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Facing Gender Absence: Questioning the International Relations Curriculum from a Peripheral Feminist Perspective and Practice

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Introduction

The International Relations field is historically tied to masculine, patriarchal, European, and white hegemonic ideologies. Besides recent advances in broadening the discipline’s objects of analysis and developing new methodological and epistemological orientations (Tickner, 2001), gender and feminist debates rarely appear in International Relations undergraduate and graduate curricula and teaching methodologies. Considering this absence, from our experiences and practices as feminists and academics from Brazil, in this piece, we demonstrate how inside-outside classroom interaction and debates can be a powerful tool to transform International Relations teaching and curriculum, opening space to new pedagogical perspectives and practices.

Curriculum, Gender, and International Relations

Social groups, especially more powerful ones, often express their perspectives and social projects through the curriculum. This happens because the decisions these groups make about the curriculum result in the incorporation (or not) of what a community will remember, believe, and hope for in the future (Moreira & Silva, 2016). In this sense, the content that “must” be approached in a curriculum is not de facto essential but is socially constructed as essential—what varies on the place and period and depends on the groups that produced it (Ribeiro et al., 2020). Curriculum, therefore, is a contested document tied to culture and social relations (Moreira & Silva, 2016). Consequently, structural factors, such as gender, influence the curriculum.

Gender relations ground the entire social body, including where we produce knowledge, such as schools and universities. Gender is a social expression of how society assigns meaning to human bodies, especially regarding their reproductive differences (Connell, 2009). The curriculum, as a socially pedagogical instrument constructed inside an oppressive gender order (Connell, 2009), is able of actively produce and reinforce gender inequalities (Colling, 2015; Ribeiro et al., 2020; Silva, 1999). For instance, it often privileges literature produced by men over those made by women or dissident gender people and usually does not consider feminist perspectives. Facing this reality, feminist theories and practices have questioned the supposed neutrality of epistemologies and choices in the curriculum, showing that these perspectives also reflect and reproduce gender inequalities.

The power dynamics influencing curriculum construction are also present in the International Relations field. Scholars approaching gender in this area criticize the lack of gender and feminist perspectives in the field (Holmes, 2018; Salomón, 2022; Sjoberg 2007). Laura Sjoberg (2007) and Georgina Holmes (2018) point out that undergraduate courses have only the “week on gender,” an expression utilized in the literature to criticize the missing perspectives on feminism and gender in the long-term formal studies in the International Relations field. These authors also highlight alternatives for facing these absences in the classroom. For instance, Sjoberg (2007) argues that to appease the common resistance among students in the classroom, professors should discuss the meaning of gender to reduce the initial discomfort on the subject—in this sense, it is necessary to face the silence that often comes with these discussions. Mónica Salomón (2022) states that we, as feminists, need to transversalize gender in different International Relations research areas, demonstrating, as Cynthia Enloe (2014) highlighted, that gender relations are present even in the places we usually would not observe. Holmes (2018) underlines the positive impact of embracing intersectional feminism in the International Relations classroom. She argues that it contains the possibility of a transformative work that may promote democratic relations. These ideas
and experiences also crossed our student lives as women researchers from Brazil, an experience we will approach in the next section.

**Facing the Absence**

We understand that living as women and researching gender dynamics in and from the Global South bring specific challenges that shape how we learn to observe the world and its inequalities. Considering this, we assume a peripheral feminist perspective and practice, which means defending a type of feminism centered and constructed from places and people marginalized in international politics. Peripheral feminism confronts hegemonic white feminism by connecting, necessarily, gender with race, nationality, class, coloniality, and many other concepts that articulate life in the Global South (Ballestrin, 2006). In doing so, it goes beyond the “Western Eyes” (Mohanty, 2015), rejecting a colonial and often dependent position from perspectives that do not face the problems that we, women from the Global South, are dealing with every day, such as colonial heritage and intensive social inequality. This feminist peripheral perspective aims not only to add gender content to International Relations classrooms but mainly transform the way we look at international politics, which means being committed to those experiences forgotten by mainstream theories and curriculum and to those groups that are usually seen as the object and not the subject of research and pedagogical practices.

One of us, Jocieli, had her first contact with gender and feminist debates during her undergraduate course, not in the International Relations classroom but from interacting with social movements. Once knowing social gender structures theoretically and connecting this knowledge to concrete experiences, Jocieli’s main research focus became feminist epistemology. Whereas the International Relations field has many limitations to gender studies, Jocieli decided to change her study area to Sociology. Her research path made clear to her how sexism crosses all areas of science, theoretically and practically. Reinforcing gender and feminist debates in academia is now one of the main objectives in her scientific and pedagogical practice.

After studying International Relations as an undergraduate and a master’s student, another of us, Alessandra, had her first course on Gender and International Relations in the second year of her Ph.D. The experience of having a formal and deep discussion on the issue was the academic support she needed to change her doctoral research to transnational movements on Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Latin America. Besides being a feminist activist, she realized that to overcome the absence of gender in the International Relations field, students needed more than just one “week on gender” and extra-curricular activities. She comprehended her role in facing the missing gender and feminist debates and decided to contribute to the construction of feminist gazes to understand, analyze, and practice International Relations inside the classroom.

Our personal experiences in the International Relations field, which are strongly affected by gender inequalities, shaped our paths in academia and were central to our training as critical researchers. These experiences came from different activist and student interventions during our undergraduate course. We can recall some of these experiences we organized as students. Back in our International Relations undergraduate period (2012–2017), the personal sexism we were facing—plus the struggles with the white, Western, and masculine core of the International Relations curriculum—led some students, us among them, to create a feminist collective dedicated to changing this scenario. The group, called *Manas RI UFSM* (UFSM IR Sisters, in English), was dedicated to discussing politics and gender, studying International Relations feminist theorists, and strengthening our confidence as students entering the area. To accomplish such goals, we developed meetings to debate texts, discuss political issues, watch movies, and organize protests aligned with transnational
movements, such as the March 8th International Women’s Strike. In addition, Manas RI UFSM worked on elaborating mini-biographies about women in international politics, highlighting their centrality to the area. The priority of the collective’s actions was to provide space for speech, action, and reception of women in the International Relations undergraduate course. This experience was important to promote debates outside the classroom, stimulating critical thinking about this place, which we usually assume is the only one legitimate to construct scientific knowledge. Manas RI UFSM may be understood as a powerful pedagogical tool to deal with gender and feminist absences in the university curriculum since it promoted an inside-outside classroom interaction that challenged academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1983), opening space to new ways of thinking about scientific practices.

**Conclusion**

Based on gender literature in International Relations and our experiences as women researchers and feminist activists, it becomes evident how the curriculum and its absences shaped our lives. One of the main points of feminist theory is to elucidate the centrality of gender dynamics in the organization of society, which means they are present everywhere, even when the mainstream lenses make them missing to our eyes, such as the syllabi of our universities. We believe that to face this historically constructed gender absence in the International Relations curriculum is necessary more than the addition of a “gender week” in our courses. We need to create strategies to observe the international dynamics and gender inequalities from a feminist perspective and confront this inequality in practical terms. We should guide such a movement through dialogue and interaction with civil society groups. Consequently, we could learn from their agency outside the classroom and connect this knowledge with content debates and curriculum-building processes, making the change from the inside and transforming International Relations at its core.
References


