



## **Applying Gender Lens to Understand International Relations: Underlying Masculinity in Global Politics**

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### **ABSTRACT :**

This paper deals with gender undertones in International Relations. In doing so it deals with the traditional understanding of masculinity and relates it with particular attributes of *states*. It focuses on how hard power based realpolitik is based on a 'hegemonic masculine' institutional base. The paper also looks into the challenges to the masculine state structure which emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The latter part of the paper takes up a specific case. It analyses the election of Barack Obama as the President of the United States of America (first in 2008 and then re-elected in 2012) from a gender perspective.

**Keywords:** *masculinity, gender, state, power, Obama*

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### **I. Introduction:**

The 'state' in International Relations (IR) is the masculine figure that secures the protection and ensures the safety of the countrymen against the interests of other states and other untoward elements. States are competing for resources and other sources of power in the anarchic world system. Gender in IR helps us to break the institutional silence and expose the gender ordering and unequal access to resources in world politics. The gender ordering of masculine and feminine (which are not biological, but socially constructed) impinges upon the social ordering, which in turn affect politics and power relations. The realist interpretation of IR tries to convey this idea of a security state. The image of the state is conveyed as a masculine member of the household who is responsible for protecting its countrymen who are feminized in this conceptualization, not being



able to ensure their own protection as they are weak, therefore rendering the importance of the state as inevitable.

## II. Objectives of the Study:

- To understand why applying gender lens is imperative for a comprehensive understanding of world politics.
- To analyse from a gender perspective the election of Barack Obama as the President of the United States of America and policies of the United States administration thereafter

## III: Methodology:

This paper is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary data collected from secondary data sources, i.e. published literature and relevant newspaper reports explaining past events, policy decisions and speeches on the subject concerned.

## IV. Result and Discussion:

After the end of the first world war, the League of Nations was founded on January 10, 1920. Its main goal was to maintain world peace. Its primary aim included preventing wars through means of collective security and disarmament and settling international disputes by negotiation and arbitration. However, the second world war broke out in 1939, meant that the League of Nations failed; and that initiated the forces to look for an alternative, the need to move from 'ideal' to 'real'- the need to look into what really motivates the actions of international actors, the need to move from Wilsonian ideals (the Woodrow Wilson's doctrine) to realist politics in order to ensure real security for 'us' against 'them'. Ensuring security by making one strong in relation to the other became the dominant



discourse. Thus, the post second world war period witnessed the rise of the cold war between the two superpowers, the USA and the erstwhile Soviet Union and the resultant arms race between the two. These events gave legitimacy to the hegemonic masculine discourse in the area of international politics (Runan et. al ,2013). Now let us look into what is meant by the hegemonic masculine discourse in the first place.

The realist approach to IR that can be associated with ‘masculinity’ is not a homogeneous entity or concept called masculinity that applies to all men but is what R.W. Connell identifies as *hegemonic masculinity*, “a culturally dominant masculinity, a socially constructed cultural ideal that doesn't correspond to the actual personality of the majority of men, but sustains a patriarchal authority and legitimizes a patriarchal political and social order”. Joan Scott claims that “the way in which understanding of gender signifies relationships of power is through a set of normative concepts (symbols) that set forth interpretations of the meanings of symbols” (Tickner ,1992) . In mainstream cultural construct, these concepts take the form of fixed binary oppositions that categorically assert the meaning of masculine and feminine and hence a set of unequal social relationships get legitimized. Thus, the dominant discourse sees the state as a patriarch and the citizens as feminine counterpart which the patriarch is ought to protect.

*Masculinity* and *Politics* have a long and close association with states and individuals that are characterized by violence and force, and these characteristics are applauded and valorized. Spike Peterson in her book *Introduction: Gender and Global Issues* gives examples of symbols of 'Masculinization' as



Valorization' and 'Feminization as Devalorization' where Men, White, (neo) colonizing, western, global north, war, international, states, market economy are 'masculinized' while the binary oppositions women, racialised, (neo) colonized, non-western, global south, peace, domestic, families/communities/social movements and care economy, respectively are feminized (Runan et. al ,2013) . Politics is portrayed as men's sphere of activity, not any man, but the so idealized 'hegemonic man'. In this context, Barack Obama's election as the leader of the most powerful state in the world was in itself a challenge to the dominant discourse which will be discussed at a later stage in this paper.

The experiences of women (as well as other feminized and subordinated genders) are often not included or given a subordinate place in the discipline of politics. One such example when this was portrayed was before the superpower summit in Geneva in 1985, when Donald Regan, the then White House chief of staff, told a Washington Post reporter that women wouldn't understand the issues at stake at the meeting. Apparently such gendered underpinnings are evident in other events as well; like in the year 1972, out of the twelve women in the House of Representatives to the United States Government, five were assigned to the Education and Labor committee (Tickner ,1992) , which suggests that women in politics are channelled into certain areas of public policy that are perceived as 'women's issues'.

However, in the 1970s, realism (realist politics) was severely challenged at a time when there was a decline in the intensity of the Cold War and a dramatic rise in oil prices. Activities of the OPEC cartel prompted some scholars to suggest that international relations must shift their attention from the current



realist paradigm to issues associated with economic interdependence and activities of non-state actors (Tickner ,1992) . The interdependence school also challenged realism's exclusive version of conflict among states and called attention to relations among states where war was not expected. The interdependence scholars claimed that the traditional approach was particularly unsuitable for explaining economic conflicts among advanced capitalist states. Also, challenges to masculinity prevalent in conventional IR were perceived through environmental issues (like climate change and ozone hole). These issues challenged the autonomy and self-sufficient status of the states. To deal with global problems, cooperation was required; no state could deal with these problems in a single-handed manner. Hence interdependence among states was inevitable, be it the more sophisticated economic problems or the softer but no less important environmental problems or the harder security problems like cross border terrorism. However, dealing with these problems has shown masculine underpinnings too as such global north is leading policy-making and imposing policies on Global South.

World order scholars further questioned whether the 'state' as an institute was an adequate instrument for solving the multiplicity of problems on the international agenda. Militarized states can be a threat to the security of their own population; economic inequality, poverty and constraints on resources were seen as results of the workings of global capitalism and were thus beyond the control of individual states (Tickner ,1992) . Some scholars have used the term 'structural violence' to point out to a structural condition of dependency (within the power structure) that locked the states on the periphery of the world system into a detrimental relationship with the centres of political and economic power,



denying them the possibility of autonomous development in the world system. The so perceived neutral structure is pointed out as rigged, patriarchal and biased to the advantage of those at the centre of the system. Thus, those at the center try to maintain the status-quo balance of power, historically by colonizing the Global South and in contemporary times by neo-colonizing the newly formed third world through covert discriminating ways of domination.

Also, there is the phenomenon of ‘militarization of the South’ taking place (Tickner ,1992) . With weapons sold or given by the ‘North’ to the third world countries of the ‘South’, it has resulted in a situation whereby the state is not perceived as a protector from outside dangers, but as an ultimate threat to the security of its civilian population. We need to arrive at some kind of common security, which is global and multidimensional. With its focus on the politics of war and Realpolitik, the traditional (Western) academic discipline of International Relation privileges issues which grow out of men's experiences and therefore is biased and one sided. We are socialized into believing that war and power politics are kinds of activities with which men have a special affinity and thus their voices in describing and prescribing for this world are likely to be more authentic. IR ignores a large body of human experiences having the potential for increasing and opening new ways of inter-state practices. In this context let’s analyse the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States and the policy initiatives thereafter.

### **Election of the 1st Afro-American president of the United States of America**

Barack Obama's skin colour, his party orientation as well as his policy initiatives are signs of a challenge to the realist way of things in Global Politics.



He succeeded George W. Bush who unleashed the 'War on Terror' on Iraq as a reaction to 9/11 terrorist attacks. Also during Bush's era, there were reports of excesses committed in Guantanamo as well which violated the human rights of individuals. Thus succession, from Bush to Obama, was an evident challenge to the realist world order. Obama's ideology (as it seemed evident from his policy initiatives) was to view people as people (human beings) and not as separate entities belonging to some religion, region or ethnicity. His policy initiatives were directed towards breaking this dichotomy between 'self' and 'other' and towards achieving a global order that would be egalitarian and inclusive in nature. It is important to note that when we view things/events from a gender lens, we are tilting towards a more liberal point of view than a conservative one. The gender lens tends to question the conventional conservative underpinnings, which are otherwise overlooked or seen as normal and neutral. On November 4, 2008, Senator Barack Hussein Obama of the Democratic Party from Illinois was elected President of the United States over Senator John McCain of Arizona. Obama became the 44th president of the United States, and the first African American to be elected to that office. He was subsequently elected to a second term in 2012. We would look into Obama's addresses and speeches regarding policy goals prior to his election, as well as his actual effective policy initiatives after getting elected and try to bring in a gender lens to such analysis.

President Obama had explicitly associated himself with liberal traditions in foreign policy (Ackerman, 2008). In one of his first major speeches on foreign policy, at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs on 23rd April 2007, Obama cited F.D. Roosevelt ("we lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good") and A. Lincoln ("America is the last, best hope of



Earth”). He made clear his inclination and attachment to the basic principles of Wilsonism (“In today’s globalized world, the security of the American people is inextricably linked to the security of all people”). He stressed the key role of international cooperation, strengthening partnerships and alliances in addressing global threats and challenges and also American moral leadership on a global scale (Ondrejcsák ).

The “Obama-doctrine” was most comprehensively presented in his Foreign Policy article “*Renewing American Leadership*” (July/August 2007). After emphasizing the legacy of F.D. Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy, Obama described his basic foreign/security policy philosophy in a classical liberal/Wilsonian way, emphasizing that the security and wealth of Americans are firmly linked with security and wealth of people living outside the borders of the United States of America (Ondrejcsák ).

He characterized America’s engagement in Iraq as a “war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics ... without a clear rationale and without strong international support” (Ondrejcsák ). Obama's point of view is in line with *Kant's Deontological approach*, i.e. morality based on reason. We cannot do away with morality (in a more liberal sense of the term) when we bring in the gender lens, especially while analysing events in IR. And this morality tries to break away from the dichotomies based on hierarchy and come to a somewhat middle point that would be universal in character and not gender biased. As we already know, the realist doctrine is certainly a gender-biased one. Obama did not completely shift from the realist paradigm, as he still had to contest elections and defend the interests of the Americans in particular;



nevertheless, within the realist scheme, he made some important shifts in terms of ideas regarding foreign and other policies, which are different from his erstwhile recent predecessors.

President Obama opined for multilateral solutions over unilateralism: he declared in Moscow (in regard to nuclear weapons reduction) that “If we fail to stand together, then the NPT and the Security Council will lose credibility, and international law will give way to the law of the jungle” (Ondrejcsák ).

His acts and speeches focused on creating alternatives against the policies of the Bush Government in almost all spheres. The emphasis on change was partly driven by his party’s and his own identity and traditions, but President Obama’s personal “life-story” had a significant impact on his foreign and security policy too. For Obama himself embodied change and it became his trademark.

International cooperation and coalition building had been key factors in Obama’s chosen approach to Iran or North Korea, as well as to deal with international terrorism. Besides multilateralism, Obama’s approach was also specific for its choice of *other-than-military* solutions, including education, healthcare, support of the market economy and investment in areas of conflict. He and his team are also less focused on traditional threats and emphasize broader social and societal factors, including climate change or poverty beyond the borders of the United States of America(Ondrejcsák ).

As the President said in Cairo, “much has been made of the fact that an African American with the name Barack Hussein Obama could be elected President” (Cairo, 2009). He was perceived as an “outsider” in Washington



policy although he received his crucial political socialization in Chicago, one of America's toughest.

Another important factor was his commitment towards communal activities and work, which made a huge impact on his viewpoints on "high politics". These socialization factors are important for representing the "culture of change" in American policy as well as the necessary tools to realize them. His foreign policy was a combination of Wilsonian idealism and pragmatism.

While President Obama reserved the right to use hard-power in cases where his country's absolute strategic interests were at stake, in general, he had made a significant shift from the traditional operations and threat-perceptions towards more social and societal issues, including problems like *global poverty* and *climate change* (Ondrejcsák ). The Obama team focussed on change and alternative foreign policy was driven not only by liberal and Democratic philosophy but also by cold strategic calculations. The decline of America's prestige and appeal in the world (with some exemptions, like India or Israel) during the Bush era had serious consequences and impact on America's soft power. In order to re-establish the United States' power in its complexity that Obama appeared to have concluded, the U.S. must first renew its focus on soft-power.

Obama's foreign policy can be applauded for cooperation with allies and multilateralism, his ending of the Iraq War, his continuation of the process of ending US combat operations in Afghanistan, the administration's attempts at destroying Al-Qaeda's core leadership (particularly the killing of Osama Bin Laden), promoting discussions that led to the 2015 Paris Agreement on global climate change, brokering a nuclear deal with Iran and normalizing U.S.



Relations with Cuba. The President was being accused of being timid and ineffectual in wielding American influence. Some even claimed that Obama's policy of 'appeasement' led to a US retreat from the world scene. Some critics even charged him of pursuing similar imperialistic policies to those of his predecessor, George. W. Bush, of which Obama was deeply critical during his tenure in the Senate and his 2008 Presidential campaign. However, such claims of the critics seem to be overstated and highly exaggerated (scoring-obamas-foreign-policy2012). Obama had the compulsions to function within the realist superstructure that could not be toppled in a legitimate manner by one person alone in one term. He did the best within his reach, working within the structure. His efforts must be appreciated by those who are close to the liberal school of thought (in the broad sense of the term, beyond its economic dimensions), which I believe is again close to the feminist school of thought. The feminist school has this liberal underlining that makes it such an important topic of discussion in the contemporary era of 'enlightenment of the masses'.

The importance attached to softer issues like climate change and the environment is relevant to the experiences of women, not only in terms of ideas and representations but also in regard to experiences in the material reality. This particularly holds true for women in the third world, and within the third world especially for those of poor rural households. There are examples of experiences of women in the tribal villages of India as well as other communities who depend for their sustenance on forest produce and village commons. There has been an impact on their lives due to environmental degradation as well as increased state interference and privatization of village commons and forests. Women of these communities are responsible for fetching water, fuel, fodder and other resources for the sustenance of the household and the depletion of these resources in terms of both quality and quantity have had an adverse effect on the lives of these women (Agarwal, 1992) . Similarly, when we talk about Global Poverty, the area



of focus is the third world (Asia, Africa, Latin America) and within the third world it is the women whose lives are more drastically affected- like pressure on women to increase childbearing such that there is an increase in the number of labourers in the family to boost the family income. This again has a link with education. Population growth and education are inversely related; the more the spread of education, the less the population growth and vice versa. Also with education, the importance of the mind prevails over the importance of the body. Thus softer issues have a gender connection and the importance given to softer issues by an American President in policy initiatives is surely a positive indication towards a more egalitarian society.

The election of an African American to the post of President of the United States of America was in itself something to be applauded, especially keeping in touch with the historical realities; a country where slavery based on racial lines was an institutionalized practice century and a half ago. Also since the United States is perceived as the power centre in world politics today, such an example of inclusive leadership at the top is really encouraging. Also the 2016 presidential elections of the USA can be perceived from a gender lens, not only because Hilary Clinton had the chance to create history yet again after Obama, by becoming the first ever woman president of the United States, but also because Hilary's competition in the contest was Donald Trump, who seems like a traditional patriarch(who ultimately went on to win the election) was campaigning on 'bringing back the American identity' and is exclusive in its character and ideology and which in present time is a challenge to the efforts made by the Obama administration to bring in a more inclusive and egalitarian world society, not based on hierarchy but equality. Trump's policy decisions are acting as a challenge in creating such an egalitarian world order. In fact, Trump administration's decisions point towards rolling back to the traditional masculine role of the state.



## V. Conclusion:

Thus, to conclude, it is important to analyse International Relations (IR) from a gender lens to unveil the gendered nature of the subject. Generally, there is a tendency to see IR as a gender-neutral subject, but it is not. The most conventional way to look at IR, i.e. the realist way, is a very masculine way to look at the discipline which privileges the experiences of a typical idea of an ideal concept of man (western white man), a culturally elite version of man as protective and strong, with the responsibility to protect and ensure the security of his family.

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