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## UNIT 10 FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES\*

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### 10.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit aims to familiarize you with the ideas of feminism, the distinction between sex and gender and feminist perspectives to international relations. After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of feminism
- Distinguish between sex and gender
- Identify the contribution of important feminist scholars in the field of international politics
- Describe the feminist understanding of war, security, economy and global politics

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### 10.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the world of increased interdependence resulting from the globalization process, the field of international relations has faced major challenges to its core theoretical structure. The feminist theory is one such challenge. Challenging the status quo, the feminist approach questions the traditional and foundational concepts and assumptions of international relations. It draws our attention to the fact that masculine conception of international relations embedded in existing theories have marginalised the role of women in creating and sustaining international politics. As we shall see in this unit, the feminist approach takes both women and gender seriously.

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\* Dr. Gazala Fareedi, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Southfield College

It is therefore a part of critical theories, theories which seek to explain and transform *all* the circumstances that enslave human beings. It has contributed to international relations (IR) studies by re-assessing the role that gender and women play in the international arena. This unit will explain and analyse international relations from a feminist perspective so that women's contribution to international politics is highlighted.

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## 10.2 MEANING OF FEMINISM

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Feminism can be broadly understood as a conglomeration of socio-political movements and academic discourse that seeks to establish equality between the sexes. It is a set of theories and practices that seek to establish equality between men and women at the most preliminary level. In various parts of the world, women historically did not have the same basic rights that were given to men. For example, they could not own property, they did not have a right to vote, they were not allowed education and employment. There are many other restrictions. Such a social order when men dominate the system and where women are discriminated against is known as patriarchy. Feminism seeks to fight against this order both theoretically and practically. Since there are still many areas where women are still subjugated, the feminist struggle is an ongoing one. For instance, there are still cases of domestic violence, rape, acid attack, female foeticide, dowry demand, eve-teasing, lack of education and opportunities for women and other such debilitations in every corner of the world. A person who fights for equality between the sexes is known as a feminist and both men and women can be a feminist. It is a progressive idea and movement that seeks to bring about positive change in both the public and private (family) spheres of society.

### 10.2.1 Historical Background

The world has witnessed many people who have written about and fought against discrimination meted out to women in various regions and at varied points of time. The term feminism, as we know it contemporarily was first used by Charles Fourier (1772-1837), the French philosopher who argued that all jobs should be open to both men and women based on their skill and aptitude (Goldstein 1982: 98). He also was of the view that in a marriage, women were forced to behave like lifelong slaves owned and dominated by the interests of their husbands. Simone de Beauvoir, another French feminist, published a book titled *The Second Sex* in 1949 where she rejected the idea that women are weaker than men due to their biology. She argued that this understanding that women are weaker is due to our patriarchal socio-cultural understanding.

In the United Kingdom, one of the forceful arguments promoting women's rights came from Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). Her first published work was a treatise titled *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* published in 1786. She is most well known for her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) where she argues that women are not oppressed because they are naturally inferior to men but because they lack proper education. Since men and women were given different types of education since childhood, they went on to develop different mental faculties and overall personalities. Hence, the fundamental difference between the sexes was not something that was innate/inherent/natural but brought about by differences in upbringing and most specifically by differences in education.

In India, Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati published her book titled *High Caste Hindu Women* in 1887 where she exposed cultural customs and traditions that were discriminatory towards women. The year 1905 also saw the publication of a utopian feminist novel titled *Sultana's Dream* by Begum Rokeya, where women are scientists, pilots, engineers in a science fiction-like plot. It depicts an alternative reality where the roles of men and women have been reversed and, in this process, the myth of male superiority is destroyed in the novel.

### 10.2.2 Distinction between Sex and Gender

Feminist scholars make a distinction between sex and gender. The sex of a person is based on the biological/bodily features whereas the gender of a person is based on the upbringing of that person. Sex is therefore something physical/natural whereas gender is something that is created/nurtured. For example, when a child is born, that child is born with certain physical entities that denote the sex of the child. Depending on whether the child has male or female genitalia, the family and the society at large started treating that child in a certain way. For example, if the child is female, she is given pink clothes and dolls to play with. If the child is male, he is given blue clothes and guns to play with. Girl children are taught cooking and other household work whereas boys are not given the same training. Girls are taught to be shy, soft-spoken and timid whereas boys are taught to be rough and tough. When boys cry, they are asked not to cry like girls. Such a difference in their upbringing impacts the total personality of the child and makes her/him a particular type of adult. Gender is created by family and societal values. How a man should behave and how a woman should behave in an ideal way is decided by societal values.

Gender is further divided into the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Qualities and behavioural features that are generally ascribed to males is known as masculinity and qualities/behaviours that are generally ascribed to females is known as femininity. Examples of masculinity are strong physical body, toughness in attitude, being rough, liking sports and outdoor physical activities, having better science and mathematical abilities, aggressive behaviour, losing temper easily, being rational and objective, quick decision-maker, having better driving skills, risk-taking abilities, leadership qualities and others. Examples of femininity would be caring attitude, emotional attachment, risk-averse, cooking abilities, compassionate, timid and weak physically and mentally, soft-spoken, lack of interest in sports, interests in shopping, inability to take quick decisions rationally and others. Feminists argue that masculinity and femininity is socially constructed and people belonging to both the sexes can develop either of these qualities, given the nature of upbringing and education. Hence if a girl child is taught to be physically and mentally tough by giving the proper nutrition and training, then she can become capable of equally becoming physically strong, tough and aggressive. This has been proved by many women in the field of sports and armed forces. The same is true for women making scientific achievements and achieving milestones in professions which are usually considered masculine. Similarly, the world has seen many famous chefs who are men, although cooking has generally been a feminine activity. Men are equally capable of showing emotions like crying and being compassionate. Hence feminist started out by arguing that differentiation needs to be made between sex and gender. If sex is something that is physical and cannot be changed, what needs to be changed is the mindset of people. Given the proper environment, men and women can equally do all the tasks that have been historically attached to only one sex.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 1**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by the term feminism?

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### **10.3 FEMINISM IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

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Feminist perspectives entered the International Relations discipline at the end of the 1980s, at about the same time as the end of the Cold War. The first international conference on women, gender and the study of International Relations (IR) was held in 1988 in Wellesley College, Massachusetts, United States. Judith Ann Ticker was one of the foremost feminist scholars in international relations who played a central role in the organisation of this conference (Dara Krishna Swamy 2012: 227). This led to the start of a new discussion about gender issues in the discipline of international politics. The growing discussion led to the creation of a new discourse on the feminist perspective to IR with the publication of several foundational texts on the subject. Some of these publications were books like *Women and War* by Jean Bethke Elshtain in 1987; *International Relations Theory: Contributions of Feminist Standpoint* by Robert Ethane in 1989; *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Sense of International Politics* by Cynthia Enloe in 1990; *Gender and International Relations* by Grant and Newland in 1991; *Gender in International Relations* by Judith Ann Tickner in 1992. This led to the establishment of various feminist courses on gender in international politics in various universities all over the world. The Feminist Theory and Gender Studies Section (FTGS) of the International Studies Association (ISA) also launched a new journal, the *International Feminist Journal of Politics (IFJP)* in the year 1999.

Feminist perspectives on international politics fundamentally focus on gender. The first step was to highlight that gender categories of masculinity and femininity are relational concepts. That means that they are dependent on each other for their meaning in a hierarchical manner. The hierarchy is so juxtaposed that masculine qualities are treated as superior and feminine traits are treated as inferior. For example, rational (masculine-[m]) versus emotional (feminine-[f]); strength (m) versus weakness (f); public (m) versus private (f); objective (m) versus subjective (f); protector (m) versus protected (f) and others. Feminist international relations scholars argue that these everyday gendered categories of masculinity and femininity have a deep impact on the nature, theory and practice of international relations. They have provided several examples of how these categories have gone on to influence not only the writings in the field but also the practice of international relations. The fundamental areas of IR, such as war and peace, diplomacy, international and national security, global economy and

trade, and others are profoundly impacted by this hierarchical gendered understanding of the world.

### 10.3.1 Critique of the Realist Paradigm

One of the most important feminist articles that critiqued the realist theory of international politics was by Judith Ann Tickner. It was published in 1988 and was titled *Hans Morgenthau's Principles of Political Realism: A Feminist Reformulation*. The first line of this article states, "International politics is a man's world, a world of power and conflict in which warfare is a privileged activity" (Tickner 1988: 429). She brings to the forefront the issue that what is considered central to the practice of international relations, areas such as diplomacy, military service and security issues have been largely domains that are controlled by men. Though the numbers of females in these professions have been increasing throughout the world, these areas are still considered to be masculine and requiring masculine traits. Tickner goes on to challenge each of Hans J. Morgenthau's six principles of the realist theory of international politics. Morgenthau had outlined that political realism believes that politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature; interest is defined in terms of power; that moral principles cannot be applied to the action of states and that the political sphere is autonomous (Morgenthau 1948).

Tickner contests each of these principles in her article. First, she argues that objectivity is associated with masculinity whereas human nature is both masculine as well as feminine. Second, national interest cannot be defined only in terms of power as it is a multidimensional concept which at the global level might require co-operation. Third, the definition of power itself needs to be broadened to not only mean domination over others (power over) but also collective empowerment (power with). Fourth, she rejects that there can be a separation between political action and morality. Fifth, while agreeing that moral aspiration of a particular country cannot be universal, there needs to be an emphasis on common moral elements of humanity that would help on building the international community. Last, she argues that focusing on the autonomy of the political sphere makes it exclusionary, especially for feminine issues. Moreover, autonomy itself has been associated with masculinity (Tickner 2014: 17). Overall, Tickner draws attention to how the discipline and the practice of international relations has prioritized masculinity. Hence concepts such as power understood as domination, autonomy, objectivity, competition, zero-sum game, aggressive behaviour, the idea of a strong muscular male leader heading the state, state security and nuclear politics get prioritized in international relations theory and practice. This not only sidelines a plurality of actors in world politics but also completely blinds the discipline to issues central to individual security especially women.

#### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) What is Judith Ticker's critique of Morgenthau's Six Principles of Political Realism?

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## 10.4 CONCEPT OF SECURITY THROUGH GENDERED LENSES

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### 10.4.1 Re-defining the Concept

Mainstream theories like realism, liberalism and constructivism treat the state as the main actor of international relations. Accordingly, when it comes to security, their focus is mainly on state security and how it can be achieved primarily through military and economic means at the national level. Feminist scholars have argued that the concept of security needs to be understood not only in a top-down fashion but also a bottom-up perspective where individual and communities are also prioritized (Tickner 2014: 265). This is because individual issues completely get hidden in this race for state security. With huge spending on defence budgets, some countries spend very less on basic necessities for their citizens. This negatively impacts all citizens, but women in particular because of the patriarchal system at all socio-economic levels. Also sometimes prioritizing state security can be directly detrimental to individual/women security. An example would be the then South Korean government being complicit in the prostitution racket of South Korean women for the United States soldiers stationed in South Korea from 1950-53 (Sang-Hun Choe 2017). “Scholars who have studied the issue have said that the South Korean government was motivated in part by fear that the American military, stationed in the country to provide a defence against North Korea, would leave” (Sang-Hun Choe 2017). It is evident here that in this case, women security was fundamentally compromised for state security. “In the name of national security, the Korean state promoted policies that exploited these women’s lives...and [demonstrated] how national security can translate into personal insecurity for certain individuals” (Katherine Moon [1997] as quoted in Ticker 2014: 263).

### 10.4.2 Rape as Systematic Military Strategy

Feminist scholars have also highlighted how war and conflicts affect women. “In wartime, women are particularly subject to rape and prostitution. Rape is not just an accident of war, but often a systematic military strategy” (Tickner 2014: 263). Since the patriarchal system thinks of women and their bodies as properties, like the territorial land being conquered in a war, there is also an attempt to conquer and brutalize women’s bodies, thereby owning them. Jan Jindy Pettman (1996) has highlighted how in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), “rape was associated with a policy of ethnic cleansing. The strategy included forced pregnancies to make Bosnia a Serbian state by implanting Serbian babies in Bosnian Muslim mothers” (Tickner 2014: 263). Such a strategy of war reflects a deeply held patriarchal belief that children belong only to their father’s religion/ethnicity. It overrides the biological fact that the babies have the genetic composition of both the parents. Hence, if the mother and father belong to different ethnicity/religion, the system that gives only the father’s surname/religion to the child is deeply discriminatory towards women.

### 10.4.3 Protectors turn Predators

Jean Bethé Elshtain in her book titled *Women and War* published in 1987 examines the different nature of roles that are expected from men and women during a war. Societal expectations dictate that men play the role of a brave soldier and women play the role of a sacrificial pacifist. This reinforces men's position as warriors and women's role as non-combatants which Elshtain challenges through her work. In continuation of such an argument, feminist scholars have challenged the protector-protected relationship during war/conflict. Gender stereotypes have forced us to think of men as protectors and women as those who need protection. "One of the stories that has been told throughout history is that men fight wars to protect women and children" (Tickner 2014: 263). But the actual conduct of a war has shown that these same protectors can easily turn into the greatest threat to women and children safety. Several cases of abuse and assault on women and children have been reported even by the United Nations Peace Keeping Forces during their missions. "Peacekeepers have been accused of engaging in sex-trafficking, soliciting prostitutes, forcing children into prostitution, and having sex with minors" (Ndulo Muna 2009: 129). "The first official allegations about peacekeeper involvement in sexual misconduct came to light during the UN mission in Cambodia in 1992, this was followed by reports from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and East Timor" (Hernandez Brianna Nicole: 2020). Such horrid stories about women and children during conflict have fundamentally challenged the protection myth.

### 10.4.4 War and Masculinity

What is also important is the masculine language that is used for war and conflict. A soldier is trained to have masculine traits to be aggressive, rough and tough. "Military training depends on the denigration of anything considered feminine—to act like a soldier is to be not 'womanly' (Tickner 2014: 264). But there have been countless wars where women have equally participated in combat. An example would be the civil war in Sierra Leone that lasted from 1991 to 2002 where "evidence shows that women, female soldiers were empowered by their fighting role. They participated in a variety of activities, including killing, using weapons, commanding armed groups, spying, looting, raping, and burning homes" (Tickner 2014: 264). Unfortunately, even when a woman shows more bravery and violence than men on the battlefield, it is still said that she fights like a man. In this context, Professor Nivedita Menon writes in her book titled *Seeing Like a Feminist*,

"And who does not remember that stirring line of Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's—'Khoob ladi mardani, who toh Jhansi wali rani thi.' (Bravely she fought, the Rani of Jhansi/Like a man she did fight). What does this line mean? Even when it is a woman who has shown bravery, it still cannot be understood as a 'feminine quality'. Bravery is seen as a masculine virtue no matter how many women display it or how few men." (Menon: 2012).

Although women are increasingly joining the armed forces in the combat role, they had to fight a long battle to be able to do so. In many places, the resistance came from within the military itself which saw addition of women as affecting the combat capabilities of the group. "It is also a controversial issue for feminists. Most feminists believe that equality dictates that women should be allowed to

serve in militaries. However, some feminists believe that women should reject fighting in men's wars" (Tickner 2014: 265).

What is also to be highlighted is the fact that the association of masculinity with security is not only in the realm of armed forces but also in political life and academic life. For example, generally, most people associate a politician with masculine characteristics like aggressiveness, physical toughness, loud talking and dominant personality with security for the state. The assumption is that such leaders can protect the state from various threats. Politicians who do not show boisterous and arrogant qualities but are more educated with good administrative skills are not favoured by people. This automatically puts dominant males at a better advantage at being voted to power, rather than people with feminine qualities. Such a notion can be completely baseless. During the Covid 19 pandemic in the first year 2020, several articles highlighted how countries with female leaders had relatively fared much better in tacking the virus with regard to the number of deaths and general preparedness. This would include female leaders like Jacinda Ardern (Prime Minister of New Zealand), Angela Merkel (Chancellor of Germany), Sanna Marin (Prime Minister of Finland), Tsai Ingwen (President of Taiwan) (Taub Amanda 2020). Despite such evidence, unfortunately, many people still associate security with masculinity. The same logic percolates to the level of academic discourse where female scholars are taken less seriously than their male counterparts especially in the field of security studies, with the latter being called for more panel discussions, talks, presentations than the former.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 3

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) How have feminist scholars redefined the concept of security in international politics?

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## 10.5 GLOBAL ECONOMY, INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND GENDER

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Concerning women and work, there are several variations depending on the socio-economic conditions of the various regions both inter and intra countries. However, there are some translational similarities that can be observed. This is related to the gendered division of labour both within the house and in the public professional sphere. As has been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is assumed that women and men are better at doing particular types of jobs. Globally, "women are disproportionately clustered in low-paid jobs in garment industries, services, and home-based work, or subsistence agriculture" (Tickner 2014: 268). In addition to this, women working outside are also expected to do all the household work in the private family sphere which is often taken for granted by



society. This is known as ‘double burden’ as women are working both in the public sphere as well as in the private sphere. Also, this labour that they do in the private sphere is invisible in the economic analysis (Tickner 2014: 268).

In the realm of international politics, Prof. Cynthia Enloe began by asking a very important question which is “Where are the Women?” This forced international relations scholars to locate the spaces that women inhabit in politics at the global level. In one of her books titled “Bananas, Beaches and Bases” first published in 1990, she looks at the various roles that women play in international politics. These roles are important but secondary. Examples would be that of diplomatic wives, military wives, sex workers on military bases, plantation sector workers, garment factory workers and others. In this huge area of international politics, women are hardly seen in decision making roles especially in the field of what is known as ‘high politics’ which are issues related to war, peace, nuclear politics, security, trade and others. While the number of women leaders is increasing, still most of the countries have men as the head of the state. This is evident especially in the photographic sessions of intergovernmental organizations like the G7 and G20, where most representatives are men, with just one or two women standing out. For example, among the Group of Seven (G7) countries only one is a female (Angela Merkel as Chancellor of Germany) as of December 2020. The same is true for the Group of Twenty (G20) as of December 2020. It is for this reason that the term ‘diplomatic wives’ exists, as most of the international diplomacy is being historically conducted by men. There is a gendered division of labour here as men do the negotiations at the high table, whereas women as the wives of these diplomats support their husbands and thereby the state. This whole issue gets complicated as more and more women enter the foreign service of various countries as diplomats. This issue underlines the fact that diplomacy, which is a fundamental part of international politics has been underlined by a gendered division of labour.

Professor Enloe has also underlined that the ‘personal is international’ and the ‘international is personal’. By this she means that politicization of domestic/personal/private life is the pillar that holds up the international system. Hence women’s lives are international. She argues that if people truly need to understand the issues of international politics like war, they need to also understand it through the eyes of women who are directly and indirectly being impacted by the war. For example, it is not enough to just analyse the belligerent parties fighting the Syrian War, one can never truly understand this war until one analyses its impact on the refugee women and children. Hence one can never fully grasp the meaning of international politics until one can understand how ideas about femininity and masculinity are holding up the international economic and political system.

The growing realization that international politics needs to take issues of gender seriously has been prompted and in return has prompted many international conventions and conferences on women. The first world conference on women was held in Mexico City in 1975 by the United Nations (UN). This was the first in a series of conferences to be sponsored by the UN. This launched the ‘United Nations Decade for Women’ from 1975 to 1985 with a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly. The objective was to focus on the issues and policies that impacted women. In 1979, the UN General Assembly adopted the ‘Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women’. The second international women’s conference was held in Copenhagen (Denmark) in 1980

and the third was held in Nairobi (Kenya) in 1985. This event saw the participation from 157 member states and a host of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations). The ‘Fourth World Conference on Women’ was held in Beijing in 1995. The ‘Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action’ adopted by 189 countries is an agenda for women’s empowerment. This plan of action has built on the ideas of the previous three conferences. The year 2020 was the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this Beijing Plan of Action and the declaration adopted on this occasion recognized the progress made by gender equality but also stated that no country has achieved full gender equality. The Commission of the Status of Women (CSW) is the international intergovernmental body that exclusively focuses on the issue of gender equality and women empowerment. It was established as a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in the year 1946. In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly also created UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women). UN Women supports the work of the Commission on the Status of Women and acts to bring together the participation from civil society representatives and international entities working for equality (United Nations website).

#### Check Your Progress Exercise 4

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) What is Cynthia Enloe referring to when she asks the question, “Where are the women?”

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### 10.6 LET US SUM UP

Feminism has brought about different ways of thinking about the central issues and processes of international politics like war and peace. It argues that the state is not the only significant actor and opens an entire range of non-state actors right down to how individual men and women are important. Its critique of the realist theory of international politics rests on exposing the underlying gendered assumptions of power and security in realist thought. Feminism hence shares its grounds with other theories of international politics in its critique of the realist paradigm. The notion of security has been reconceptualized to include the elimination of all forms of violence at both international and inter-personal levels. This includes economic empowerment and freedom from all forms of physical and emotional harassment which women have been particularly subjected to. The international feminist movement has brought to the forefront the importance of gender mainstreaming, which is a strategy to evaluate all policies and organizational set-ups in a manner that promotes gender equality at all stages. Feminist scholars have opened several issues in the theory and practice of international politics. They have highlighted how the discipline has been blind to the issues of women from its inception. Feminist scholars have focused on

how ideas of masculinity and femininity have influenced the functioning of international relations. In the process, they have considerably broadened and deepened the scope of the theory and practice of international politics.

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## 10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Your answer should highlight i) Feminism seeks to establish equality between men and women, and ii) Feminism is both a practical movement and a theoretical discourse

### **Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

- 1) Tickner focuses on how realism has focused on masculine features such as objectivity, power, autonomy, national interest, lack of morality to understand international politics

### **Check Your Progress Exercise 3**

- 1) Your answer should highlight the fact that Feminists have moved beyond state security to include individual security

### **Check Your Progress Exercise 4**

- 1) Here Cynthia is referring to i) Women have been relegated to secondary roles in the practice of international politics, and ii) They have not yet been given decision making roles especially in issues of high politics

