

# Gender, Politics and the State

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In August 2017, a conference of Research Committee 7 (RC07) on “Women and Politics in the Global South” of the International Political Science Association was held at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study in South Africa. The theme of the conference was “Gender, Politics and the State,” and its aim was to explore the gendered nature of the state and policy-making in the global South, as well as women’s engagement with the state.

In this special issue of *Politeia* on “Gender, Politics and the State” we publish some of the papers that locate the state in the global South and that grapple with issues of “state feminism,” substantive representation, policy-making, migration and the state’s regulation of multiculturalism through the spaces it creates for the expression of culture, tradition and religion.

In *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, Catharine MacKinnon famously stated “[F]eminism has no theory of the state.” That was in 1989. Since then, feminism has come a long way in theorising and understanding the state, its being an actor, its governmentalities and how it shapes citizenship. There are similarities but also vast differences between the state in the global North and the global South, and in the 21st century the boundedness and boundary-making of the state are significantly influenced by neo-liberal policies and globalisation, which creates the paradox of opening borders to let some in, and at the same time monitoring borders more closely to keep some out so as to deal with ever-increasing migration.

The state is deeply gendered in its institutions, its policies and in the way it governs. How women’s and men’s interests are incorporated into political agendas and represented differs significantly. The spaces that exist in the state for women’s representation or policy engagement vary in terms of country contexts and also political systems. With greater globalisation and the associated institutionalisation of multi-level governance frameworks in the global North, the state has reshaped, relocated and rearticulated policy responses. Here the national level is influenced by the supranational



or the subnational level (Kantola and Outshoorn 2007, 8). Both the state and feminism have changed in significant ways over the last decade or two due to greater globalisation, regionalisation, welfare-state restructuring, privatisation and multi-level governance (in the global North). Gender-equality policies, gender mainstreaming, market feminism and gender institutionalisation (Kantola and Squires 2012) demand that we rethink the state (Kantola and Outshoorn 2007, 1).

In the global South, globalisation has led to a greater engagement with neo-liberal capitalist policies, monetary organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and structural adjustment programmes that do not necessarily benefit citizens, but contribute to greater inequality by enlarging the gap between rich and poor.

## **What is the State?**

Many feminists are quite sceptical/suspicious of the state, because they view it as an instrument of patriarchal domination of women providing limited opportunities for women to engage with policy-making or to have the power to co-opt whatever gender agenda is being set. Yet, the state is not a homogeneous entity, nor does it always function in a hegemonic way, thus creating spaces for engagement.

Rai (1996a, 5) calls the state a “shorthand” to describe a network of power relations that exist in cooperation but also in tension. These power relations are situated in a grid that includes economic, political, legal and cultural forms interacting with and acting on each other. As she rightly points out, Western feminist state theory has largely ignored (and is still ignoring) the experience of women in developing countries and post-colonial societies. These theories ignore processes of state and class formation leading to relations of exploitation operating in both economic and socio-political arenas, often ignoring the nexus between women’s lived experience and women’s struggles across many domains (political, social and economic). The pervasive universalising language of Western theory has become more and more challenged lately because of the work of post-colonial scholars.

For Marxist feminists the state is, in line with Marxist theorisation, “the oppressive instrument of the ruling class” (Rai 1996a, 6), and when adding the women question, as Marxist feminists did, the state becomes the mediator between the two different but complementary systems of patriarchy and capitalism.

Post-structuralists on the other hand theorise the state not as all-encompassing, but as uneven relations of power and as having openings through which it can be engaged, but where the expression of power can be erratic and disconnected. Power in post-structuralist thinking becomes constituted through discourses in the state that also help to constitute gender inequalities. From a gender perspective, discourses, institutions and practices of the state are bound up with prerogatives of masculinity in patriarchal societies, which has implications for feminist politics (Rai 1996a, 7).

The state can therefore be viewed as a regulating, constraining, structuring network of power with the aim of producing regulated, subordinated and disciplined gendered subjects (Rai 1996a, 7).

## **The Post-Colonial State**

The legacy of colonialism was material, cultural and political (Rai 1996a, 8). Colonial interventions altered cultural practices, traditional systems and economic production through reinterpreting and reinventing social and political histories and distorting lived realities of colonial people's sexualities, gendered interactions and power relations.

In nationalist freedom struggles against colonialism, women's bodies became the symbols of national reproduction and often the terrain on which struggles played themselves out violently. Women's movements that developed during the time of decolonisation very often promoted the goals of modernising nationalist elites (Rai 1996a, 10), as can still be seen in the actions of women's party auxiliaries, such as parties' women's leagues in Africa.

We have to distinguish between weak and strong states: strong states have the capacity to implement political decisions and policy and have autonomy from institutions and civil society organisations, whereas weak states do not have this capacity and autonomy, and citizens resist public controls and their implementation (Rai 1996a, 13). Illiberal and weak states of developing countries cannot provide social security safety nets for their citizens, have high levels of corruption and state violence (Rai 1996a, 17) as well as gender-based violence. These conditions often promote migration to other countries.

However, the views put forward above still use Western theory to explain the post-colonial state, and, as post-colonial feminists have pointed out, post-colonialism is also about knowledge production from the vantage point of the oppressed, in other words it is also an epistemological project that will recognise the partial and situated quality of knowledge claims (McEwan 2001, 105). Go (2016, 100), for example, argues that there are important differences in the ways the global South and the global North understand the state and related concepts that are used to understand it. For example, distinctions among civil society, the state and the economy are much more tenuous in the South than in the North. For our purposes, the state and the ways the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality and other markers of identity and the legacies of colonial impositions determine state/society relations therefore have to be understood from the vantage point of the global South.

Post-colonial states and civil societies are complex terrains and not completely independent of each other—the state is embedded in civil society, and phenomena such as ethnic politics or religious expressions are not independent of the state but reinforce dangerous alliances (Rai 1996b, 35). None of this may benefit women, so that they are

often positioned with a choice of engagement or non-engagement with the state. In some cases, but not in others, the state is marginal in some women's lives (Rai 1996b, 36).

## **State Feminism/Femocracy**

Women's entry into the state has provided us with a certain vocabulary such as state feminism, femocrats and femocracy. State feminism is understood as the influence that women who are feminists can exercise once they enter the state, or, as Kantola and Outshoorn (2007, 2) argue, it is simply the advocacy of the demands of women's movements inside the state. But this can vary across contexts. The Nordic countries are the most successful in making feminist gains through the state. In other countries, state feminism may have the pejorative meaning of referring to the situation where policies are directed by women but imposed from above by the state. The most general meaning refers to efforts by women's policy machineries (or gender machineries) to pursue women-friendly policies through the state, in other words institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women. Structures dedicated to legislative oversight and monitoring, as well as the formation and implementation of policy relating to women's interests, advance state feminism.

Some of the main criticisms against policy machineries that are not explicitly feminist are that they become co-opted by the state and then contribute to the impression that gender equality goals are pursued while in reality state feminism has been hijacked, or the state may even be pursuing anti-feminist ends (Kantola and Outshoorn 2007, 18).

The incorporation of policy machineries into the state does not mean that the state is feminist, but that there are openings in the state that allow for feminist influence. Women who are feminists in the state are called femocrats. This should not be confused with femocracy as used in the African context where it refers to the political influence of African first ladies due to their proximity to power as is explained in the article of Van Wyk, Neyere, and Muresan. Mechanisms that enhance women's representation in the state, such as quotas, are important to create state feminism. The success of state structures or agencies often depends on their relationship with women's organisations and/or women's movements in civil society. The research by Stetson and Mazur (1995) in the global North has shown that state capacity (the extent to which policy machineries influence feminist policy) and state-society relations (the extent to which policy machineries develop opportunities for society-based actors to access the policy process) to a large extent determine the success of state feminism. Where femocrats represent women's demands as articulated through women's movements, greater policy successes have been documented.

## **Gender Mainstreaming**

Another way of accessing the state was made possible through the adoption of gender mainstreaming policies. These policies demand the inclusion of gender concerns in

legislation and policy, as well as gender budgeting to make sure that policy implementation does not fail. Research in the global North has shown that gender mainstreaming has the potential to shift gender concerns from the margins to the mainstream in ways that empower women. In the global South, success has been uneven and has very often led to technocratic processes that pay lip service to gender equality rhetoric while at the same time managing to depoliticise feminist activism.

## **Multiculturalism**

To the extent that post-colonial societies have developed into multicultural societies (it is contested whether this concept applies at all, given its liberal origins) there has always been a tension between the state and multicultural regulation and women's rights. Key to the recognition of culture and tradition is controlling women's sexuality because women become the symbols and boundary markers of the purity and honour of the nation. The focus is often on women's bodies, sartorial styles of religious expression and adherence to cultural practices (Gouws and Stasiulis 2014, 4–5). The regulation of culture is also often used to racialise and gender the sexual practices of immigrants as a way to cope with immigration.

The articles in this special issue cover different political contexts in the global South—Africa, Latin America and Asia—in order to demonstrate women's engagements with the state, contributing to a developing body of literature on the gendered nature of the state in the global South.

Josephine Ahikire, in her article “The Shifting Gender of the State in Africa: Reflections from Uganda's Experience,” which she also delivered as the keynote address at the conference referred to earlier, poses the challenging question about what the “gender of the state” is. Concerning herself with women's political representation, she asks what shifts have occurred with women's entry into legislatures and broader government structures. Her outlook is pessimistic because of the waning optimism about women's ability to engage broader policy processes once there. They seem to experience decreasing levels of autonomy, autonomy that could have led to substantive gender equality. As she rightly argues, shifting the gender of the state cannot be reduced to women representatives alone—we need to understand how men's privilege is institutionalised in the public sphere and how policy-making is a gendered process that has at its core distributive struggles that go wider than the mere recognition of women as political actors.

Ahikire is critical of the idea that we should go “beyond the numbers.” As she argues, the debate about “beyond numbers” reduces the potency of women as political actors to the level of subjects to be evaluated according to masculine norms, which does not contribute to our understanding of the state. She furthermore contends that women's entry into the state opens two possibilities: (1) greater representation, which opens increased possibilities of policy change and (2) the creation of fluid contexts, which

creates the real possibility of critical reversals. For her, research on state structures or the political will of leaders will not result in a better understanding. What is needed instead is a more ingenious interrogation of political power, which demands comparative research in developing countries. She also calls for the rebirth of feminism on the continent of Africa to change the approach to gender and the state through a new kind of politics.

Van Wyk, Neyere, and Muresan, in “African First Ladies, Politics and the State,” look at the power that African first ladies have due to their proximity to and membership of the inner circle of the executives in their countries. This phenomenon of first ladies’ political influence has been called femocracy (which is not to be confused with state feminism or the femocrat phenomenon). Femocracy is an anti-democratic female power structure that claims to advance the position of ordinary women but fails to do so because power is derived from the women’s marriages to powerful men. The authors argue that femocracy does not result in feminists working in the state—it achieves quite the opposite.

The article shows that the first ladies forming part of the case study have not raised the profile of women or improved women’s lives in their respective countries. This perpetuation of the so-called First Lady Syndrome reinforces the notion that a woman’s power and influence is acceptable only when it comes from her being married to a powerful man.

In “The Politics of Gender Policies: A Comparative Framework Applied to the Peruvian Case,” Denisse Olivari seeks to advance the study of women’s substantive representation. She argues that it is important to observe the policy environment and political opportunities in the state that are involved in reforms. Selected gender policies in the Peruvian context provide evidence of such dynamics. She proposes a framework for analysing variations in gender policy outcomes in the case of Peru by mapping factors of influence such as the presence of critical actors (e.g. National Congress, non-government organisations, government agencies), features of the policy environment (international legal standards and public opinion) and presidential support.

Olivari argues that gender equality policies are influenced by the usual policy-making elements but also by the doctrines of the Catholic Church and, more recently, evangelical churches. The article critically examines the instrumentality of unexpected allies in the discourse on women’s rights, and it sheds light on the role of church-state relations in framing the policy debate. Unexpectedly, the effect of presidential support in regimes that hinder major policy reforms and rights is much more important than theory has anticipated. In fact, the success of gender policies depends to a great extent on presidential support. The political influence and willingness provide a unique opportunity for policy implementation. This finding in the Peruvian context challenges the common sense of democratic claims that women’s rights are advanced by the presence of a critical mass or an enabling national and international environment.

Coalitions have proven more effective than critical mass in many Latin American countries. She obtains these results through an analysis of policy-making on reproductive rights and intimate feminicide (femicide).

In her article “Going beyond the State: Political Mobilisation of Domestic Workers in Asia—A Critical Appraisal of the Literature,” Sreejita Dey does a critical analysis of literature on the political agency of migrants through their struggles. As she argues, the “contentious politics” approach becomes a useful tool in focusing attention on the interactive activities between the state and the protesting migrants while at the same time allowing an inquiry into the communicative and structural dynamics of the domestic worker movement itself. Dealing with bodies of literature on migration and on the services that women domestic labourers provide, she shows how global power structures perpetuate a cycle of labour exploitation.

Dey attempts to problematise the monolithic conceptualisation of the global South by showing how transnational economic forces are dividing the region through the emergence of gross economic inequalities between the regions. These inequalities in turn become the reason for the inter-regional migration of women in search of better livelihood options, which often ends in social and economic degradation.

Lisa le Roux and Brenda Bartelink, in “Navigating State, Religion and Gender: A Case Study of ABAAD’s Gender Activism in Lebanon,” use the work of ABAAD as a case study to explore the complexities of doing gender activism in a country ruled by both state and religious law. Viewing the complexities of this context through an intersectional lens they explore how religion, gender and state politics intersect and how these intersections are navigated in the gender activism of the Lebanese organisation ABAAD. The work of this non-faith, non-political organisation allows for an exploration of the complexities of doing gender in postcolonial settings where religious law has significant influence, especially in a context where contestations over gender, religion and gender-based violence involve family law, marriage, and gender equality. They attempt to understand how ABAAD’s transformational approaches propose to realise gender equality and prevent gender-based violence through transforming patriarchal structures. These approaches involve the destabilisation of binaries (male/female, religious/secular, perpetrator/victim), as well as engagement between religious leaders and civil society.

Le Roux and Bartelink show that such transformational approaches require active, yet careful, engagement with religion through long-term dialogue and exchange. They point out that interventions involving Syrian refugees tend to focus on responding to the increase in gender-based violence in refugee communities. While such responses are urgent, necessary and important they lead to a shift from transformational approaches to gendered humanitarianisms, which can deter changes in discriminatory structures.

Selina Palm tries to come to grips with gender-based violence on university campuses in “Religion, Gender Norms and Campus Rape Culture: Building Resistance from Below.” This article is timely in the context of the South African #EndRapeCulture campaign, emphasising the need to take campus rape culture seriously in the light of the widening gap between legal promise and lived experiences. It was students’ experiences of high levels of normalised gender-based violence that prompted students to put campus rape culture onto the national and global agenda. The author argues that this type of violence can be understood through the interrogation of the challenge of underlying socio-religious ideologies that construct, drive and legitimate harmful gendered social norms. These ideologies need to be brought to the surface in order to engage strategies to re-imagine these socio-religious beliefs in the lives of those for whom religious faith remains an important identity marker, an area that is under-researched.

Rape culture is underpinned by a complex interplay between the various beliefs and attitudes that encourage male sexual aggression that support and facilitate violence against women. Gendered constructs of masculinity and femininity are embedded in power imbalances that have the potential to generate violence. The article shows how activism can be used to raise consciousness to make state intervention possible.

Ashanti Kunene, in “A Stellenbosch University #FeesMustFall Herstory: Reflections of a So-Called ‘Radical Black Intersectional Feminist’,” grapples with the erasure of the feminist history of student activism in South Africa in 2015 and 2016. This article falls within the praxis of feminist revisionism. Kunene’s reflections on what happened during 2015/2016 to “Fallists” who are women is an attempt to record the perspective of a radical African intersectional feminist that may be erased due to the many male-dominated narratives that have been recorded or written up.

As the author argues, access to power for black students is directly equivalent to the ability to manoeuvre and function within whiteness, within white spaces, within the system without seeming too foreign. The better you are able to do this, the more “power” you have. Kunene argues that being black in a white world speaks to the “double consciousness” of Du Bois. Her stance is radical but gives us broader insight into power relations in institutional cultures that African students experience as alienating. Implicit in her writing is a critique of the state’s inability to ensure institutional transformation at historically white universities in South Africa.

The articles included in this special issue highlight the differences between the global South and the global North and show the variation among regions of the global South and experiences with the state. In this regard they contribute to building feminist scholarship from the South.



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