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**Rethinking Gender Politics in a Liberal Age:
Institutions, Constituencies and Equality in
Comparative Perspective**

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August 2009

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE REPRESENTATION GAP

The persistent, and in some cases growing, gap between indicators of women's political empowerment and those of women's social and economic development must surely be one of the most significant development puzzles of our time. Women's inclusion in the state is a widely noted outcome of political liberalization, evident in two significant developments. In the bureaucratic arena, the creation of gender machineries from the late 1970s fostered the idea of women as a constituency for policy-makers to consider. More recently, women's political access to parliaments around the world has been facilitated by the use of deliberate strategies ranging from formal and informal quotas to reserved seats.

Yet, while women have gained significant access to state bureaucracies and legislatures, particularly in developing countries, access and inclusion do not appear to have delivered the kinds of equality outcomes that many would like to see. Feminist scholarship remains confounded by the question of how and when claims for gender equality are facilitated and or constrained by engagement with the state. Put another way, why has the apparent redistribution of power not resulted in a redistribution of goods? This is not to suggest that no gains have been made through the strategies of engagement thus far; political empowerment and formal equality is not an insignificant achievement by any means. Rather, it is the catalytic effect of political empowerment that appears to be missing - that is, the translation of institutional access to political voice, and from political voice to policy outcomes.

This paper makes a start at addressing this conundrum by focusing on the following three key questions:

- To what extent, and under what conditions, have women in highly unequal societies managed to overcome differences of race, class and geographic location to create effective constituencies for pushing through welfare measures and other gender-sensitive policies that meet the needs of low-income women?
- What constellation of political actors (political parties, states, civil society and social/women's movements) and forces have been most effective in representing and aggregating women's diverse interests and bringing them into the policy arena?
- What are the different constraints across contexts impeding cross-class/race coalitions of women and the translation of their common gender interests into policies?

The paper aims to extend and deepen the debate on the relationship between political access and descriptive representation and equality-enhancing social and public policy. There is a plethora of countries that might be considered and compared, and the paper draws on a wide range of literature from advanced democracies and new democracies. However, I am most interested to consider how powerful constituencies of women might emerge in highly unequal societies. I examine the literature first in a broad comparative manner to identify patterns in the relationships between women and the state. In section 2 of the paper, I lay out the key hypotheses that are offered to explain women's relationship to political power and the state in different parts of the world. I argue that we need to look beyond a narrowly focused analysis of women in politics, and address three aspects of contemporary institutional and political crisis that may offer greater analytical purchase on the impasse in feminist politics. I categorise these broadly as a) the crisis of representation in liberal democracies; b) the impact

of neo-liberal policy orthodoxies on social reproduction and c) the crisis of institutional capacity in developing countries.

Then, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between women's organising and mobilizing, women's representation and policy outcomes, I focus on the relationship between equality activism and the broader political system within which this activism is located. Here I want to expand the debate beyond the politics of women's organizations to consider the ways in which electoral and party systems shape the range of possibilities for the use of integrationist strategies. I argue that these institutions set the parameters within which the representation of women is advanced and determine the extent to which there can be a close relationship between political position and policy effect. In cases where parties are strongly institutionalized and well-entrenched in the population, they are the pre-eminent vehicles for policy influence. However, in situations where they are weakly developed and have not established their legitimacy, other formal institutions such as traditional authorities or informal patriarchal social norms may limit their effectiveness. In such instances, pursuing overwhelmingly state-centric strategies to advance equality may be limited.

I examine two countries in some detail to elaborate my arguments: India and South Africa. Both are postcolonial democracies (India of course being a much older democracy than South Africa), both are characterized by high levels of inequality and strong local traditional power bases, and both have used quotas in different ways over more than one election to bring women into the public political arena. In the case of India, quotas have been used in local councils, while in South Africa they initially were used at the national level and later at the local level. At local level, quotas have been relatively ineffective in South Africa and more effective in India, suggesting that the arena of representation may be a crucial variable in understanding policy effectiveness. Although both countries have strong women's movements rooted in a nationalist tradition, the kinds of demands made on the state have been more systematically focused on specific policy concerns in India (e.g. water, access to economic resources) than in South Africa where the leadership of the women's movement has been relatively less oppositional to the state since 1994.

These commonalities and differences may offer a sharper focus on the questions of when and how poor women may use political access and power to redirect public resources.

2. WOMEN, POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND POLICY INFLUENCE: SOME KEY HYPOTHESES

Modernisation and Gender Equality

The modernization hypothesis is the most dominant explanation for women's access to political power and decision-making. However, this hypothesis manifests itself a variety of ways that one could classify as being on a continuum from 'strong' to 'weak'.

In its strongest form, proponents of modernization assume that economic growth and affluence lead to the expansion of opportunities for women; concomitantly, higher levels of education and participation in the paid labour force erode inequalities in access to political office (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). As women gain representation and voice, they put forward new claims on the state that lead to shifts in the allocation of public resources. Secularisation increasingly displaces religious arguments in favour of gender inequality,

gradually building a new and more egalitarian culture that buttresses women's gains in the public sphere with greater power in the private sphere. If and when gaps in representation persist, whether in terms of numbers of women in elected office, or particular allocations of public budgets to women, the strong modernization hypothesis posits two explanatory factors. Women may choose not to run for political office, preferring other activities to politics. And budgets may not take account of women's specific needs because it may not be evident that gender is a key variable in access to resources. In this view, then, gender equality is directly linked to the level of economic development.

There are several critiques of these arguments. It has been pointed out that economic wealth is not correlated to increases in women's political access in many countries, most notably in the Middle East (Moghadam, 2005). Furthermore, even advanced democracies, which did experience the favourably combined conditions of economic growth, expansion of literacy, increase in women's labour force participation and liberal democracy, did not see a correspondingly significant increase in women's representation or automatic attention to the relationship between private and public inequalities (UNRISD, 2005).

A more modified version of the modernization hypothesis, evident in archetypal form in the Scandinavian social democracies, draws attention to the importance of state intervention to support changes in the market, arguing that gender equality could not be left to the market. Paid labour and unpaid labour are understood as inextricable, and the state has a particular responsibility to create the conditions for women to enter and stay in the paid labour force. In these democracies, women's movements have embarked on a deliberate strategy to push political parties to *both* increase representation of women *and* address women's gendered interests in policymaking. Two important factors in the success of this approach were a) the mobilization of women as an electoral constituency and b) the careful crafting of alliances with trade unions and political parties. The positive effects of the strategy are significant and to a considerable extent the Scandinavian countries have become the benchmark model of the link between women's increased representation and the redirection of public spending to meet the needs of poor and working class women. In particular, the impact of increasing women's representation on introducing 'private' concerns into the public domain of decision-making is notable in all social democracies. The enactment of care policies that socialized a number of the gender-specific burdens of women in households is most explicit in Sweden, but also evident elsewhere. For example, a study of women members of the Australian Senate between 1987 and 1999 found that 'women members were five times as likely as their male colleagues to raise issues such as domestic violence and paid parental/ maternity leave' (Sawer, 2002, p.9). Early analyses of the phenomenon suggested that the crucial variable was the presence of a 'critical mass' of women (Dahlerup, 1988).

This raises the question of whether the particular kinds of alliances and modes of mobilization that facilitated such changes can be replicated in contemporary new democracies. The central difficulties with replicating the relationship demonstrated in the model of political representation leading to equality-enhancing policy outcomes appear to be the following. Firstly, there is a high level of path dependency in this model (that is, a particular historical combination of economic growth and political will that is hard to replicate). The gains that women made in social democracies, particularly in the Nordic countries, appear to have been made in relatively self-contained economies in which there is a virtuous circle between progressive political mobilisation and state policies: that is, with the right kinds of ideologies and strategies in place, political mobilisation can create social consensus with regard to shifts in public spending. Secondly, a crucial factor in the model is

the importance of the alliance between left political parties and feminists, rather than the influence of women per se. Notably, as Marian Sawer (2002, p.6) points out, the correlation between representation and pro poor women policies does not hold when a predominant number of the women politicians are from conservative parties. In the Australian research cited above, for example, there were no notable shifts in spending in the 1990s when the Coalition government held power. A crucial variable must therefore be the existence of progressive pro-equality political parties. Finally, even countries like Sweden adopted quotas eventually to 'guarantee' women's representation. This suggests that political culture arguments are limited (i.e. political cultures that support equality are shallow and may not be sustained).

A rather different version of modernization through the state is to be found in state socialism, where formal gender equality was to a considerable extent imposed from above by the party. In those countries, it was assumed that women's participation in the labour force, together with socialized care for young children, was sufficient to produce equality. However, the persistence of patriarchal assumptions about the division of labour within households was ignored, and gendered hierarchies in wages persisted. The dominance of a single party and the repression of oppositional civil society constrained the emergence of women as a political constituency. Indeed, the equality espoused by feminism came to be associated with the excessive intrusions of the socialist state into the private sphere, making it even more difficult for women to develop strong constituencies to defend the benefits of the old state socialist model in the post-communist, liberal era.

Moving to the weaker side of the spectrum, we find a variant of the modernization hypothesis that emphasizes the role of anti-colonial nationalism in advancing gender equality. Women's movements allied their cause for equality to nationalist, anti-colonial movements and won support for the idea of gender equality through appeal to the modernist, 'forward' (western) looking strategies of nationalizing elites (Yuval Davis, 1997; Jayawardena, 1989). Most anti-colonial nationalist projects also entailed processes of state-building, with formal gender equality inscribed as a corollary. Most analyses of this approach agree that the nationalist route was not highly successful, for a number of reasons. Firstly, to large extent formal rights remained just that: formal rights that existed on paper but not in the daily experiences of women. While post-independence governments in Africa and Asia did initially focus on the provision of goods and services to address the needs of their populations, there was almost no emphasis on the gendered nature of need. Indeed, to a considerable extent the idea that communities (read women) would continue to provide privately for many of their social reproduction needs was very strongly advanced. Women's access to control over important livelihood resources such as land and crops was not deemed important, and when these demands were articulated they were treated as threats to the political project of cultural recognition. The linking of the relative autonomy of local communities to the notion of cultural self-preservation (for example by retaining communal land ownership with control vested in male elders) constrained the ability of feminists to advance different arguments for the socialization of care.

Secondly, while nationalism did promote modernist notions of gender equality, it nevertheless rested on an ideological framework that was profoundly gendered and unable to accommodate equality in practice (Yuval Davis, 1997). Women's representation in post-independence governments was low; more typically, women activists were reintegrated into the domestic sphere. Development itself was understood as a male project, directed at urban male workers.

Thirdly, the state was poorly developed and had little infrastructural or planning capacity to meet the needs of poor people in general. Many postcolonial states in Africa and Asia degenerated into authoritarian one-party states. The 'activist' postcolonial nationalist governments in Africa, although initially committed to redistribution, did not expand the institutions established by colonialism (executive, civil service, police and army) in ways that consolidated democracy or even their long-term ability to sustain a developmental focus. In particular, institutions that would constrain executive power such as multiparty elections, judicial independence and, outside the state, institutions that might expand the legitimacy of the state and its capacity to represent diverse interests (such as a vibrant civil society) were either severely restricted or actively repressed. By contrast, those institutions that were seen as either enhancing the capacity of elites to manage or to remain in power, such as the military, expanded rapidly. Importantly, however, bureaucratic expansion was not tied to efficiency or to citizen responsiveness and for the most part the political system continues to operate in ways that do not depend on electoral responsiveness. As a result, in sub-Saharan Africa for example, many groups in society disengaged from making demands on the state. Citizens bypassed the state as the locus of their demands, meeting their needs through a combination of informal mechanisms and developing allegiances to local political actors rather than the state *per se*. To the extent that the women did find spaces in the state, this was frequently through their association with powerful male leaders (Mama, 1997). They were seen as elitist and did not build grassroots movements behind gender equality so that existing class bifurcations among women were exacerbated. These developments have a direct impact on the extent to which new strategies for gender equality can be pursued.

The challenges of political and economic liberalization

All variants of the modernization hypothesis have been challenged by late twentieth century developments in capitalism, which have resulted in contradictory processes of liberalization. Political liberalization has opened spaces in the state, enabling women's participation at the highest levels of political decision-making. However, inclusion has ambivalent aspects, being both seductive in its promise of power and also implicating women in the operations of power; institutions trail their historical legacies of hierarchy and authority and are not easily permeable to new modes of operation. This is not to suggest that institutions cannot be changed, of course. Rather, as Georgina Waylen notes, the outcomes may be unpredictable. 'Often, institutional layering – new institutions added in to existing ones...- or institutional conversion, for example if new groups are incorporated, takes place' (Waylen, 2009: 247). All too often women representatives find the equality agenda appropriated and mutated into mechanisms of governance and regulation, losing the ambition of transformation of gendered relations of power. Thus, for example, feminist ambitions to transform decision-making institutions through the strategy of gender mainstreaming were thwarted by the reduction of this approach to technical checklists (Manicom, 2001). In some cases, inclusion *masks* relations of power; there is a superficial redistribution of places in the state but the underlying inequalities of power remain intact. In many respects, the institutionalization of feminist politics has been inimical to project of democratization. It has limited the notion of democracy to inclusion into existing institutions, and marginalised more radical demands for reconfiguring the ways in which power is organized. The democratization of the spaces of power (political parties, legislatures, the civil service) has been difficult to achieve, at best, and neglected at worst. At best, then, pursuing strategies of inclusion into formal politics has produced contradictory outcomes for feminists.

Changes in the environment of policymaking also impact directly on poor people's movements. The locus of economic decision-making in many parts of the world has shifted away from nation-state level and stifled 'sovereignty' and democratic decision-making as far as economic policy-making is concerned, in what Thandika Mkandawire calls 'choiceless democracies' (Mkandawire, 1999). In highly indebted countries, policies may be shaped more directly by global prescriptions and lender conditionalities than by contestation between different constituencies of citizens and the state. The emphasis on cost-recovery through user fees has fuelled, at least in Africa, a crisis of social reproduction where households are unable to provide core needs and where the state has retreated from earlier post-independence commitments to drive development. Women's responsibilities for social reproduction are increasing as social institutions are overburdened by the failures of states to provide the basic infrastructure for care (health, welfare, education). The ideology that the provision of care should be only, or primarily, located in the family has not change the skewed distribution of the costs of and responsibilities for social reproduction (Razavi and Hassim, 2006). The social and political effects of state weakness are significant for women, as citizens continue to rely on traditional networks of reciprocity outside of the formal political sphere. In the absence of strong collective organizations of women that are able to articulate women's gender interests, dependence on those networks may undermine struggles for equality.

Despite the seeming dominance of liberal political models, several commentators point to a crisis of representation that is not gender-specific: that is, a distrust of political parties, weak civil society activism and relatively low membership in trade unions (Harriss, 2002). In many developing countries, political parties have done little to inspire faith in poor people, being accused of corruption and appropriation of public resources. In Africa, particularly, few political parties have successfully transformed themselves from nationalist movements into democratic vehicles of representation (Salih, 2005). Although women's political access has increased as a result of quotas, the emphasis on formal inclusion has led to a weakening of oppositional women's/ feminist movements, so the capacities for holding representatives accountable – the capacities for substantive equality - are weak. Where the political demands of gender equality were posed in earlier periods as a central challenge to the relations of power, in the late twentieth century processes of democratization, the gender-equality agenda has been co-opted and turned into a technical project while more thorough-going feminist demands for transformation of power relations have been marginalized.

Indeed, in many new democracies, women's organizations have become 'development partners' and have transmuted from being political movements to acting as NGOs. This role should not be downplayed, of course. Women's NGOs have played a vital role in ensuring

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