

Feminism in International Relations. Case study: Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher

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Abstract

The present article takes on the subject of feminism in international relations. The objective of this article is to nuance, if not to combat the harsh feminist point of view by focusing on two key figures in the history of global politics, two female politicians who shaped the world they lived in. Through the case study, the aim is to prove that, although falling under the category of the female gender, a politician's primary focus should be the people they are leading.

Keywords: feminism, Gandhi, Thatcher, international relations, gender

THE FEMINIST POINT of view has been voiced only recently with regard to international relations. The first article which subscribed to such an opinion was published in 1987, bearing the title "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals". (Cohn 1987: 687-718). The said article discusses the problem of nuclear weaponry, also bringing into focus the author's conviction, which can be summarized as: the strongly masculinized culture of the institution of the defense has brought about a situation in which the state and acts of war have become aspects that are fundamentally separated from human emotions. (Cohn 1987: *passim*) The book that had the most influence on the emergence of feminism, as a theory of the international relations field, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, written by Cynthia Enloe, was published in 1990. The main idea of the book, as pointed out by its subtitle („Making feminist sense of International Politics"), revolves around the fact that a reconsideration of the field is necessary, paying special attention to the women's perspective, seen as shadow actors in international politics.

During the following years, more and more voices have supported the necessity of a feminine perspective with regard to the issues of international politics. Controversy and debates – although few – did appear. The majority of researchers and international relations analysts had no interest in joining the debate, remaining neutral or detached.

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Robert O. Keohane's article (Keohane 1989: 245-253), which reutilizes a typology of feminism in international relations formulated originally by Christine Sylvester (Sylvester 1989: *passim*), and which attempts to provide constructive criticism of what could potentially become a feminist theory of international relations, is received as an attack by some researchers in the feminist community. The first response came from Cynthia Webber (1994: 337-349), who wrote an article, the title of which proved the acidity of the intervention: "Good Girls, Little Girls and Bad Girls: Male Paranoia in Robert Keohane's Critique of Feminist International Relations". The said article proves the radicalism of some feminists in the sense that Keohane's idea, stating that research should make use of gender but not necessarily subscribing to the feminist point of view, was poorly received by the feminist school of thought. Likewise, more voices appeared that supported the fact that a gender theory would be more recommended in the study of international relations, compared to a feminist theory. The idea that there was a real danger in bringing women onto center-stage, concretely the undermining of men, was brought into focus, the so-called "masculinities" having been conceptualized as representing social issues. (Carpenter 2002: 157) Epistemological and normative differences prevent the integration of gender issues, which as such cannot be taken seriously, and feminists contribute to this marginalization through the fact that they are resistant to co-opting gender as an explanatory framework, separate from feminists norms. (Carpenter 2002: 153-154) On the other hand, Terrell Carver considered that to study using gender theory, without approaching the subject from a feminist point of view, would constitute an oxymoron. (Sjoberg 2009: 191)

Taking into consideration the works of the mentioned authors, as well as others, the common conception on feminism in international relations is the following: feminism implies an analysis of the way in which the stage of international politics affects and is affected by both sexes. At the same time, it includes an analysis of concepts used in the field of international relations and the way in which these are attributed to a gender or the other, with the purpose of deepening the understanding of international relations.

This theory divides into several categories, but as to which exactly, there is no unanimous consensus. As such, the categories presented in the present article are the ones considered to be the most relevant for the field at hand. The feminist standpoint theories claim that the experiences that women had lived through, on the outskirts of politics, have granted them some perspectives regarding social issues, which can prove useful to the political world. From the outskirts, the theoreticians of feminism offer criticism to the theories constructed by the men who assume the role of policy-makers. (Keohane 1989: 245)

Realist feminism is interested in gender roles strategic and power-policies between states. The liberal viewpoint analyses the undermined position of women in global politics and advocates for the inclusion of women into the existing structures of world pol-

itics. (Sjoberg 2009: 188) At the same time, it represents an individualist form of feminism, in which the ability of women to showcase and maintain their equality through their own actions and decisions. (Goldstein 2013: v. „Liberal feminism”)

Critical feminism is interested in the idea and manifestation of gender identity and its power in world politics. Constructivist feminism gravitates around the study of ways in which preconceived views and opinions about gender form and are formed by global politics. The analysis of the linguistic manifestations of gender, of the way in which these contribute to the empowerment of the masculine and the marginalization of the feminine in constituting global policies, is the appanage of post-structuralist feminism. Thus, it focuses on the analysis of dichotomies, such as “rational-emotional”. (Sjoberg 2009: 188)

Because of the fact that, according to feminists in the field of international relations, one of the defining characteristics and one through which academic feminism can be told apart, is the research question (Ackerly, Stern, True 2006: 5), in the present study answers will be attempted to be given to the following questions, referring to the cases of Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi:

Can a feminist key be applied to their actions in international politics?

In what way was their political life affected by their gender?

What were their thoughts on feminism?

Do their decisions in the realm of international politics prove feminist considerations? In this context, have they advocated for the fulfillment of an ideal that can be considered feminist?

The objective of the present article is to disprove, through the aforementioned examples, a part of the feminist theory, according to which women, because of their gender, have a different style of ruling, utilizing and implying concepts which have feminist connotations, such as emotions and sensitivity.

Indira Gandhi

The rise to power of Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi happened at a political turning point. Up until that moment, the fact that a woman could ascend to a leading position had never been considered. Her ascent had been of course facilitated (if not altogether made possible) by the fact that Indira Gandhi was the daughter of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

After her father’s death, in 1964, she was named Minister of Information and Broadcast by her father’s successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri. Gandhi chose to have an active role in

politics. In 1965, having arrived in Kashmir at the time of the discovery of the Pakistani infiltrates, the first act of Gandhi was to notify the prime minister, and the results of her actions were to have benefic effects on her image in the eyes of the public. This was the moment in which she stopped being regarded only as the daughter of Nehru. (Wagner-Wright 2012: 6) She had earned the reputation of being “the only man in a Cabinet of old ladies”. (Everett 1993: 112)

After the death of Shastri new elections were announced and Gandhi was a candidate for the position of prime minister of India. Her candidature was orchestrated by Kumarasami Kamaraj. Because of the fact that she was a woman, she was considered to be malleable and easily manipulated, thus being perfect for the role of puppet in the hands of the Syndicate, but also strong enough so as to assure victory. (Katz 2012: 34; Frank 2002: 184)

From an international relations viewpoint, Ms. Gandhi’s actions were controversial. At first, she held to the idea of non-alignment, regarding the non-involvement in Cold War matters. (Wagner-Wright 2012: 7) However, she was reticent and there were problems regarding India’s relations with the United States of America. These originated from the aid (weapons) offered by the USA to Pakistan during the war in 1965, and had only gotten worse with the US involvement in Vietnam. (Frank 2002: 187-188) Forced by the troubled internal situation, in 1966 Gandhi made an official visit to the USA, in order to obtain financial and material aid (food), but without having to ask for it explicitly. Because of this, she made use of her femininity and charm, in order to eventually receive a promise of aid from the US president Lyndon Johnson. (Frank 2002: 187-188)

The aid however was running late and the food shipments were not organized, arriving in a chaotic manner, which led to the fall of Gandhi’s popularity. She then turned to the Soviet Union. The USSR became India’s most important weapons provider. In order to counter the bond between the USA, Pakistan and China, Indira Gandhi signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in 1971. (Wagner-Wright 2012: 7) In December of the same year, there was another Pakistani attack on India. Indira Gandhi had taken a big risk by offering support to the liberalization of Eastern Pakistan, especially because of the danger of involving India in a conflict not only with Pakistan, but also with its supporters, China and the USA. She held her ground under pressure from the USA and China, proving to the entire world that she was a capable leader. (Mukherjee 2015: 30-31)

She proved her worth again, when she regained her position of power after two years, in 1980. Her assassination was a direct result of her ironclad political convictions.

With regard to the personal convictions of Indira Gandhi, she always denied vehemently the claim that she was a feminist. Implicitly, she was bothered by the questions

of reporters who wanted to find out more about her role as a female politician. (Frank 2002: 187)

Looking at things from the viewpoint of feminism in international relations, the first thing that is to be observed is the perception of the public regarding Gandhi, at the beginning of her political carrier, the aforementioned episode that took place in Kashmir, in 1965. The most important thing to notice is the citation, “the only man in a Cabinet full of old ladies” (Everett 1993: 112). Thus, a core idea of feminist theory is proved, the case of the concepts and genders associated to them, the case of post-structuralist feminism. In the present case, what is invoked is courage. This is a strongly masculinized concept. Besides this theoretical idea, we obtain proof through the fact that Indira Gandhi is labeled as a “man” because of her courage and her sense of duty. At the opposite pole of the comparison is the label given to the other members of the Cabinet. The rest of the members (all men) are viewed as “old ladies” (women) because of the fact that they were cowards and preferred not to get involved. The main issue with this comparison is the positive connotation given to the masculinized concept, although the reference is clearly to a woman, and at the same time, the negative connotation given to the feminized concept, although those involved were all men. This is proof that what feminists in international relations want to change is actually a deeply rooted concept in world culture, because of the customs of the experiences in patriarchal states.

The second point of interest from a feminist point of view is the opinion of the Syndicate regarding Indira Gandhi. As she was a woman, the role of a puppet seemed to be fitting for her. Herein lies the issue brought up by constructivist feminism. The opinion regarding Indira Gandhi’s gender was that it was malleable. This opinion formed was helped by global politics, as well as Hindu culture. Although, through her ulterior actions, Gandhi contributed to the development of a different opinion regarding her gender, even if this was not a policy supported by her.

A third issue that should not be neglected, given the subject of the present paper, is Gandhi’s behavior during her official visit to the USA, her use of her gender in order to achieve her goal. Interestingly enough, the feminist theory on international relations does not mention such a possibility. It could however be tied in with the perspective of realist feminism. The fact that a woman will utilize her gender’s attributes in order to gain something must be regarded as a given, sure fact. In no way should sexuality be the only thing thought of in such a case, a woman’s attributes transcend the said aspect. Of course, the fact that she can use this will confer a different role to a woman in inter-states strategic and power policies. The example of women spies comes to mind, such as Mata Hari or Madhuri Gupta, but the issue is raised at another level when the subject of a research is a woman of the state, a prime minister. In this case however, the role of only one woman,

or that of a select group of women changes – those who will play a role in world politics –, but not that of all women.

Regarding her way of ruling, Indira Gandhi does not enter into any category with regard to the theme of this paper. Her actions did not offer proof of any typically feminine conceptions. Thus, there is nothing to prevent her from being considered a “woman” of the state solely because of her gender, but who also acted and ruled in a way that a man would have probably ruled as well. This was also what determined the author Sylvia Wagner-Wright to consider her to be a cyborg, a political robot. (Wagner-Wright 2012: 9)

Margaret Thatcher

Unlike Indira Gandhi, Margaret Hilda Roberts Thatcher was not born into a politically prominent family. Her rise to power did not have anything to do with her family or her name; she could not be considered a political asset due to these, as Gandhi had been.

Thatcher began her political career in 1950, receiving a seat in the British Parliament in 1959 as a member of the Conservative Party. In 1970 she was appointed in the Cabinet as State Secretary for Education and Science (Wagner-Wright 2012: 10). In October of 1974 she announced her candidature for the presidency of the Conservative Party, title which she had received officially on the 11th February 1975 when, for the first time in British history, a woman gained control of the helm of one of the great political parties (Blake 1990: 319). Approximately four years later, in May 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected as the first female prime minister in British history.

She had been named the Iron Lady before getting elected as Prime Minister. The title had been given to her by a Soviet newspaper, Red Star, and was not meant to be a compliment, but Thatcher decided to wear it with pride (Wagner-Wright 2012: 10).

In external affairs, the issues were always placed under the motto “Britain first” (Blake 1990: 341). Thatcher strove to reconfirm Great Britain’s status as a world power through a seat on the UN’s Security Council and through nuclear power, and to reestablish the special relationship between Great Britain and the USA. At the same time, Thatcher refused to obey the pretense of a united Europe (Wagner-Wright 2012: 11-12).

The Falkland war was, in the eyes of most political analysts, her moment of glory. Great Britain, as well as Argentina had ties to the islands. The islands were British territory, but were dependent on Argentina as far as services go. Maintaining British jurisdiction of the islands was not a vital issue for Great Britain, the islanders however

thought of it as essential (Wagner-Wright 2012: 12). Thus, negotiations regarding this issue were held with Argentina, but to no avail. Tensions rose, and Thatcher decided to send nuclear submarines into the Southern Atlantic as a threat and a demonstration of power (Wagner-Wright 2012: 12).

The tactic was unsuccessful. The Argentinean forces launched an attack on the islands on the 2nd of April 1982, and with regard to war, Thatcher found herself agreeing with her nation's state of mind (Blake 1990: 350). The campaign in order to reclaim the islands was launched on the 21st of May. The Cabinet was prepared to lose 1000 soldiers. The final tally showed that 260 people lost their lives, and the Argentinean forces were forced to surrender on the 14th June (Blake 1990: 352).

With regard to bilateral relations with the USA, the fact is they were good and stable. The same, however, cannot be said about Great Britain's relations with the European Community. Great Britain had joined the Common European Market in 1973, the practical reason being that this was the only way in which British products could remain on the European market. In 1975, Britain was contributing approximately 20% of the total budget of the Community, but the return rate was only 5% (Wagner-Wright 2012: 14). Thatcher was not content with the situation and after five years of debate, in 1984, at the Fontainebleau Summit, Great Britain was granted an annual rebate of 66% of the difference between British contributions and revenues (Wagner-Wright 2012: 14).

As did Indira Gandhi, Thatcher also repudiated feminism. Any idea or belief she might have had, that might be categorized as "feminist" (such as "equal pay and equal opportunities" of 1969), actually stemmed from her individualist convictions (Katz 2012: 14).

The most striking problem, with regard to the feminist viewpoint on external affairs, is the nuclear issue. Feminist international relations theory, regarding security, is strongly against weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear weaponry, strongly opposing militarism. Even if Thatcher considered these weapons to be a last resort, she seemed ready and willing to use them as a threat in the Falkland Islands conflict.

At the same time, with regard to war, retreating for reasons, such as safeguarding life, never came up and was never thought of as an option. Emotions played no role in this case. Throughout the entire period when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, the only emotion that can be deduced from her actions and her style of rule is passion and patriotism, two key characteristics of a statesperson.

The only acknowledgeable feminine side, as far as Thatcher's rule, was the way she presented herself, the fact that she did not abandon skirts for trousers, and that she always had her hair and make-up done. She kept these attributes for a simple reason: she

was surrounded by men. She counted on and used high-class men's discomfort to her advantage, a discomfort that they had near all women, but mostly near women in power (Wagner-Wright 2012: 14).

In feminist historiography and in non-feminist historiography as well it is considered that Thatcher was not a woman, when referring to her public life. Thus, the Iron Lady, in the same way as Indira Gandhi, can be considered a cyborg.

Conclusions

Having the benefit of an overall view on the issue at hand, the answers to the posed research questions become clear. Gandhi, as well as Thatcher, repudiated feminism, a fact that does not however mean that they did not have opinions, views or did not manifest themselves in ways which can be considered feminist in nature.

Indira Gandhi's political life was affected at the beginning of her career, having been viewed by the members of the Syndicate as easily manipulated, because of her gender. On the other hand, she managed to get into the graces of President Lyndon B. Johnson, during her first visit to the USA, precisely because of the trumps provided by her gender.

Unlike Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher's political life did not seem to have been affected by the fact that she was a woman, at least not after she had ascended to a position of power. Most likely, she enjoyed the aforementioned discomfort, felt by those who surrounded her, but which she also exploited.

The decisions made in external affairs do not reveal a feminist viewpoint. To the contrary, the fact that they were women had nothing to do with the manner in which both of them chose to behave and act. Their behavior begs the conclusion that a statesperson has to be a *state's person*, the behavior scheme being androgynous in nature. They have to consider each aspect of the issue at hand, however, the most efficient actions are the ones in which they are not preoccupied with their personal identity, as far as gender. Based on these two distinct cases, it can be stated that including more women into the existing structure of global politics will not lead to a dramatic reconfiguration of the said structure.

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FEMINISM IN INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS. CASE STUDY: INDIRA GANDHI AND MARGARET THATCHER

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