

An Understanding of Gender as a Contemporary Issue in International Relations: A Critical Analysis from Gender Violence Perspective

Berebere Varsity

United States International University - Africa
Nairobi, Kenya
bvarsity@gmail.com

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Abstract

Gender is a fundamental social construct that shapes our experiences and opportunities in all aspects of life. There are varied and diverse definitions and opinions about what exactly gender is. In the field of international relations, gender has traditionally been marginalized. Feminist scholars have argued that an understanding of gender is essential to better explanation of the most important issues in contemporary international relations. There are different gender identities and expressions, and these vary across cultures. Traditional gender roles may include stereotypes about how men and women are expected to behave, what interests or activities they should pursue, and how they should interact in society. However, these roles and expectations are evolving as societies become more inclusive and diverse. Thus this article aimed to:

i. To identify theories that examine gender in international relations. ii. To analyze gender violence in international relations iii.

To establish the place of gender in migration in international relations. The study adopted a desktop review approach by gathering information from existing sources without conducting new experiments or fieldwork. The results showed that systemic gender-based injustices reflect deeply embedded societal problems that require multifaceted solutions, including changes in policy, cultural norms, education, and awareness programs. Addressing these injustices is crucial for achieving gender equality and building fair and just societies. Gender is an integral aspect of migration in International Relations, affecting not only who migrates and why but also the experiences and challenges faced by individuals throughout the migration process. Understanding these gendered dimensions is vital in creating more comprehensive migration policies and addressing the specific needs of diverse migrant populations. The feminist approach to gender in contemporary international relations is evidenced by literature as key in the contemporary international relations.

Key words: *Contemporary, Gender, Gender Violence, International Relations, Migration, Theories*

1. Introduction

Gender is a fundamental social construct that shapes our experiences and opportunities in all aspects of life. There are varied and diverse definitions and opinions about what exactly gender is. Different authors and experts have defined gender differently. Lindqvist, Sendén and Renström (2021) define gender as the roles, behaviors, activities, and expectations that a society considers appropriate for men, women, and individuals whose gender identity doesn't fit within traditional categories. It's not just about biological differences but encompasses cultural, social, and psychological dimensions. It is often distinguished from sex, which is the biological differences between males and females. Gender, on the other hand, is more about the characteristics and roles that society attributes to each sex.

In the field of international relations, gender has traditionally been marginalized. Feminist scholars have argued that an understanding of gender is essential to better explanation of the most important issues in contemporary international relations. There are different gender identities and expressions, and these vary across cultures. Traditional gender roles may include stereotypes about how men and women are expected to behave, what interests or activities they should pursue, and how they should interact in society. However, these roles and expectations are evolving as societies become more inclusive and diverse.

Understanding gender goes beyond just male and female categories (Cameron & Stinson, 2019); it includes the exploration of identities like transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, etc., which might not conform to the traditional gender norms. It's a complex and multidimensional concept that influences how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by society.

This term paper hypothesized that an understanding of gender is not essential to better explain the most important issues in contemporary international relations. It drew on two theories of IR (Feminist International Relations theory and positivist study of gender) and in the context of violence/conflict, migration and global poverty. The article presents the argument and findings under subheadings; gender in contemporary international relations, gender in international relations theories, gender violence in international relation and place of migration in international relations.

1.1 Gender in contemporary International relations

Gender in contemporary international relations involves the study and understanding of how gender identity, roles, and power dynamics influence global political, social, and economic relationships. This approach to international relations acknowledges that gender is a fundamental factor that shapes human interactions (Steans, 2006), policymaking, and global governance. There are various aspects that brings gender issue at the center stage of contemporary international relations. Gender mainstreaming in international organizations has been on the rise in the 21st century. Concerns emerging for international development including the past MDGs and the current SDGs put gender equality at the forefront targeting the position of women in the development space. According to True (2003), efforts are made to integrate gender perspectives into the policies and programs of international organizations. This is aimed at addressing gender inequalities, empowering women, and ensuring that gender considerations are central in decision-making.

The contemporary international relations are skewed towards humanity especially in the context of emerging conflicts associated with climate change, displacements and even migrations. As such, issues on gender in conflict and peacebuilding sprout. There is a focus on understanding the differential impact of conflict on men and women and the roles of gender in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. In their gender analysis, March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay (1999) highlight how men and women experience conflict differently and emphasizes the importance of women's participation in peace processes. This implies that any understanding of how international relations apply to crisis interventions must focus on gender differences to be effective.

The issue of gender analysis in international relations stretches into the focus of the largely affected gender during conflicts or wars. Conflicts affect men and women differently, often leading to disproportionate challenges faced by women (Plümper & Neumayer, 2006). These appear in different contexts where violence and abuse show how women often face higher risks of sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation during conflicts. They can be subjected to physical and sexual violence, including assault, rape, and forced labor, often leading to severe physical and psychological trauma. When it comes to displacement during conflicts, more women are put at increased risk. They may lose access to healthcare, education, and protection, and often face an increased risk of human trafficking and exploitation. Conflicts may also disrupt livelihoods and create economic hardships, affecting women's ability to sustain their families. Displacement and destruction of infrastructure may limit their opportunities for work, making them more vulnerable to poverty.

In the face of global advocacy for gender equality, contemporary international relations increasingly involve global advocacy efforts to advance gender equality. This illustrated in the works of Dankelman (2012) on the promotion of women's rights, and reduction in gender-based discrimination and violence. These efforts often involve diplomatic negotiations and international agreements to improve the status of women and marginalized genders. These impacts underscore the importance of considering gender in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Acknowledging and addressing the specific challenges faced by women can contribute to more effective, inclusive, and gender-sensitive approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Contemporary international relations focus on representation and participation of different genders. With the sprout of the LGBTQ+ and related gender issues, the concern has been drifting to see that representation of these groups are taken care of (Thiel, 2014). The role and representation of women and gender minorities in international relations, such as in diplomacy, international organizations, and political leadership, are areas of focus to ensure more inclusive decision-making. This and more other elements in contemporary international relations point at how the gender perspective is key. It acknowledges the importance of understanding gender dynamics, challenging gender biases, and promoting gender equality as essential components of global governance, security, and development.

2. Objectives

The study was conducted with aim of responding to the following three objectives;

- i. To identify theories that examine gender in international relations.
- ii. To analyze gender violence in international relations
- iii. To establish the place of gender in migration in international relations

3. Methods

The study adopted a desktop review approach by gathering information from existing sources without conducting new experiments or fieldwork. The author defined the research objective and questions narrowing down the scope of the study. By this, a manageable scope with defined boundaries was defined. Various relevant sources were identified through database searches using key words as well as filtering the years of publication.

The researcher further narrowed down the search to academic journals, conference papers, books, and other scholarly publications related to the topic. Using online databases including PubMed, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and IEEE Xplore, the latest literature was gathered. Other related works from official reports, white papers, and policy documents from the governments as well as reputable websites were searched. The search key words included Contemporary, Gender, Gender Violence, International Relations, Migration, Theories.

To ascertain the credibility of the sources as well as improving the validity of the findings, the study used a criterion of peer-review, authoritative sources as well as consultation with the experts in International Relations from the USIU- Africa, Nairobi – Kenya. The findings were presented thematically based on the identified themes with illustrations and explanations on perceived meaning. Conclusions were drawn from the findings.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Gender in International Relations Theories

The alignment of contemporary society to the international relations theories cannot ignore the emerging issues around gender. There are various theories that describe gender in the contemporary international relations. One major theory is the Feminist International Relations Theory as presented in the work of Sylvester (2002). This theoretical framework emphasizes the need to understand the role of gender in shaping international relations. It also creates room for questioning traditional male-centric views and highlighting the unequal power dynamics between men and women in the global context. As such, it draws to the need to consider the position of women in international relations.

The Feminist International Relations Theory critique of gender bias. It spells how feminist scholars argue that traditional theories overlook or downplay the roles and experiences of women (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011). The theory emphasizes the unequal power structures that perpetuate gender inequalities in international relations. It aims to uncover how gender shapes power dynamics and agencies at local, national, and global levels. In regard to intersectionality, the theory recognizes that gender does not operate in isolation, but intersects with other social categories like race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. According to Brewer and Dundes (2018), intersectional feminism explores the complex ways in which these factors combine to shape experiences and social hierarchies.

The Feminist International Relations Theory looks at peace and conflict as a dimension that affects gender. It delves into the gendered dimensions of conflict, peace, and security. It questions traditional assumptions regarding women's roles in peace processes (Adjei, 2019); and their experiences during conflicts, emphasizing the importance of involving women in peace negotiations. International relations focus on accommodating all the stakeholders in an issue being addressed. The contemporary conflict issues call for peace negotiations where women are involved as they are more affected than men.

From a global governance and development glance, the feminist approach seeks to transform global governance structures. This helps to address gender inequality in global development agendas, such as improving women's access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation. Issues around education ensure equal access to education for girls and boys and providing educational opportunities for women and girls in developing countries. Education empowers women and helps break the cycle of poverty (de Weiss, & Sirkin, 2010), improving economic opportunities and social status. For healthcare and reproductive rights, a feminist approach to governance promotes access to quality healthcare, reproductive rights, and family planning services. This includes access to maternal health services, reproductive health education, and addressing issues related to child marriage and gender-based violence.

In an economic empowerment dimension, a feminist approach guides in encouraging economic opportunities for women through microfinance (Cheston & Kuhn, 2002), entrepreneurship, vocational training, and fair employment practices. Women's participation in the formal economy and business can significantly contribute to economic growth.

Feminist International Relations Theory promotes a more inclusive understanding of international relations. It integrates gender analysis into the discourse, policies, and practices of global politics. It advocates for recognizing and addressing gender-based disparities and injustices on a global scale. Addressing gender-based disparities and injustices globally requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. This can be achieved by developing and enforcing policies that protect the rights of all genders (McBride, & Parry, 2016). This includes laws against gender-based violence, ensuring equal pay for equal work, and combating discrimination in all forms. What about looking at education opportunities? Implementing educational programs that promote gender equality and challenge stereotypes can be a steppingstone for the understanding of women position in international relations. Education is a powerful tool for change, providing the knowledge and understanding needed to foster an inclusive and equitable society.

Contemporary international relations that adopt feminism is also aimed at economic empowerment of women. Through this approach, opportunities for economic empowerment are created by providing access to credit, employment, and entrepreneurship training for women. Addressing economic disparities is crucial in ensuring fair and equal opportunities (Elenbaas, 2019). This also stretches into the health and well-being of the citizens of a given country. It provides accessible healthcare, particularly focusing on reproductive health and family planning services. Ensuring that individuals have control over their health and reproductive rights is essential in promoting gender equality.

The feminist approach to contemporary international relations fosters leadership and representation. The feminist theory encourages and support women's leadership and participation in decision-making roles in government, business, and other sectors. Having diverse voices in positions of power is key to addressing systemic gender-based injustices as illustrated by Etienne (1995). Today, several sectors have shown discrepancies in pay between men and women for the same work. Despite the same qualifications and job responsibilities, women often earn less than their male counterparts. For instance, in Kenya, the Equity bank group was reported to having women in senior positions but earning much less compared to their male counterparts (Business Daily, 2023).

The feminist theory in contemporary international relations also focus on tapping the key community engagement. Through this, there is encouragement of community-driven initiatives that promote gender equality (Note, 2020) and challenge traditional norms. These initiatives can include grassroots organizations, community forums, and local campaigns that address specific gender-related

issues. An approach of feminist theory demands that decisions are research based. This entails gathering and analyzing data that specifically addresses gender disparities. Having accurate data is critical for understanding the extent of inequalities and developing targeted strategies to address them.

The intersectional approach guided by the feminist theory in the contemporary international relations create room for international cooperation and advocacy. This ensures that the stakeholders engage in global conversations, support international agreements that advocate for gender equality, and collaborate with other countries and international organizations to address global gender-based disparities (Bott, Morrison, & Ellsberg, 2005). By employing these strategies and recognizing the importance of an intersectional approach, global efforts can be more effective in recognizing and addressing gender-based disparities and injustices. This comprehensive approach aims to foster an equitable and inclusive world for all genders.

In a different approach, the positivist study of gender by Reiter (2015) explores how gender is essential to better explain the most important issues in contemporary international relations. A positivist approach to gender is a method used to understand and study gender issues, rooted in the principles of positivism, which emphasizes the importance of empirical evidence and scientific methods in research. When applied to gender studies, a positivist approach aims to examine gender-related phenomena through systematic observation, measurement, and experimentation.

The positivist approach typically focuses on obtaining observable and measurable data to analyze gender roles, behaviors, and societal norms. Positivist gender research often relies on quantitative data collection techniques, such as surveys, experiments, and statistical analysis (Fryer, 2003). This reflects the consistency in the study of research philosophy in International relations. It seeks to establish general patterns, correlations, and cause-effect relationships related to gender by using empirical evidence.

In the context of gender, a positivist approach might be employed to gather quantitative data on gender disparities in areas. The disparities show the demands and interest of international relations that draw on areas such as wages, representation in various fields, or access to education and health services. It can provide valuable insights into gender-related issues by systematically analyzing statistical trends and empirical data (Baldwin, 2013). However, this approach might not capture the complexity of individual experiences, cultural contexts, or social dynamics that influence gender and may overlook qualitative aspects of gender experiences.

4.2 Gender Violence in International Relations

Gender violence in international relations encompasses various forms of violence experienced by individuals due to their gender. This is often within a broader global or international context as described by Jones (2008). During conflicts, there are reported cases of sexual violence in where rape, sexual assault, and other forms of gender-based violence occur. It is evident within the global statistics that women and children are often being the primary targets (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). Challenges related to trafficking and exploitation often involving women and children, is a form of gender-based violence where individuals are coerced into exploitative situations. In other cases, there are forced marriage and child marriage (McFarlane, Nava, Gilroy, & Maddoux, 2016). Women and girls are often forced into marriage against their will, leading to a range of abuses and denial of rights. These are concerns that the contemporary international relations seek to address.

Gender violence also exist in international relations through other circumstances like honor killings and femicide. Some cultures witness honor killings, where women are murdered due to perceived social transgressions. Femicide is the gender-based killing of women. Atuk (2020) explores how femicide takes place. Atuk defines femicide as the intentional killing of females or women because they are females. The term specifically highlights gender-based violence and represents a hate crime targeting individuals based on their gender. Femicide encompasses various forms of violence, including murder, honor killings, dowry-related killings, and gender-based killings. It often reflects deeper societal issues such as gender inequality, discrimination, and cultural norms that devalue or oppress women. Understanding and addressing femicide involves comprehensive efforts captured in international

relations. This is always captured through the legal reforms, public policies, community education, and awareness campaigns aimed at preventing violence against women and ensuring justice for victims.

Contemporary international relations entail the address of domestic violence which is skewed towards the gender card. Abuse and violence, whether physical or psychological, is mostly perpetrated against women in a domestic setting. This is a global issue affecting women of all cultures and backgrounds. Women may face sexual harassment, discrimination, and lack of opportunities in various spheres due to their gender. Fried (2003) delves into how violence against women in the 21st century remains a pervasive issue that spans various forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. This includes the physical abuse where infliction of physical harm, such as hitting, punching, kicking, or any form of physical violence leading to injury.

For sexual abuse, there are cases of forcing sexual acts without consent, marital rape, unwanted sexual advances, or exploitation. There is also behavior that aims to control or degrade women's self-worth, such as verbal threats, constant criticism, gaslighting, and isolation. Extremes reach the exerting of control over a woman's financial resources, restricting financial independence, and preventing access to education or employment.

This issue is often deeply rooted in social, cultural, and economic structures (True, 2012). Efforts to combat violence against women in the 21st century involve awareness campaigns, legal reforms, empowerment programs, and creating safe spaces and support systems for victims of abuse. Although progress has been made, challenges persist in ensuring the safety and rights of women globally.

Addressing gender violence in international relations involves both legal and policy changes, education, empowerment programs, cultural shifts, and interventions at both local and global levels. Efforts include legal reforms, advocacy for women's rights, education and awareness campaigns, support services, and community-based interventions. Understanding and addressing gender violence is crucial for building a safer, more equitable world for all individuals, irrespective of gender (Jones, 2008).

4.3 Place of Gender in Migration in International Relations

Gender in migration within the field of International Relations (IR) focus on how gender influences, shapes, and is affected by migration patterns, policies, and the experiences of migrants in global relations. This perspective acknowledges that gender plays a significant role in various aspects of migration (Morokvasic, 2015). This may include the decision to migrate, experiences during migration, and the implications of migration policies. The contemporary world is faced with diverse challenges that cause migrations in different parts of the world. For instance, the climate change issue is now a leading cause for migration. Others like terrorism and violence are also leading on the major migration causes.

As people migrate, they need to decide. Gender roles and expectations often influence who migrates and why. For instance, in some societies, men may migrate for economic opportunities while women might move due to family reunification, marriage, or to escape conflicts. There are also concerns about migration experiences (Szymanska-Matusiewicz, 2016). Gender impacts the experiences of migrants. Women, in particular, may face specific risks, including gender-based violence, exploitation, or trafficking. Gendered experiences can differ between men, women, and non-binary individuals during the migration process.

In terms of policy and protection in international relations, gender-sensitive policies and practices are crucial in managing migration. Recognizing the unique vulnerabilities faced by women, children, and LGBTQ+ individuals in migration (Gottvall, Brunell, Eldebo, Johansson Metso, Jirwe, & Carlsson, 2023) is important to provide adequate protection and support. Women migrants are at increased risk of experiencing various forms of gender-based violence, including sexual assault, exploitation, and trafficking. They might encounter violence during transit, at borders, or in their destination countries. Moreover, many women are lured into migration under false pretenses and subsequently exploited or trafficked for forced labor, sexual exploitation, or other purposes. The vulnerabilities are compounded by limited legal protection and support systems. Similarly, women might migrate for family

reunification or to join a spouse or family member. In doing so, they often shoulder the responsibility of caregiving, which can place them in a position of dependency.

Another dimension of gender migration in international relations is identity and intersectionality. Understanding the intersectionality of gender with race, class, sexuality, and other identities is vital. Intersectionality recognizes that individuals experience migration differently based on multiple aspects of their identity. Madsen and Van Naerssen (2003) posit how experiences determine migration identities and belonging for different gender. The circumstances that led to migration, such as conflict, economic reasons, persecution, or seeking opportunities, can influence migrants' perceptions of their identities. Their experiences during the journey—possibly involving hardships, dangers, or trauma—may deeply affect their sense of self. Once migrants arrive in a new country, their experiences of settling in, adapting to new cultural norms, learning the language, and integrating into society contribute to shaping their migration identities. Successful adaptation might foster a sense of belonging, while difficulties might accentuate feelings of isolation.

Related to intersectionality, the experiences in the job market, economic status, and social class play a role in shaping their identity. For instance, experiences of employment discrimination or economic challenges might impact their perception of self-worth. Similarly, experiences with the legal system (Davis & Erez, 1998) and political landscape—such as access to rights, citizenship, or inclusion in decision-making processes—can significantly shape their sense of identity and belonging in the host country. Thus, understanding the diverse experiences and the impact they have on migrants is crucial. It helps in creating inclusive and responsive policies that recognize and respect their identities and contribute to their successful integration into the host society.

Analysis of the gendered dynamics of migration highly depends on the Feminist IR Perspectives. Some scholars employ feminist International Relations theory to advocate for more inclusive, equitable, and just policies for migrations (Hatton & Williamson, 2005). This indicates the interlude between gender, migration and contemporary international relations. Policies for migration need to be comprehensive, just, and responsive to the diverse needs and experiences of migrants. As such, the migration policies should prioritize the protection of human rights for all migrants, irrespective of their status. This includes safeguarding against discrimination, violence, exploitation, and ensuring access to healthcare, education, and fair working conditions.

Establishment of fair and efficient immigration processes is key in addressing gender issues in contemporary international relations. This includes clear and accessible procedures for obtaining legal status, ensuring transparency, and addressing long processing times. Encouraging integration efforts, such as language training, cultural orientation, and employment support, facilitates the inclusion of migrants into their host society. Inclusive policies aim to ensure equal opportunities for social participation and access to public services (Rubery, Humphries, Fagan, Grimshaw & Smith, 2005).

In addition, contemporary international relations call for policies that promote fair labor standards, non-discriminatory hiring practices (Dagan-Buzaglo, 2008), and uphold the rights of migrant workers. This includes mechanisms to prevent exploitation and provide pathways for professional development and career advancement. Moreover, this mostly point at the inclusion and fair treatment for both men and women which forms the basis of gender issue in the contemporary international relations.

Policies around international relations that seek to address migration are key for gender issues as they touch family reunification. Encouraging and facilitating the reunification of families separated by migration (Moskal & Tyrrell, 2016) is a vital element of just policies. This ensures that families can stay together and support each other during the migration process. Policies that address refugee protection provide asylum for refugees in line with international law, ensuring their safety and access to basic rights and protection. Ensuring access to legal counsel and representation for migrants to understand their rights and navigate legal processes is crucial for justice and fairness. These are mostly centred around the disadvantaged of whom the majority are women.

Further, community engagement calls for inclusive policies that involve the local community in the integration process (Craig, 2015). These help in fostering positive interactions and mutual understanding between migrants and locals regardless of gender.

Just migration policies involve collaboration between countries to address migration issues collectively, especially in managing humanitarian crises or displacement. Through this, the understanding of gender issues between the involved countries is balanced. For success, the two involved countries must be at par in terms of handling the migrants which is a benefit of the women as majority victims in such circumstances.

Having regular reviews and adaptation of the migration policies helps in addressing the emerging gender issues. Policies need to be periodically reviewed and adapted based on the evolving needs and challenges of migrants. Flexibility is crucial to respond to changing circumstances. Just migration policies aim to protect the rights and dignity of migrants, facilitate their integration into host societies, and contribute to social cohesion and harmony between diverse communities.

5. Conclusion

This article explored and presented the understanding of gender in contemporary international relations. It considered various themes including violence, migration and theories of international relations. The article shows that systemic gender-based injustices reflect deeply embedded societal problems that require multifaceted solutions, including changes in policy, cultural norms, education, and awareness programs. Addressing these injustices is crucial for achieving gender equality and building fair and just societies.

In conclusion, gender is an integral aspect of migration in International Relations, affecting not only who migrates and why but also the experiences and challenges faced by individuals throughout the migration process. Understanding these gendered dimensions is vital in creating more comprehensive migration policies and addressing the specific needs of diverse migrant populations. The feminist approach to gender in contemporary international relations is evidenced by literature as key in the contemporary international relations. Thus, 'An understanding of gender is essential to better explaining the most important issues in contemporary International Relations.'

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