



# GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY, FEMINIST CRITIQUE, AND THE POLITICS OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

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Article history:	Abstract:
<p><b>Received:</b> 28<sup>th</sup> March 2026 <b>Accepted:</b> 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2026</p>	<p>This article examines the role of gender in contemporary international relations, focusing on the persistent structural inequalities that continue to shape women's participation in global political, economic, and social processes. Despite the formal recognition of gender equality within international normative frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5, its practical implementation remains uneven across regions and institutional contexts.</p> <p>Grounded in feminist international relations theory, the study argues that global governance structures are still largely informed by patriarchal assumptions embedded in traditional understandings of power, security, and rationality. These assumptions contribute to the systematic underrepresentation of women in decision-making institutions and reinforce gendered hierarchies within international political and economic systems.</p> <p>The article further analyzes key dimensions of gender inequality, including political exclusion, economic disparities, unpaid care work, limited access to education and healthcare, and heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence and armed conflict. It demonstrates that these factors are structurally interconnected and collectively sustain gender asymmetries in global development outcomes.</p>
<p><b>Keywords:</b> International relations, gender equality, feminist international relations, global governance, patriarchy, political representation, economic inequality, unpaid care work, gender-based violence, security studies, Sustainable Development Goals.</p>	

Contemporary international relations are becoming increasingly complex and fraught with multifaceted challenges. In an era when the factor of power in global politics is assuming diverse forms, the role and significance of women as representatives of a more vulnerable social category, as well as issues related to their active participation in state and public life, are becoming more relevant than ever.

One of the defining issues of twenty-first-century global governance and politics has been gender equality. Regardless of efforts such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which promotes gender equality, the progress of achieving gender equality and empowerment of women remains uneven across political, social, and economic domains. Less than one-third of the legislative seats worldwide are held by women, and they remain underrepresented in the high-level political arena.<sup>1</sup> This lack of women in politics is not only seen at the institutional level but also in the deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that affect the behavior of people in politics.

Over the past few decades, the fundamental ideas of international relations have come under scrutiny. Feminist theorists, many of whom are drawn to neo-Marxist and critical theorists, claim that the discipline is influenced by patriarchal ideas. To some extent, they argue that gender is often disregarded. Feminists challenge the fundamental assumption of the classical approach. They reject an understanding of the state as being fixed. They challenge narrow understandings of power and security. And they also target the idea that humans can be understood as purely rational agents that only pursue self-interest. They oppose these frames that reflect masculine values.

In response, feminists offer a vision of international relations. In that vision, power is understood as cooperation rather than domination; it directs emphasis to care, interdependence, and compromise, instead of competition and self-interest. For example, Gilpin defines an ideology as a belief system and includes both a scientific explanation and

<sup>1</sup> Shepherd (2010), *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, p. 6.

normative prescriptions.<sup>2</sup> None of these approaches discusses gender, so we can only conclude that their authors think they are gender neutral. They claim that while identifying the interaction between states and markets, as Gilpin defines political economy, we can explain this no differently, whether gender is considered or not. Just as women are absent from the field of international relations, the few feminists who write about economics claim that feminist economics has made them completely invisible. The field of economics has shown little interest in household production and volunteer work, or in women's particular problems and accomplishments in a market economy. In practice, this level of "gender neutrality" has permitted IR scholarship to ignore differences in how women and men experience war, economics, and diplomacy.

Feminist International Relations was created in part to highlight this gap. Leading feminist scholars push back against these constraints by emphasizing that all IR is gendered, even if not to insist, but at least to suggest, that gender relations inform power. By asking "Where are the women?" both in theory and policy, their work shows that terms like power, security, and even rationality are founded on masculine assumptions.

Masculinity relates to rationality, power, and independence, whilst femininity historically associates with domesticity, dependence, and the private sphere. Cynthia Enloe, in her writing, has asked, "Where are the women?". Enloe examined how the local and international spheres intersected and how everyday realities are built upon gendered identities. The military and war have been viewed as masculine spheres for centuries. In juxtaposition to the masculine image constructed around men as protectors, women's roles in international conflict were historically downplayed.<sup>3</sup>

Gender as a "useful category of historical analysis" supports Scott's claim that power is based on symbolic meanings and institutional practices that define knowledge and authority.<sup>4</sup> Global politics perpetuate these meanings through diplomatic rituals, leadership conventions, and security discourse. Enloe shows that even international organizations' supposedly neutral practices—uniforms, hierarchies, bureaucratic language—support male supremacy as gendered assumptions.<sup>5</sup>

Feminist scholar Judith Butler critically examines the narrow military and political understanding of the concept of "security," arguing that it is largely constructed within male-dominated political structures that tend to exclude women from meaningful participation in political decision-making. In her view, the state frames security as an extension of masculine political power, which marginalizes women and distances them from core processes of governance. In *Frames of War*, Butler further emphasizes that "the state determines whose lives are worthy of protection and whose are not,"<sup>6</sup> highlighting how this selective framework not only shapes security priorities but also reinforces the political exclusion of women, particularly from influential spheres where such determinations are made. As a result, issues disproportionately affecting women, such as sexual violence, poverty, and social oppression, remain peripheral within dominant security discourses.

Similarly, John Stuart Mill critiques the reduction of "security" to state protection and links genuine security to individual freedom and social justice. In *The Subjection of Women*, he argues that "when society blocks the opportunities of women, this is a threat to the security of society itself."<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, the systematic exclusion of women from political life undermines both social stability and the very foundations of security, as it prevents their full participation in shaping public and political outcomes.

Feminist scholars argued that global politics cannot be fully understood without analyzing how gender shapes power, conflict, diplomacy, and development. In making women visible, feminism has also highlighted women's absence from decision-making and institutional structures.

One of the earliest and most visible victories of feminism was the right to vote. New Zealand became the first country to grant women suffrage in 1893, followed by many nations across the world in the 20th century. In the United States, the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920 was a turning point in political equality. Legal reforms also extended to property and family law, allowing women to own assets, initiate divorce, and make decisions independent of male authority. Feminist struggles also reached the workplace. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 in the United States and similar legislation worldwide sought to close the wage gap. A landmark achievement came in Iceland, which in 2018 became the first country to make it illegal for companies to pay men more than women for the same work. Governments from 189 countries unanimously declared that equality between women and men was a matter of human rights and a prerequisite for achieving social justice, as well as a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for development, and peace.

Today, there is more legal protection for women and girls worldwide: 1,583 laws addressing gender-based violence have been enacted in 193 countries, compared to only 12 countries in 1995. And more than 100 countries have trained police to support survivors of violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Tickner, A. (1992). *Gender in international relations: Chapter 3*.

<https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/book/tickner/tickner14.html>

<sup>3</sup> Smith, S. (2018, January 4). *Introducing feminism in international relations theory*. E-International Relations.

<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/04/feminism-in-international-relations-theory/>

<sup>4</sup> Scott (1986), pp. 1053–1057.

<sup>5</sup> Enloe (2000), pp. 19–25.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, J. (2009) *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso Books, pp. 33–39.

<sup>7</sup> Mill, J.S. (1869) *The Subjection of Women*. London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, pp. 45–50.

Even after a century of progress, it could take 169 years to close the economic participation and opportunity in the gender gap, and not a single country has achieved full gender parity yet.<sup>8</sup>

Today, gender equality is recognized as a fundamental component of human rights by numerous states and international organizations. Nevertheless, significant challenges persist in achieving substantive gender equality across different regions of the world. These challenges manifest in social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. In many societies, deeply entrenched traditional roles and gender stereotypes continue to shape perceptions of women, with a prevailing expectation that their primary responsibilities lie in maintaining the family and raising children. Such normative expectations significantly constrain women's active participation in political and economic life. In several countries across the Middle East and North Africa, for instance, women's roles in public life remain limited, while their political participation and economic autonomy are comparatively weak. These socially constructed stereotypes therefore constitute a major structural barrier to the realization of gender equality<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, women's representation in national parliaments remains low worldwide. The persistent underrepresentation of women in political institutions reflects an ongoing failure to ensure genuine gender equality in political representation, resulting in the partial or inadequate articulation of women's interests within policymaking processes<sup>10</sup>

Women also continue to experience pronounced economic and social inequalities across the globe. On average, women earn approximately \$0.50–\$0.78 for every dollar earned by men, although this ratio varies significantly across countries. At the current pace of change, it is estimated that the global gender pay gap may take roughly a century to close. A substantial share of women's labor remains unpaid: women perform two to three times more unpaid care and domestic work than men. This "invisible" labor is estimated to contribute around \$10 trillion annually, accounting for approximately 13% of global GDP. Interruptions in employment due to childbirth and caregiving responsibilities further exacerbate lifetime income disparities. For instance, in the United States, only about 14% of employers provide paid maternity leave, and the country—alongside a small number of others such as Papua New Guinea and Suriname—does not guarantee statutory paid maternity leave. By contrast, Sweden offers up to 480 days of paid parental leave, illustrating how public policy can significantly mitigate structural disadvantages faced by working mothers<sup>11</sup>.

Gender disparities are also evident in education and health outcomes. According to UNESCO, approximately 121 million children worldwide remain out of school, with girls constituting more than half of this population, thereby limiting their future socio-economic opportunities. Insufficient access to education is closely associated with early marriage and higher fertility rates; each additional year of secondary education for girls reduces the likelihood of child marriage by approximately five percentage points.

In the health sector, an estimated 214 million women of reproductive age have unmet needs for modern contraception, contributing to unintended pregnancies and preventable maternal health risks. Limited access to education and healthcare services, particularly in conflict-affected and low-income regions, continues to trap many women in cycles of poverty<sup>12</sup>.

Violence and armed conflict further represent critical barriers to gender equality. Gender-based violence remains widespread, with global estimates suggesting that up to seven in ten women experience violence during their lifetime. Domestic violence is still insufficiently criminalized or inadequately enforced in many countries, leaving hundreds of millions of women without effective legal protection. In conflict settings, women and girls are disproportionately affected; recent United Nations data indicate that more than 600 million women and girls currently live in conflict-affected areas, reflecting a substantial increase over the past decade. Additionally, conflict-related sexual violence has shown a marked rise, with verified cases increasing significantly in recent reporting periods<sup>13</sup>.

Despite significant normative progress and the institutionalization of gender equality within global governance frameworks, substantial disparities continue to exist across political, economic, and social domains. Women remain systematically underrepresented in decision-making structures, disproportionately affected by economic inequality and unpaid labor, and more vulnerable to structural violence and the consequences of armed conflict. The analysis has

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<sup>8</sup> World Economic Forum. (2023). *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*. Retrieved from [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Human Development Report 2023/2024: Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World* (Gender Inequality Index section). <https://hdr.undp.org/>

<sup>10</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). *Women in national parliaments*. <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2025-03/women-in-national-parliaments>

<sup>11</sup> World Bank. *Gender Data Portal / Gender Equality & Economic Opportunity*. <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/>  
International Labour Organization (ILO). *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work* (2018). [https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS\\_633135/](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_633135/)

OECD. *Closing the Gender Pay Gap*. <https://www.oecd.org/gender/>

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics. *Out-of-school children and youth data*. <https://uis.unesco.org/>  
UNICEF. *Child marriage and education facts & figures*. <https://www.unicef.org/>

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<sup>13</sup> UN Women. *Facts and figures: Ending violence against women*. <https://www.unwomen.org/>

World Health Organization (WHO). *Violence against women prevalence estimates*. <https://www.who.int/>

United Nations (UN) Security Council / UN Reports on conflict-related sexual violence. <https://www.un.org/>

further shown that these inequalities are not incidental but are embedded within broader institutional and epistemological frameworks that shape international relations theory and practice. Feminist perspectives have been instrumental in revealing how dominant conceptualizations of power, security, and rationality are often constructed through gendered assumptions, thereby reproducing exclusionary structures within global politics.

In light of these findings, it can be concluded that achieving meaningful gender equality requires more than formal legal recognition or policy commitments. It necessitates a transformative shift in both global governance practices and the theoretical foundations of international relations. Integrating gender as a central analytical category is essential for a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of global politics, as well as for the development of more equitable and sustainable international systems.

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