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Gendering Comparative Politics: Achievements and Challenges

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Approximately one-fifth, or 21%, of the members of the American Political Science Association identify themselves as comparativists, according to data in 2004. Among those affiliated with the APSA Women and Politics Research Section, the corresponding figure is nearly one-third, or 31% (Tripp 2010, 192). While not a majority, these patterns suggest that

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gender and politics scholars have been attracted in greater proportions to this particular subfield. The reasons for this, Karen Beckwith (2010) has noted, are linked to features of comparative politics particularly conducive to work on gender: an interest in answering "real world" questions, a lack of a hegemonic research agenda making the subfield more open to new topics, an emphasis on methodological pluralism valuing the contributions of qualitative and case study analysis, and a stress on fieldwork as an important vehicle for data collection.

Nonetheless, a recent symposium speaks to the limits of gender research in comparative politics, arguing that its findings have not been fully integrated into the broader literature.[1] In part, some argue, this is due to a tendency to pitch work in relation to debates on gender rather than comparative politics. Feminist research, in turn, has been marginalized within the subfield due to perceptions among many comparativists that this literature engages separate concerns, not relevant to "mainstream" debates (Caraway 2010; Schwindt-Bayer 2010). Yet applying a gender lens *does* have important stakes for the questions that are asked, how concepts are defined, and which actors are deemed central to explaining a particular phenomenon (Goertz and Mazur 2008; Tripp 2006). This essay reviews these discussions and explores how work on gender contributes to knowledge about a range of political dynamics. It also identifies new challenges in moving toward a new comparative politics of gender, related to analyzing the gendered, comparative, and political dimensions of various topics.

Gender Research and Comparative Politics

Scholars of gender and comparative politics recognize the importance of "engendering" the subfield, "tak[ing] seriously the extent to which gender is a major and primary constitutive element of political power" (Beckwith 2010, 160). Beyond this commitment, research in this vein addresses a large variety of topics, incorporating gender into the analysis as independent and/or dependent variables (Caraway 2010), albeit defining "gender" in a number of ways (Beckwith 2005). Seeking to give greater unity to this approach, recent contributions have issued calls for a new "comparative politics of gender," arguing for a shift in focus from "women" to "gender," as well as renewed efforts to engage the non-gender literature. Teri Caraway (2010), among others, observes that an

1. See Symposium on "A Comparative Politics of Gender," *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (1): 159–240.

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emphasis on gender has the beneficial effect of opening up a wider array of research topics (cf. Krook 2010; Lovenduski 1998).

Joining Caraway's appeals for increased dialogue with the mainstream, Leslie Schwindt-Bayer (2010) advocates that gender researchers pursue two strategies. First, they should seek to better situate findings from a single country or region within the context of global developments. Second, they should do more to emphasize how gender dynamics cut across other research areas. In other words, scholars of gender should address more explicitly the "added-value" of their research, drawing on non-gender theories and findings, and presenting new theories and showing how these illuminate broader political processes (cf. Beckwith 2001; Krook and Mackay 2011). Yet, as Aili Mari Tripp (2010) rightly cautions, such engagements may also come at the risk of abandoning, or toning down, some of the most innovative features of feminist research, causing work to become less interdisciplinary, problem driven, and relevant to real world concerns in the quest to gain greater legitimacy in political science. Balancing these concerns will thus constitute an ongoing debate among those seeking to gender the study of comparative politics.

Comparative Politics from a Gender Perspective

Many topics in comparative politics have been the subject of gender analysis, some areas quite extensively. Although this work has not always been read by non-gender scholars, it offers important contributions to central debates in the subfield, with the potential to reorient how many of these questions have traditionally been understood. Social movements have long been a focus of many feminist researchers, linked partly to women's exclusion from other political arenas but also to the major role played by women in civil society organizations, as well as an interest among scholars in exploring the dynamics of political change. Key questions in this literature concern the gendered political opportunity structures for women's movements (Chappell 2002) and determinants of movement failure and success (Banaszak 1996), offering new insights into the concept of opportunity structures and factors leading — or not — to broader social transformation.

Another large body of work addresses political parties, analyzing women's participation in parties, as well as decisions by feminist activists to engage with party structures, and those in turn by parties to respond to feminist demands (Wiliarty 2010; Young 2000). Research explains cross-national variations with

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reference to party ideologies, strategies, and structures, noting differences in the integration of women and women's issues into left-wing and right-wing parties, the importance of electoral incentives in motivating shifts in party policy priorities, and the effects of decentralization and party discipline on the behavior of party leaders and legislators (Kittilson 2006; Lovenduski and Norris 1993). These studies present a chance to theorize more widely about activism within, outside, and against individual parties, as well as mechanisms for achieving or blocking change.

A third major area focuses on elections, examining gendered trends in voting behavior and the possibilities for women to gain office. Women's suffrage today is nearly universal, but it was initially controversial due to its anticipated effects on politics, society, and the economy, on the grounds that women might vote differently than men (Daley and Nolan 1994). Later work on the gender gap has found some evidence for this voting difference, although gaps have narrowed and reversed in many countries (Inglehart and Norris 2000). The proportion of women in elected positions has grown, but there are substantial variations across countries and levels of government. Scholars have identified political, social, economic, and cultural factors shaping women's access (Tripp and Kang 2008), which together with research on the vote, shed light on important gendered dimensions of democracy and the persistence of patterns of inequality.

A fourth, but by no means final, literature concerns public policy and the state. Feminist comparativists have been interested in understanding how states influence gender relations and, conversely, how gendered norms and practices shape state policies. This research explores how laws — including those not traditionally thought of as "women's issues" — reflect normative interpretations of gender relations with regard to how "problems" are prioritized, framed, and translated into policy prescriptions (Bacchi 1999; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). It also analyzes how states differ in the types of women's rights policies adopted (Htun and Weldon 2010), as well as the access and influence afforded to gender equality advocates (McBride and Mazur 2010). This work fosters awareness of factors shaping the passage of laws, as well as new perspectives on the nature of policymaking.

Rethinking Gender, Comparison, and Politics

Despite these important contributions, movement toward a comparative politics of gender faces a number of new challenges. The first relates to

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definitions of *gender*, which many view as the major analytical contribution of feminist research (Hawkesworth 2006). A new wave of work seeks to nuance its role, drawing attention to the ways in which multiple facets of identity interact to shape experiences and outcomes (Hancock 2007). This focus appears to undermine comparative research on gender, making it impossible to speak of "women" as a group, much less generalize about gendered trends. As Laurel Weldon observes, however, a comparative approach has great potential to illuminate dynamics of intersectionality: It can help to further "denaturalize and politicize" these identities (2006, 236), as well as offer a better sense of each identity's effects by examining different instances of interactions with other identities.

The second challenge stems from calls to be more *comparative*. In American political science, the subfield is seen to include both cross-national research and in-depth studies of individual countries and regions outside the United States. A problem with the first is that, in practice, most work has focused on developed countries and established democracies (Tripp 2006), at the same time that scholars have generally shied away from engaging in global comparisons (Htun and Weldon 2010). The result is the generation of "general" frameworks reflecting experiences of only a subset of countries. The difficulty with the second approach, studies of a single case or region, is knowing how the findings of that case illuminate dynamics at work in others. It is vital to think more explicitly about how knowledge of that case contributes to broader knowledge on a particular question, through greater collaboration with scholars of other areas and more cross-regional research designs (Krook 2009; Schwindt-Bayer 2010; Tripp 2010; Waylen 2010).

The third issue to tackle concerns the *political*. One of the major contributions of feminist theory and activism has been expansion of the definition of "politics" beyond formal institutions in the public sphere to include informal activities, like social movements, and the private dynamics of everyday life (Caraway 2010; Krook and Childs 2010). Yet formal structures have undergone dramatic changes in recent years with increased globalization, and decentralization, posing major challenges to traditional configurations of political organization (Banaszak, Beckwith, and Rucht 2003). The consequences of these new arrangements are not yet well understood, although they create new opportunities and constraints for feminist change. Working together toward a comparative politics of gender, however, will prove valuable, helping not only to

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produce better knowledge but also to contribute to broader goals of positive political transformation.

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Contested Questions, Current Trajectories: Feminism in Political Theory Today

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I once mentioned to a prominent feminist scholar that I was using one of her books in my course on feminism and political theory. She looked at me blankly for a moment and then replied, "Feminism *and* political theory? I thought feminism *is* political theory." She was right of course; in some sense, everything that is feminist theory is also political theory. Feminism illuminates gendered relations of power in politics and social life, after all, and it contributes (however indirectly) to the larger project of transforming them. Moreover, since the rise of "second wave" feminism in the 1970s, feminist theorists have significantly reshaped political theory as a discipline, moving crucial questions from the margins of the field to its center, questions about gender equity and justice, the constitution of the political subject, the demands of difference, the intersecting dynamics of domination, the differential effects of globalization, and the conditions of

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