allows for a level of predictive insight into the future of feminism. Feminists are naturally interested in great power politics because great powers are the states setting the trajectory of global politics. Between 1991 and the mid-to-late 2010s, the United States was the sole great power and a liberal democracy. This liberal unipole offered a permissive environment for feminist (and many other) voices to express themselves. Nevertheless, this changed during the 2010s because China and Russia (re)emerged as great powers. Great powers always want to secure themselves by gaining predominance in their regional neighborhood. The sole successful regional hegemon of the modern era is the United States, which has dominated the Western Hemisphere since the nineteenth century. Neighboring states living under the shadow of a regional hegemon will tend to amend their policies to appease it. The hegemon will orient its neighbors' foreign, defense, and economic policies to maximize its security and extract additional resources from them.⁵⁶ Thus, a regional

⁵⁶ Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 6–15; Jennifer Lind, “Life in China’s Asia: What Regional Hegemony Would Look Like,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2018): 71–82, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44822082>; Dylan Motin, *Bandwagoning in International Relations: China, Russia, and Their Neighbors* (Wilmington: Vernon, 2024), chaps. 1–2; and Dylan Motin, “Not in My Backyard, But in Yours: Containment Realism, Restraint Realism and China-US Competition,” *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2022): 27–47, <https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2022.0024>. Also, Michael A. Allen, “The Influence of Regional Power Distributions on Interdependence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 5 (2018): 1072–1099, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002716669809>.

hegemon could undermine, purposefully or not, feminist movements or ideas by several mechanisms.

1. When intervening in the internal affairs of its neighbors, a hegemon that dislikes feminism may compel them to repress feminist movements and voices.

2. When intervening in the internal affairs of its neighbors, a hegemon is, *ceteris paribus*, likely to favor political parties or forces that resemble its own ruling elite.⁵⁷ Therefore, if the hegemon dislikes feminism, it will tend more or less consciously to support non-feminist forces.

3. Neighbors may wish to avoid potential friction with the hegemon by anticipating its preferences and preventively reining in feminism.

4. Regional states will have privileged relations with the hegemon on every level. Thus, they will tend to replicate through socialization the hegemon's approach to feminism.⁵⁸

Apart from the United States, there exists for now only two great powers, and both are well-positioned to claim regional hegemony in their respective neighborhoods: China and Russia.

⁵⁷ David R. Cameron and Mitchell A. Orenstein, "Post-Soviet Authoritarianism: The Influence of Russia in Its 'Near Abroad'," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 28, no. 1 (2012): 1–44, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.28.1.1>.

⁵⁸ Daniëlle Flonk, "Emerging Illiberal Norms: Russia and China as Promoters of Internet Content Control," *International Affairs* 97, no. 6 (2021): 1925–1944, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab146>.

Russia maintains by far the largest military in Europe. It has renovated its armed forces while most European states demilitarized or moved slower. Also, the U.S. focus on China and Asia has offered leeway to Moscow. Without the rise of China, the United States would likely have met resurgent Russia head-on at every corner. However, with the Americans busy in Asia, West European states have neither the will nor the capabilities to confront Russia directly on its own borders.⁵⁹ On its side, China translated its newfound wealth into a formidable military. Although its neighbors followed suit, no other Asian state is capable of resisting China on its own. That is why the United States is putting together a balancing coalition to contain Beijing.⁶⁰

These balances of power will have consequences for the future of feminism. The Chinese and Russian governments have a grudge against feminist movements and voices, seen as threats to their goals, their moral strength, and as agents for foreign

⁵⁹ Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, "Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back," *International Security* 45, no. 4 (2021): 7–43, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00405.

⁶⁰ Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*.

powers.⁶¹ One can predict that the prospects for feminism throughout the post-Soviet area are bleak. In the Chinese sphere — Cambodia, Pakistan, maybe Myanmar — it is unlikely that feminism develops much either. If China or Russia eventually reach regional hegemony in Asia or Europe, feminism will probably decline in both regions.

III. Theoretical proposition for a neorealist feminism

A. Theoretical proposition

In this part, I propose a basic theory on how and when security competition is likely to affect women. Neorealism is a theory of the interactions between functionally undifferentiated states. For the theory to remain coherent, states cannot vary in identity or interest; “domestic factors must be integrated into realism as components of structure, like capabilities. They cannot

⁶¹ Leta Hong Fincher, “China’s Feminist Five,” *Dissent* 63, no. 4 (2016): 84–90, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2016.0078>; Janet Elise Johnson and Aino Saarinen, “Twenty-First-Century Feminisms Under Repression: Gender Regime Change and the Women’s Crisis Center Movement in Russia,” *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 543–567, <https://doi.org/10.1086/668515>; Oleg Riabov and Riabova Tatiana, “The Remasculinization of Russia? Gender, Nationalism, and the Legitimation of Power Under Vladimir Putin,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 61, no. 2 (2014): 23–35, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216610202>; and Cai Wilkinson, “Mother Russia in Queer Peril: The Gender Logic of the Hypermasculine State,” in Swati Parashar, J. Ann Tickner, and Jacqui True, eds., *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 105–121.

shape actor preferences.”⁶² Integrating a focus on women into neorealism must occur through capabilities, the sole varying causal variable.

Security competition yields some influence over political and societal evolutions.⁶³ In a dangerous, anarchic world, states have the incentive to extract as many resources as possible from their society to maintain or increase their share of world power. Therefore, states adopt best practices and reject inefficient ones.⁶⁴ States that fail to learn and stick to their old ways get punished by the system. The stronger the level of security threat, the more states will learn and be ready to give up harmful practices.⁶⁵

For example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) leadership learned that feminization could bolster its fighting efficiency and thus pushed for it.⁶⁶ The Cold War incentivized the 1960s U.S. government to fight racism to unify the country against the Soviet threat. During wartime, previously powerless people mobilized for service or work usually gain new recognition; it is no coincidence that many extensions of the right

⁶² Narizny, “On Systemic Paradigms,” 163.

⁶³ Peter Gourevitch, “The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics,” *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (1978): 881–912, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002081830003201x>.

⁶⁴ Waltz, *Theory*, 127–128.

⁶⁵ Ionut C. Popescu, “Grand Strategy vs. Emergent Strategy in the Conduct of Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018): 451, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1288109>.

⁶⁶ Heidi Hardt and Stéfanie von Hlatky, “NATO’s About-Face: Adaptation to Gender Mainstreaming in an Alliance Setting,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 136–159, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz048>.

to vote in the United States happened during post-war periods. It is also no coincidence that British and French women were enfranchised during the last months of World War I and World War II, respectively. Indeed, research shows that war generally accelerates women's empowerment.⁶⁷

I propose that structural incentives can push a state towards feminization — understood here as the quantitative increase of women in civilian or military employment. I do not discuss feminization in the qualitative sense — for example, in terms of perceptions or culture — because this would require more elaboration than possible here. Therefore, I only approach feminization as a material phenomenon and do not touch upon gender issues directly. Nevertheless, from a purely logical standpoint, the more women participate in the economy or public service, the more women and men should tend toward equality. Balance of power-induced feminization appears through two mechanisms.

⁶⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, 72–74; and Kaitlyn Webster, Chong Chen, and Kyle Beardsley, “Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women’s Empowerment,” *International Organization* 73, no. 2 (2019): 255–289, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818319000055>. However, combat itself usually has a terrible impact on women. H. Patricia Hynes, “On the Battlefield of Women’s Bodies: An Overview of the Harm of War to Women,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 27, no. 5–6 (2004): 431–445, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2004.09.001>.

1. *Quantitative increase.* If a state lacks troops for its military or workers for its economy, it should tend to boost feminization.

Security competition is a labor-intensive activity. Thus, population is one of the necessary building blocks of military power.⁶⁸ Traditionally, states mostly rely on men to staff their military forces. But if there are not enough male recruits to staff the military, a logical remedy is to rely instead on female recruits. Accordingly, “the crucial determinant of the number of women brought into the armed forces is whether the supply of men meets the number needed to fulfill the military’s mission(s).”⁶⁹ Also, wealth is essential to sustain military power. This logic can thus extend to the economic sphere, too. States with higher rates of women’s economic participation will likely generate more wealth. Therefore, we can predict that states populous enough will have little incentive to pursue feminization actively. On the contrary, states that lack people-power compared to their competitors will tend to push feminization harder.

2. *Qualitative increase.* If a state has incentives to boost the efficiency of its economy or its military, it should tend to push for feminization.

⁶⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy* (2014), chap. 3.

⁶⁹ Mady Wechsler Segal, “Women’s Military Roles Cross-Nationally: Past, Present, and Future,” *Gender and Society* 9, no. 6 (1995): 766, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124395009006008>. To the best of my knowledge, Segal’s theoretical proposition is the most similar to mine.

A state may want to mobilize the abilities of the female population to increase its capabilities.⁷⁰ In many developed countries, women receive, on average, higher education than men.⁷¹ Therefore, states are interested in pushing for feminization in the economy and the public service to benefit from this educated people-power and increase its economic and administrative potential. For instance, World War II had a noticeable impact on the employment of higher-educated women in the United States.⁷²

In addition, weapon systems have significantly increased in complexity throughout the last few decades. For example, 1960s-designed F-5 and A-7 jets only required around 20 person-hours of maintenance per flight hour. 1970s design F-14 and F-15 jets required approximately 48 person-hours of maintenance per flight hour, while the newest F-35 jet requires

⁷⁰ Frank Grass, "Female Citizen Soldiers and Airmen: Key Contributors to Worldwide Peace and Security," *Prism* 6, no. 1 (2016): 46–57, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26470431>.

⁷¹ Abigail Johnson Hess, "For the First Time in History, Women Are Better Educated Than Their Husbands—but Men Still Earn More," *CNBC*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/21/women-are-better-educated-than-their-husbands-but-men-still-earn-more.html>.

⁷² Claudia Goldin and Claudia Olivetti, "Shocking Labor Supply: A Reassessment of the Role of World War II on Women's Labor Supply," *American Economic Review* 103, no. 3 (2013): 257–262, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.103.3.257>.

around 50.⁷³ Such complex machinery needs the work of numerous specialists to remain operational. Hence, contemporary militaries must recruit large numbers of educated personnel, often women.⁷⁴

In a nutshell, states should tend to push for feminization when they lack in total population but also if they lack not in total population but in educated or trained personnel. On the contrary, following the same logic, a state that does not lack personnel or is not engaged in an intense security competition has little incentive to push toward feminization. In the next section, I do not attempt a systematic demonstration and limit myself to a few examples to show that this thesis is plausible.

B. A few examples

States like China and India have large enough populations to sustain almost any level of military effort deemed necessary. These states have little structural incentive to push for feminization. Conversely, Russia deals with NATO on its west and China on its southeast, and both entities are largely more

⁷³ Giovanni De Briganti, "Navair Sees F-35 Requiring Up to 50 Maintenance Hours per Flight Hour," *Defense-Aerospace.com*, December 5, 2016, <https://www.defense-aerospace.com/navair-projects-f-35-to-need-50-maintenance-hours-per-flight-hour/>; and Joshua M. Epstein, *Measuring Military Power: The Soviet Air Threat to Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 19.

⁷⁴ Saskia Stachowitsch, "Military Gender Integration and Foreign Policy in the United States: A Feminist International Relations Perspective," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 4 (2012): 305–321, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010612451482>.

populous than itself. Based on our theoretical expectations, Russia would feel the structural incentive to feminize its military despite being a conservative nation on women and gender issues. Indeed, the Indian military counts around three percent of women, and the Chinese military stands at five percent. But the Russian military reaches ten percent of women.⁷⁵ The Orthodox Church profoundly influences the Russian polity from the higher levels of the state down to military units.⁷⁶ In this background, it is a fair claim that women's military participation could be lower than it is without international political motives.

The nascent Soviet Union accepted women for the Red Army because it lacked people-power in its civil war (1917–1922). Then, after sustaining massive losses to the German onslaught in 1941–1942, the Red Army started to put women in front units. Women were found in numbers in air defense, sniper, and tank units. During the war, 76 women were nominated 'Hero of the Soviet Union'. By the war's end, the Soviet military comprised around 10 percent of women. Actually, Britain and Germany during World War II also pushed significant numbers of women toward military service, while the United States did not. Indeed,

⁷⁵ Army Technology, "Women in the Army: Female Fighters in the World's Seven Biggest Armies," November 30, 2018, <https://www.army-technology.com/uncategorised/women-in-the-army/>.

⁷⁶ Dmitry Adamsky, "Russian Orthodox Church and Nuclear Command and Control: A Hypothesis," *Security Studies* 28, no. 5 (2019): 1010–1039, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1662483>; and Yulia Prozorova, "Religio-Political Nexus and Political Imaginary in Russia," *Social Imaginaries* 5, no. 2 (2019): 105–139, <https://doi.org/10.5840/si20195216>.

Washington suffered less from shortages of men recruits, and the war was a less existential threat than for European powers, thanks to geographic distance. Although the Cold War Soviet Union did not conscript women, it planned to mobilize them in case of a major war. Soviet girls had to take basic military training like boys to prepare for this eventuality.⁷⁷ Although actual recruitment policies remain unclear, women appear poised to play a growing role in the Russian military to compensate for the casualties taken following the 2022 Ukraine invasion.⁷⁸

The neighbors of today's Russia in Eastern and Northern Europe are states with smaller populations and limited defense capabilities.⁷⁹ Estonia imposes compulsory military service only for men but is now actively trying to entice more women to join voluntarily. Latvia is one of the NATO member states with the

⁷⁷ D'Ann Campbell, "Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Military History* 57, no. 2 (1993): 301–323, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944060>; and Chris McNab, *The Great Bear at War: The Russian and Soviet Army, 1917–Present* (Oxford: Osprey, 2019), 48, 89, 160.

⁷⁸ Interfax-Ukraine, "Russian Invaders Start to Mobilize Women — AFU General Staff," December 12, 2022, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/877888.html>; and Moscow Times, "Wagner Boss: Women Should Also Get Early Jail Release to Fight in Ukraine," December 21, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/12/21/wagner-boss-women-should-also-get-early-jail-release-to-fight-in-ukraine-a79768>.

⁷⁹ Dylan Motin, "Geography, Military Balance, and the Defence of NATO's Borderlands," *Journal on Baltic Security* 6, no. 1 (2020): 52–57, <https://doi.org/10.2478/jobs-2020-0002>.

highest proportion of women soldiers.⁸⁰ Sweden reacted to the resurrection of Russian power by re-enacting conscription in 2017 (after a seven-year hiatus), this time for both men and women.⁸¹ Ukraine's military counted in 2008 only around 1,800 women. Ukraine faced an existential military threat after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and intervened in the Donbas. The number of enlisted women jumped fifteenfold to enlarge its military rapidly, reaching 27,074 in 2019. The number of women in the Ukrainian armed forces exceeded 60,000 during its war with Russia, with many in combat roles.⁸²

Israel is a small state surrounded by more populous neighbors, notably Egypt and Syria. Consequently, Israel has levied both men and women for military service since 1948. Also, Israel's social and economic feminization level is higher than its

⁸⁰ Baltic News Network, "Latvian Army — the Most 'Feminine' in NATO," January 3, 2012, <https://bnn-news.com/latvian-army-feminine-nato-45619>; and LRT, "Estonian Military Launches Campaign to Attract Female Conscripts," March 24, 2021, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1372075/estonian-military-launches-campaign-to-attract-female-conscripts>.

⁸¹ Adam Chandler, "Why Sweden Brought Back the Draft," *Atlantic*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/sweden-conscription/518571/>.

⁸² 112 Ukraine, "Number of Women in Ukraine's Armed Forces Increased by 15 Times for Ten Years," September 19, 2019, <https://112.international/society/number-of-women-in-ukraines-armed-forces-increased-by-15-times-for-ten-years-43702.html>; and Nicholas Kristof, "Ukrainian Women Fight for Their Own Liberation," *New York Times*, December 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/03/opinion/ukraine-women.html>.

Arab neighbors.⁸³ North Korea also presents a similar pattern. Its population and economy pale compared to the South Korean-U.S. alliance. North Korea, too, instituted women's conscription. Although Pyongyang has an abysmal record for violating women's rights, the North Korean military comprises women at around 40 percent.⁸⁴

Since the mid-2010s, the United States has refocused its foreign policy on competing with rival great powers, namely China and Russia. Hence, concerns about both the relative size and the quality of the U.S. military have surfaced. The U.S. mobilization system only registers men as draftable for mobilization, and whether or not to include women as mobilizable has become a political issue.⁸⁵ Traditionally, military aircraft's cockpits were conceived to suit male physiology. However, the U.S. Air Force now requests new planes to accommodate better female physiology. As an Air Force official explained, the United States notably faces China, a state with well-trained and educated soldiers who could soon outnumber the U.S. Air Force. Therefore,

⁸³ Idit Shafran Gittleman, "Female Service in the IDF: The Challenge of an 'Integrated' Army," *Lawfare*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/female-service-idf-challenge-integrated-army>.

⁸⁴ Army Technology, "Women in the Army"; and Sea Young Kim and Leif-Eric Easley, "The Neglected North Korean Crisis: Women's Rights," *Ethics & International Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2021): 19–29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679421000010>.

⁸⁵ BBC, "Should Women Be Eligible for US Military Draft?" April 26, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52274164>.

Washington needs to build aircraft that accommodate everyone if it wants to remain competitive:

*All well and good when you're a country that's going to face a country with a population that's four times your own by the end of this decade. But if we begin with a recruitment population that we've artificially halved because of how we design our cockpits and workstations, we've just doubled our work, and now we make every operator in the seat have to be eight times better than the counterpart they will face in a nation like China.*⁸⁶

Once again, this part is no full-fledged case study but just impressionistic evidence that supports my point. Also, numerical

⁸⁶ Valerie Insinna, "To Get More Female Pilots, the Air Force Is Changing the Way It Designs Weapons," *Air Force Times*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2020/08/19/to-get-more-female-pilots-the-air-force-is-changing-the-way-it-designs-weapons/>.

feminization may not necessarily lead to gender equality.⁸⁷ But one could use that theoretical proposition to make predictions. For example, South Korea's extremely low birth rate will impede its economic development and military strength for the foreseeable future. Therefore, due to its enduring standoff with North Korea and the rising threat from China, the Korean government will face enormous pressure to increase the participation of women in both civilian and military sectors quickly.⁸⁸ Taiwan also confronts a quickly declining pool of male recruits while the Chinese capabilities are growing by the day. Thus, Taipei recently allowed

⁸⁷ On the topic: Jacklyn Cock, "Women and the Military: Implications for Demilitarization in the 1990s in South Africa," *Gender and Society* 8, no. 2 (1994): 152–169, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124394008002002>; Cynthia Enloe, "Women — the Reserve Army of Army Labor," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 12, no. 2 (1980): 42–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/048661348001200206>; and Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987). I pay little attention to civil wars here. For an introduction to the issue: Marie E. Berry, *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El Salvador* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸⁸ Timothy W. Martin and Andrew Jeong, "South Korea's Military Is Shrinking and Some Say Women Must Answer the Call of Duty," *Wall Street Journal*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-koreas-military-is-shrinkingsome-say-women-must-answer-the-call-of-duty-11622727598>.

women to volunteer as reservists and will likely soon be hard-pressed to recruit more women in the military.⁸⁹

IV. Conclusion

This article attempted to fill the gap between feminism and neorealism. The first part argued that neorealist theory applied to IR gender research, and ultimately to feminism itself, could create new insights. The last part proposed a basic theory on why and when security competition creates momentum for feminization. Overall, the article tried to show that neorealist insights can shed new light on existing research puzzles and generate new theories. The rise of new great powers and the collapse of the liberal international order throughout recent years forced a renewed interest in realist teachings. Meanwhile, feminism emerged during the last decades as one of the main IR approaches. Yet, few scholars tried to associate both despite the potential benefits. Such

⁸⁹ Wayne Chang, "Taiwan to Allow Women into Military Reserve Force Training as China Fears Grow," *CNN*, January 18, 2023, [https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/18/asia/taiwan-women-military-reserve-intl-hnk-ml/index.html#:~:text=Taiwan's%20military%20on%20Tuesday%20rolled,the%20democratic%20self%20ruled%20island](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/18/asia/taiwan-women-military-reserve-intl-hnk-ml/index.html#:~:text=Taiwan's%20military%20on%20Tuesday%20rolled,the%20democratic%20self%20ruled%20island;); and Eric Cheung, "Taiwan's Military Has a Fertility Problem: As China Fears Grow, Its Recruitment Pool Shrinks," *CNN*, December 17, 2022, [https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/16/asia/taiwan-fertility-rate-security-risk-invasion-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=Taiwan's%20military%20has%20a%20fertility,grow%2C%20its%20recruitment%20pool%20shrinks&text=A%20military%20cadet%20graduates%20in%20Taipei%2C%20Taiwan%2C%20in%202018.&text=Taiwan%20has%20noticed%20a%20hole,budget%20or%20buying%20more%20weapons](https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/16/asia/taiwan-fertility-rate-security-risk-invasion-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=Taiwan's%20military%20has%20a%20fertility,grow%2C%20its%20recruitment%20pool%20shrinks&text=A%20military%20cadet%20graduates%20in%20Taipei%2C%20Taiwan%2C%20in%202018.&text=Taiwan%20has%20noticed%20a%20hole,budget%20or%20buying%20more%20weapons.).

association forces realists to ask new questions while it offers feminism more explanatory and predictive power.

Therefore, associating feminism and neorealism opens the way for potentially fruitful research. Future works could investigate potential links between external threats and evolutions in gender images or relations. One could also inquire how changes in the balance of power influence women's lives. For example, Wildenthal connects Imperial Germany's accession to world power to the experience of German women.⁹⁰ Furthermore, a state's mobilization intensity significantly influences women's private lives.⁹¹ One could hypothesize that China's international rise impacted the lives of Chinese women worldwide by either enhancing their status or, conversely, turning them into potential national security threats. How defeat in the Cold War fragilized the status of Russian women both in Russia and abroad could also be a valid question.

Further research could compare the performance and endurance of states with different levels of feminization amid power competition. Gender explanations of international politics can also explain what realism cannot. For example, most realists consider the Vietnam War an anomaly because it was not waged

⁹⁰ Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁹¹ Victoria M. Basham and Sergio Catignani, "War Is Where the Hearth Is: Gendered Labor and the Everyday Reproduction of the Geopolitical in the Army Reserves," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 2 (2018): 153–171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1442736>.

for sound strategic reasons.⁹² Dean comes to the same conclusion and instead explains that the gender ideology of the then-U.S. leaders made them fear looking weak and cowardly, making it hard for them to remain out of the war.⁹³

Going beyond the man-woman binary, one could inquire how international competition affects sexual minorities.⁹⁴ The logic of neorealism may also apply to understanding multi-ethnic and multiracial states. For example, according to Eckstein, the Roman Republic developed a formidable military and eventually overpowered its opponents because, contrary to them, Rome had a unique ability to digest and integrate the diverse people it conquered thanks to its citizenship system.⁹⁵ The possibilities for combining the realist method with new outlooks are vast.

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⁹² Lorenzo Zambnardi, "The Impotence of Power: Morgenthau's Critique of American Intervention in Vietnam," *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 3 (2011): 1335–1356, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001531>.

⁹³ Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

⁹⁴ Terrell Carver and Laura Lyddon, *Masculinities, Gender and International Relations* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022); and Cynthia Weber, *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹⁵ Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, chap. 7.

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