



Research Note

Governance and Women's Claims-Making What Do Feminists Want and How Do They Get It?

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A paper prepared for the UNRISD project When and Why Do States Respond to Women's Claims?
Understanding Gender-Egalitarian Policy Change

What are the political circumstances under which women's rights advocates effectively pursue policy agendas on issues that challenge patriarchal interests—issues like violence against women, reproductive autonomy, and women's labor and property rights?

Winning policy contests from the margins

The question can be answered simply: states respond to women's claims when women win policy contests against their opponents. But women's policy victories are not a matter of the mathematics of tallying the political power of the social and political forces that resist gender-equality against the tactics and constituency-building of gender-equality activists. The fate of women's claims-making is also shaped by governance institutions that influence the autonomy and size of women's organizations, the chances that women will win representative political office, the extent of social programmes to alleviate their domestic work burdens, the extent of economic programmes to ensure their access to income and property, and the extent to which they will be protected from gender-based violence at home and in public. Such conditions can change the strikingly weak hand women's groups are dealt in terms of resources and opportunities for political contestation.

Tactics and circumstances producing policy gains

The once solid assumption that effective gender equality policy depends upon increases in women's representation in public office has been undermined by cases where women hold a majority of seats in representative office and yet have not effected a marked feminist shift in public policy. Cross-national research suggests that large and autonomous women's movements are crucial in driving policy changes—particularly in areas that challenge traditional patriarchal groups. However, autonomous women's movements in countries with similar governance systems and levels of wealth, or even with cultural commonalities, achieve substantially different outcomes in their struggles over gender equality issues.

This paper finds there is no single governance system that delivers consistently high-quality gender-equality policy making, or that consistently enables women's associations to work autonomously and advance claims effectively. The paper focuses specifically on women's claims that advance a feminist agenda of gender equality, and identifies aspects of governance systems, as well as tactical decisions, alliances with other social movements and champions in public office, that must be considered in explaining the circumstances for effective claims-making.

State-society relationships and state capacities

In terms of governance systems, the paper examines the impact on successful claims-making of, first, the way state-society relationships are managed; and second, the way policies are framed and implemented. Prospects for women's claims-making will be shaped by institutions for channeling citizen preferences to decision makers (elections, corporatist negotiations, media, patronage channels), and are affected by the composition of the governing elite, and in some places, by the existence and effectiveness of an institutionalized advocacy or oversight body such as a gender commission or women's rights office. The success of claims-making also depends on the organization and technical capacity of the public administration (in particular its capacity to implement what are sometimes socially unpopular gender equality policies), and the degree of decentralization in policy implementation.

Tactical framing of issues

In terms of feminist tactics, the paper examines how women's rights issues are framed, the value of alliances with other organizations, the role of regional and international solidarities, the nature of oppositional groups, and the cultural environment.

While it is appealing to think that there might be a consistent and “winning” governance formula that enables effective claims-making, no such formula emerges. However, at a minimum, and as with any other subaltern social group, women's movements benefit from:

- opportunities for public debate that allow women to build constituencies;
- the capacity to engage in political competition to have their interests represented; and
- high-capacity public institutions that can enforce what may be “unpopular” policies, such as the prevention of child marriage, the promotion of women's access to property, recognition of reproductive rights, and the prevention and prosecution of domestic violence.

Democracy is crucial for the sustainability of policy gains

Democratic institutions matter for the longer term sustainability of the changes prompted by women's claims, not only because democracies are more likely to enable women's movements to be autonomous, but because women can make their claims the subject of political competition, build popular support for their policy ambitions, and encourage politicians to appeal to voters interested in gender equality. However, women's feminist claims and demands often project not just unpopular, but countercultural visions of a just society. The most enduring obstacle to women's claims-making is traditional patriarchal elites. Since women's organizations are the engine of efforts to hold states accountable for promoting women's rights, financial support for their organizational development, and civil and political freedoms, are crucial to ensuring effective claims-making.

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