

# Women invisible in global relations

by Sandra Whitworth

**F**eminists share a conviction that international relations are as much about population control policies as they are about nuclear deterrence; as much about sex trade workers serving foreign military bases as about the arms trade; as much about foreign domestic servants as about international crisis management; and as much about sex specific international labour legislation as about the foreign policies of so-called "great" powers. In short, feminists claim that international relations are about what affects the lives of women throughout the world, which, because of the primacy given to the "high politics," go largely unnoticed.

The "New World Order" has been ushered in as a re-statement of the centrality and expediency of military violence in resolving international conflicts. As riveting as the Cold War may have been, even superpower posturing did not capture our imagination like the real thing, and Desert Storm gave us precisely that. Real wars are exciting, frightening, and for some, even beautiful. One U.S. fighter pilot described Baghdad on the first night of that aerial bombardment as "lit up like a Christmas tree." We can be impressed by the logic of the strategic game and horrified by the deaths of hundreds of innocent lives, all in one thirty minute news broadcast.

Wars are important. Only in war do we see clearly and explicitly the tools of violence available to the state. Desert Storm illustrated what a 'monopoly of force' really means. Of course, the marginalized, the dissenters, the minorities have long understood this. But the violence used to silence these groups are exercised quietly and covertly. During the Gulf War, by contrast, the overwhelming power of the state showed itself in our living rooms every evening.

It is the power and violence of the Gulf



In more than 80 countries throughout the world, women are force-injected with Depo Provera, an intravenous contraceptive. Depo Provera is given to the most vulnerable women: Third World women, Black women, poor women, disabled women. Like all intrusive birth control methods, it allows men to maintain sexual power over women, assumes women's responsibility for birth control and assumes women's availability for sexual intercourse. Depo Provera makes it difficult for women to say 'no.' Image by Catherine O'Neil from Depo Provera: From stories to struggles, published by Women's Health Interaction, 58 Arthur Street, Ottawa K1R 7B9

War that has created this "new" world order. The ability of international organizations to promote peace, if not altogether discredited, has been severely disabled. The new world order arrives with words like precision bombing, Patriot missiles, collateral damage, offensive military capability and pre-emptive strike. It comes with a whole ensemble of expert analysts who use these words with ease, as they do the entire world view associated with them, that of realism or *realpolitik*.

The language and form of analysis associated with realism suits the drama of war well. Its simple precepts—that states seek

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to enhance their power in the anarchic international system—permit us to develop expectations about how state leaders will and should act in situations of conflict. Realists never doubted that the UN was unable to promote peace and cooperation in any lasting sense; the anarchic nature of the system precluded that. And while realists may disagree amongst themselves about different phases of the conflict, basic principles of realism were confirmed by the events of August 2nd to February 27th—for realism is never more salient or more compelling than during war.

All of the ways in which feminist concerns have been rendered invisible in the past thus remain unchallenged. The Gulf War, and the analyses made of it, re-tell a familiar story: the most important elements of international relations revolve around the activities of states, diplomats and generals. By this view, international relations are gender neutral. It is this attitude which may make feminist struggle even *more* problematic in the new world order. Realists never claimed to intentionally promote the sexism which is inherent in their analysis. Rather, we are told, they seek to describe the world "as it really is." It is not the categories of realism that are sexist, but the world they seek to describe. It is not that relations of domination between women and men do not exist, but that they do not exist in relations between states. The new world order embodies these myths as much as the old, and having been created

out of the ultimate confirmation of realist precepts, these myths will be all the more difficult to shake.

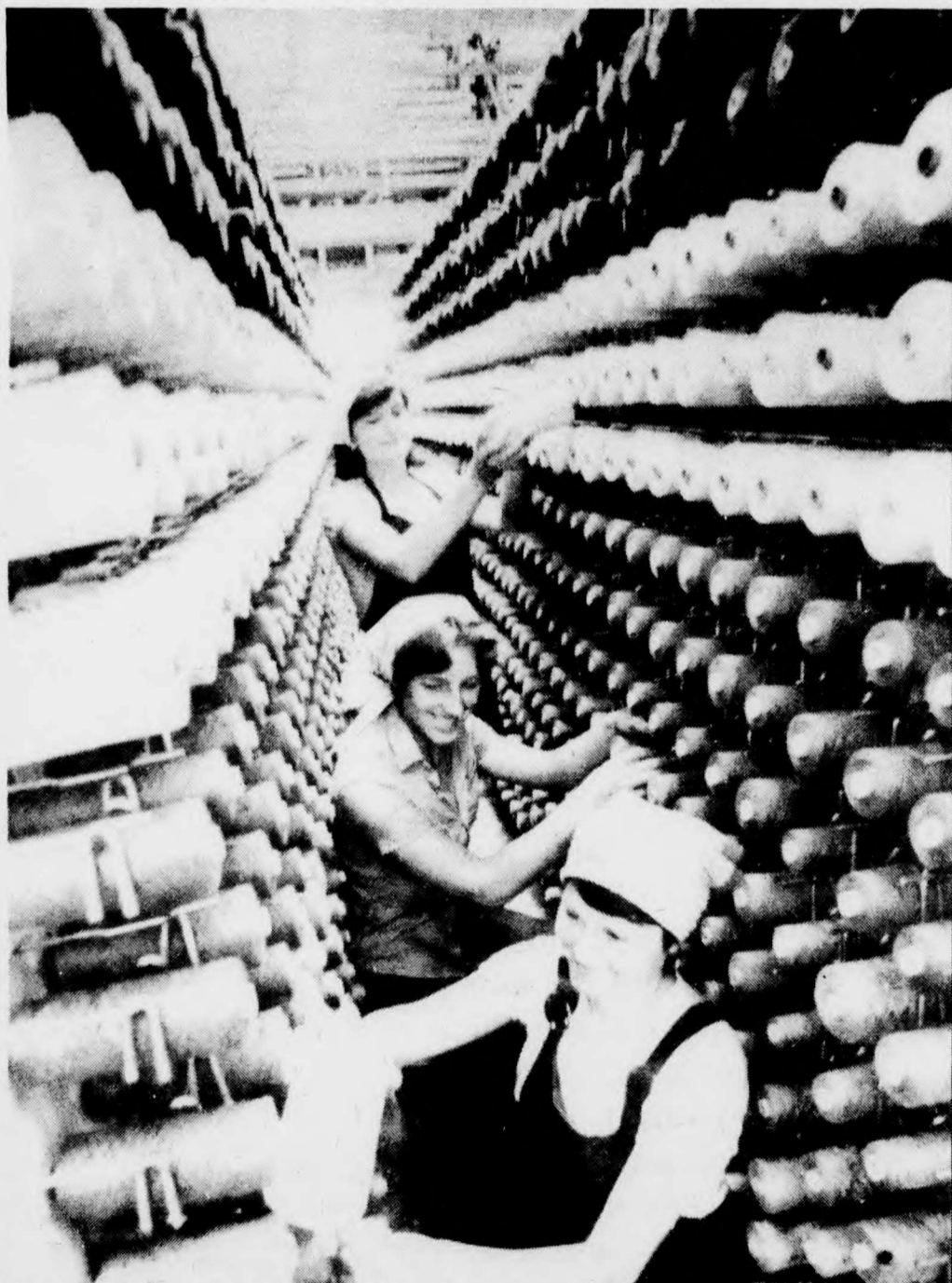
This setback affects all of us. The feminist project is not simply to add our questions to international relations discourse, but by doing so to transform its agenda. The realist disposition toward international relations always justifies the resort to force witnessed in the Gulf War and other conflicts like it. By this view, states will, and must, seek to preserve themselves in the anarchy of international relations. As such, international relations will always be prone to the violence from which our "new" world order has been created. For realists, one need only look at the world as it "really is" to acknowledge the accuracy, and perhaps tragedy, of these claims.

But as feminists argue, nothing is natural—everything has been created and must be maintained. This is as true of the vision of international relations handed to us by realists as it is of relations of inequality between women and men. Only when we understand that international relations is about much more than states, power and

anarchy might we break out of this vicious circle. Only when legitimacy is accorded to the issues raised by feminists and other critics, may the resort to force finally become illegitimate.

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Women in cotton factory in Tiraspol, Moldavia. Photo courtesy Novosti Press Agency/Canadian Woman Studies

For an excellent and very readable feminist analysis of international relations, see Cynthia Enloe, **Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics**, (London: Pandora Press, 1989). It should be obvious that the issues raised here are as much concerned with racism as they are sexism. Indeed feminists can claim no monopoly in our attempts to expand the IR agenda, and rather are part of a larger project including those active in anti-racist struggles as well as all groups critical to the mainstream of international relations.