

Why Women Can't Run the World: International Politics According to Francis Fukuyama

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Feminist perspectives on international relations have proliferated in the last ten years, yet they remain marginal to the discipline as a whole, and there has been little engagement between feminists and international relations (IR) scholars. As I have suggested elsewhere, I believe this is largely due to misunderstandings about feminist IR scholarship that are reflected in questions that feminists frequently are asked when presenting their work to IR audiences.¹ Many of these misunderstandings reflect considerable ontological and epistemological differences, which are particularly acute with respect to mainstream IR approaches. In other words, feminists and IR scholars frequently talk about different worlds and use different methodologies to understand them.²

A different kind of misunderstanding, also prevalent, arises from the fact that talking about gender involves issues of personal identity that can be very threatening, even in academic discourse. Feminists are frequently challenged by their critics for seeming to imply (even if it is not their intention) that women are somehow “better” than men. In IR, this often comes down to accusations that feminists are implying that women are more peaceful than men or that a world run by women would be less violent and morally superior. Critics will support their challenges by reference to female policymakers, such as Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir, or Indira Gandhi, who, they claim, behaved exactly like men.³

¹J. Ann Tickner, “You Just Don’t Understand: Troubled Engagements Between Feminists and IR Theorists,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41, No. 4 (1997), pp. 611–632.

²The symposium in *International Studies Quarterly* 42, No. 1 (1998), pp. 193–209 is an exception to the lack of engagement. It also demonstrates some of the conversational difficulties to which I refer.

³Tickner, “You Just Don’t Understand,” p. 613.

Most IR feminists would deny the assertion that women are morally superior to men. Indeed, many of them have claimed that the association of women with peace and moral superiority has a long history of keeping women out of power, going back to the debates about the merits of female suffrage in the early part of the century. The association of women with peace can play into unfortunate gender stereotypes that characterize men as active, women as passive; men as agents, women as victims; men as rational, women as emotional. Not only are these stereotypes damaging to women, particularly to their credibility as actors in matters of international politics and national security, but they are also damaging to peace.

As a concept, peace will remain a “soft” issue, utopian and unrealistic, as long as it is associated with femininity and passivity.⁴ This entire debate about aggressive men and peaceful women frequently comes up when issues about women and world politics are on the table. Moreover, it detracts from what feminists consider to be more pressing agendas, such as striving to uncover and understand the disadvantaged socioeconomic position of many of the world’s women and why women are so poorly represented among the world’s policymakers.

A current version using the claim that women are more peaceful than men to women’s disadvantage, and the types of agenda-deflecting debates it may engender, can be found in Francis Fukuyama’s recent article, “Women and the Evolution of World Politics,” in *Foreign Affairs*, as well as in the commentaries on it in the subsequent issue.⁵ Unlike the type of criticism mentioned above that, often mistakenly, accuses feminists of claiming the morally superior high ground for women, Fukuyama boldly asserts that indeed women *are* more peaceful than men. But, as has so often been the case, Fukuyama deploys his argument to mount a strong defense for keeping men in charge. Not only does this type of reasoning feed into more strident forms of backlash against women in international politics, but it also moves our attention further away from more important issues. Hypothesizing about the merits or disadvantages of women in charge, or debating the relative aggressiveness of men and women, does little to address the realities of a variety of oppressions faced by women worldwide. Fukuyama’s views not only deflect from important feminist agendas, but they also support

⁴ For elaboration on this claim, see Jean B. Elshtain, “The Problem with Peace,” in Jean Elshtain and Sheila Tobias, eds., *Women, Militarism and War* (Savage, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990), pp. 255–266; and Christine Sylvester, “Some Dangers in Merging Feminist and Peace Projects,” *Alternatives* 12, No. 4 (1987), pp. 493–509.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, “Women and the Evolution of World Politics,” *Foreign Affairs* 77, No. 5 (1998), pp. 24–40; and Barbara Ehrenreich, Katha Pollitt, et al., “Fukuyama’s Follies: So What If Women Ran the World?” *Foreign Affairs* 78, No. 1 (1999), pp. 118–129.

some disturbing trends in IR more generally, which are reinforcing polarized views of the world in terms of civilization clashes and zones of peace versus zones of turmoil.⁶

Foreign Affairs chose to publish Fukuyama's article under the cover title (in red) "What If Women Ran the World?" This title was surely designed to provoke (and perhaps frighten) its readers, most of whom are probably unfamiliar with IR feminist scholarship. More problematically, it is likely that this will be the only article that mentions feminist IR scholarship to which readers of *Foreign Affairs* will be exposed.⁷ Responses in the subsequent issue of *Foreign Affairs* were, for the most part, quite hostile to Fukuyama's position, and asked what was wrong with his argument. Katha Pollitt asserts, "just about everything."⁸ Nevertheless, by focusing on the need to rebut Fukuyama's sociobiological and over-generalized portrayal of warlike men and peaceful women, these responses, like the article itself, refocus conversations in unproductive ways that do little to clarify many of the issues with which IR feminists are concerned.

Fukuyama's article is not overtly antifeminist. Indeed, he cites what he calls "a vigorous feminist subdiscipline within the field of international relations" (p. 32) quite favorably, albeit chastising postmodernism for its commitment to social constructionism and radical feminism for its misguided utopianism (p. 40).⁹ Curiously, in light of his misgivings about utopianism, Fukuyama offers a seemingly optimistic, even radical vision of a different, relatively peaceful, "feminized" world (in the West at least), where men's aggressive animal instincts have been tamed and channeled into productive activities associated with liberal democracy and capitalism. Fukuyama supports his central claim—that men have "naturally" aggressive instincts—by comparing their behavior to the aggressive and even Machiavellian behavior of male chimpanzees in Gombe National Park in Tanzania. This type of aggression, which, Fukuyama argues, is atypical of most intraspecies behavior, is as true of male humans as it is of their nearest evolutionary relatives, male chimpanzees.

⁶ See, for example, Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); and Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky, *The Real World Order: Zones of Peace, Zones of Turmoil* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1993). Fukuyama also draws on the democratic peace argument to support his global polarization view. For further discussion of this point, see Miriam Fendius Elman, "The Never-Ending Story: Democracy and Peace," in this issue of *International Studies Review*.

⁷ Indeed, Fukuyama's article has received much worldwide attention in the press, as well as in the foreign policy community. See, for example, Katie Grant, "Why We Need Men in Our New Feminine World," *Glasgow Herald*, January 11, 1999, p. 13.

⁸ Katha Pollitt, "Father Knows Best," *Foreign Affairs* 78, No. 1 (1999), p. 123.

⁹ Since *Foreign Affairs* does not allow footnotes, it is often difficult to know to which specific literature Fukuyama refers when making such criticism.

Fukuyama notes that, as with chimps, violence in all types of human societies has been perpetrated largely by men. He develops this claim by documenting recent discoveries in the life sciences and evolutionary psychology that find profound differences between the sexes, especially in areas of violence and aggression. Whereas he is careful to say that culture also shapes human behavior, Fukuyama believes that this line of thinking will replace social constructionist views of gender differences that came about as a reaction to the misuse of Darwinism to reinforce racial superiority and class stratification. In other words, these findings have profound implications for all the social sciences.

Fukuyama also notes that feminists prefer to see such behavior as a product of patriarchal culture rather than rooted in human biology because biologically rooted behavior is harder to change; therefore, they will not be happy with his claims. Fukuyama goes on to hypothesize about a feminized world that would follow different rules. He sees the realization of such a world as a distinct possibility, at least in the West, as women gain more political power. What he calls the “feminization” of world politics has been taking place gradually as women have won the right to vote. The right to vote, along with a relative increase in numbers of elderly women, has resulted in a gender gap with respect to voting on issues of foreign policy and national security, with women being less supportive of national defense spending and involvement in war than men. In spite of these trends, Fukuyama predicts that men will continue to play an important role, particularly in international politics where toughness and aggression are still required.

Given the difficulties of changing genetically programmed behavior and presuming that this new world would have to include socially constructed feminized men, this hypothetical picture seems like a considerable leap from reality. Even though Fukuyama’s portrait of this feminized world is seemingly sympathetic, I believe that his message is, in fact, deeply conservative—offering one more iteration of the well-established argument that a “realistic” view of international politics demands that “real” men remain in charge. Accepting its premises actually silences, rather than promotes, feminist agendas and women’s equality. Although many of his claims can be successfully challenged on empirical grounds, as his critics demonstrated by their rebuttals in *Foreign Affairs*, his views feed into a conservative agenda that serves not to put women in control, but to keep them out of positions of power.

Why is this the case? Because Fukuyama tells us that no matter how attractive it may seem, we should not move further toward this feminized world; instead, we must keep things the way they are—with strong men at the helm. He argues that women are not able to deal with today’s threats that come from violent leaders, such as Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, and Mobutu Sese Seko. On the horizon are threats from states in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, led by aggressive younger men unsocialized in the ways of mature

democracies. Fukuyama claims that people in agricultural societies, presumably outside the zone of peace, with their surpluses of young, hotheaded men, are less concerned with military casualties and therefore more prone to pick fights (p. 38), an assertion that appears to have disturbingly racist overtones.

Closer to home, citing the necessity for combat readiness in the face of these dangers, Fukuyama, by advocating separation of men and women in single-sex military units, effectively advises against women in combat positions. Although he does not deny that women could do as well in combat as men (which was indeed demonstrated in the Gulf War), he claims that their presence destroys combat units' cohesion, which he believes is built on male bonding (p. 37). This "false necessity," together with the need to channel what he calls the biologically rooted male desire to dominate into successful competition in universities, corporations, and political arenas, seems to imply fewer rather than more opportunities for women in both military and civilian life.¹⁰

And what of men's biological or naturally aggressive tendencies?¹¹ As feminists have pointed out, one of the main reasons why today's military is recruiting women is because not enough "aggressive" men are joining up. Much of basic training involves overcoming men's reluctance to kill. Advances in military technology have depersonalized warfare so that the problems associated with the long-standing reluctance of men in combat to fire their weapons have been lessened.¹² Violence inside states, which is more prevalent in the United States than in many states outside the western democratic "zone of peace," about which Fukuyama speaks so favorably, stems at least as much from lack of economic opportunities as it does from innate male aggression.¹³ Tenure in universities and

¹⁰ This type of argument has shown up in more virulent forms. See, for example, Harvey Mansfield, "Why a Woman Can't Be More Like a Man," *Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 1997, p. A22. Mansfield accuses feminists of "feminizing America." He argues that women are not cut out for war and that men must be allowed to fulfill their traditional role as protectors, a role that is being undermined as women gain equal access to jobs outside the home. Fukuyama also addresses some of these issues in his new book *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

¹¹ R. Brian Ferguson, "Perilous Positions," *Foreign Affairs* 78, No. 1 (1999), p. 125 claims that chimpanzees' naturally aggressive tendencies are also questionable. He contends that the Gombe chimps became aggressive only after human-induced changes in their feeding patterns.

¹² While there has been evidence documenting soldiers' reluctance to kill, I realize this is a controversial argument. For further discussion of this issue, including positions that refute this hypothesis, see Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

¹³ The recent dramatic drop in the crime rate in the United States seems to support this position.

corporate success are not just about satisfying the need for social recognition of alpha males; they are much-needed guarantees of income and job security, important to both men *and* women.

If we were to accept that men do have aggressive tendencies, the leap from aggressive men to aggressive states is problematic, as many international relations scholars have pointed out.¹⁴ Do men's aggressive tendencies really get channeled into international war, thus leading to the possibility of domestic peace between wars? The high homicide rate in the United States makes one skeptical of this possibility, whereas Switzerland, a country with one of the lowest homicide rates in the world, is rarely an international aggressor. If most men, particularly young men, have violent tendencies, as Fukuyama claims, why is it that some states are so much more peaceful than others? Statesmen do not choose war lightly. Nor is war generally decided at the ballot box where, according to Fukuyama, significant numbers of women are voting for peace. It has often been older men who send young men off to war to fight for what they see as legitimate national interests. Would American policymakers in the 1960s or today's Vietnam veterans be satisfied with the explanation that America fought in Vietnam as an outlet for the aggressive tendencies of its young men?

Now to turn to some of the real feminist agendas for international politics—agendas that are completely silenced by Fukuyama's article. I know of no international relations feminists who hypothesize about or advocate women running the world, as the cover title of Fukuyama's article and the turn-of-the-century illustration depicting a woman in boxing gloves "flooring her beau" (p. 29) suggest. Although Fukuyama includes socially feminized men (who must have overcome their aggressive genes) in the ruling coalitions of his feminized world, such a world is unappealing and sure to threaten, or perhaps amuse, those presently in charge, as well as reinforce culturally defined gender stereotypes about international politics and women.

What IR feminists *have* argued for is getting rid of idealistic associations of women with peace. Associations of women with peace, idealism, and impracticality have long served to disempower women and keep them in their place, which is out of the "real world" of international politics.

When Fukuyama claims that sociobiology was misused at the turn of the century, with respect to race and ethnicity, he, too, is misusing it. He does this under the guise of evidence about profound genetically rooted differences between the sexes by inferring that these differences predetermine men's and women's different (and unequal) roles with respect to contemporary

¹⁴ For examples, see Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1979), Chap. 2; and Jane Jaquette, "States Make War," *Foreign Affairs* 78, No. 1 (1999), pp. 128–129.

international politics.¹⁵ Of course, feminists want women to participate more fully in global politics and contribute to making the world a less dangerous place. But, rather than killing each other, haven't many men been working toward this goal also?

Wherever men's genes may have pointed, they founded the discipline of international relations by trying to understand why states go to war and trying to devise institutions to diminish its likelihood in the future. Preferred futures are not feminized, but ones in which women *and* men participate in reducing damaging and unequal hierarchical social structures, such as gender and race.

Many feminists would agree that biology may indeed be a contributing factor to certain aggressive behaviors. Yet understanding and working to lessen various insecurities that women face can only be achieved if we acknowledge a need for diminishing socially constructed gender hierarchies that result in the devaluation of women's lives and their economic and social contributions to society. In spite of Fukuyama's assertion that social constructionism is being effectively challenged by new findings in evolutionary biology, the fact that the majority of subsistence farmers in Africa are women, while men are more frequently found in the more prosperous cash crop sector, can hardly be explained by biology alone. Culturally assigned roles, which have little to do with biology, diminish women's socioeconomic position in most societies. Speculating about women in charge, whether their boxing gloves are on or off, seems far removed from the lived reality of the vast majority of the world's women. Katha Pollitt states that even in the United States, where Fukuyama claims that women are fast gaining political power, women constitute only 12 percent of Congress and, after eighty years of female suffrage, have not even won the right to paid maternity leave or affordable day care.¹⁶ Running foreign policy, she concludes, seems like a fantasy.¹⁷ Nevertheless, by focusing on these unlikely futures, Fukuyama effectively silences more pressing agendas and deflects investigations away from trying to understand why the world's women are so often disempowered and even oppressed.

¹⁵ The popularity of sociobiological arguments about sex differences is evidenced by a cover story in *Time*, March 8, 1999, p. 57, by Barbara Ehrenreich entitled "The Real Truth about the Female." Ehrenreich's position is much more sympathetic to women—she cites feminist scholars who are doing serious work in this area—but it is indicative of a trend toward emphasizing the sociobiological roots of human behavior and its appeal to wider audiences. Many feminists would probably argue that biology and culture are mutually constitutive of each other.

¹⁶ Pollitt, "Father Knows Best," p. 125.

¹⁷ Katie Grant points out that if, as Fukuyama claims, men can become feminized, we do not necessarily need women to run things, even in this new gentler world. Grant, "Why We Need Men."

Of course, IR feminists are concerned with issues of war and peace. But rather than debating whether men are aggressive and women peaceful, they are asking new questions about conflict, as well as trying to expand conventional agendas. Feminist agendas include human rights issues such as rape in war, military prostitution, refugees (the majority of whom are women and children), and more generally issues about civilian casualties.¹⁸ Even though civilians now account for well over 80 percent of wartime casualties, understanding the reasons for and consequences of these disturbing trends has not been at the center of international relations investigations. Feminists have also joined the debate about whether security should be defined more broadly to include issues of structural and ecological violence. With this question in mind, feminists are investigating the often negative effects of structural adjustment and economic globalization on women, as well as problems associated with the degradation of the environment.¹⁹ All of these issues seem closer to women's lived realities than debates about their likelihood of running the world.

By asserting that developed democracies tend to be more feminized than authoritarian states, and by linking this to the popular claim about the relative peacefulness of democracies, Fukuyama obscures deeper truths and hides more progressive practical possibilities.

Kal Holsti has suggested that a better explanation for "zones of peace," which actually extend well beyond Western democracies, is the diminished likelihood of war between strong states with governments seen as legitimate by their populations.²⁰ There are very few states where women have reached a critical mass in political decisionmaking, which makes any link between the democratic peace and the political participation of women tenuous at best. A more fruitful line of investigation is one that is illustrated by a study outlining the results of survey data collected in several Middle Eastern countries, democratic and otherwise. The data show that in the case of the Arab-Israeli dispute, women are not less militaristic than men, but both women and men who are more supportive of

¹⁸ Ruth Seifert, "The Second Front: The Logic of Sexual Violence in Wars," *Women's Studies International Forum* 19, No. 1–2 (1996), pp. 35–43; Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Katharine Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in US-Korean Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and Susan Forbes Martin, *Refugee Women* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

¹⁹ Eleonore Kofman and Gillian Youngs, eds., *Globalization: Theory and Practice* (London: Pinter, 1996); Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993); and Rosi Braidotti et al., *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

²⁰ Kalevi Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

gender equality are also more favorably disposed to compromise.²¹ A cluster of such attitudes could be the building blocks not for a more feminized world, whatever that may mean, but for a more just and peaceful world in which gender and other social hierarchies of domination, which have resulted in the subordination of women, are diminished.

The debate surrounding Fukuyama's article appears to have stimulated a race to demonstrate who can be more aggressive than whom. Marshaling evidence of women's participation in wars, with pictures of female soldiers on parade and documenting women's violence in matters of abuse of children and servants, Ehrenreich and Pollitt assure us that women can be every bit as aggressive as men.²²

Are these the debates we should be having? Surely they deflect from the real issues with which international relations scholars are struggling—namely to try to understand the roots of war and what can be done to prevent it. Investigating the enormous variations in levels of conflict across history and societies is surely a more promising place to begin than in deterministic, biologically rooted theories about the aggressive nature of men. International relations feminists have added a new and important dimension to these investigations.

Rather than joining debates about aggressive men and peaceful women, IR feminists are striving to better understand unequal social hierarchies, including gender hierarchies, which contribute to conflict, inequality, and oppression. Evidence suggests that war is more likely in societies with greater gender inequality. Intentionally or not, Fukuyama's musings about women running the world deflect attention away from this more pressing agenda of working toward a world with increased gender equality. Such a world could, I believe, be a less conflictual one for both women and men. Let us turn our attention to more productive conversations between feminist and international relations scholars about the evolution of world politics, conversations that strive to better understand how such a world could be realized.

²¹ Mark Tessler and Ina Warriner, "Gender, Feminism, and Attitudes Toward International Conflict: Exploring Relationships with Survey Data from the Middle East," *World Politics* 49, No. 2 (1997), pp. 250–281.

²² Barbara Ehrenreich, "Men Hate War Too," *Foreign Affairs* 78, No. 1 (1999), pp. 120–121; and Katha Pollitt, "Father Knows Best," p. 123.