Politics & Gender, 9 (2013), 329–359.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

International Feminist Strategies

Introduction

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X13000202

For feminists of all stripes, international institutions have long provided an arena to advance a diverse range of claims. These included efforts in the 1920s and 30s to enlist the League of Nations in combating the trafficking of women and children and to convince the International Labor Organization to remove protective legislation that limited women's participation in the labor force. They also comprised struggles in the 1970s and 80s to universalize through UN conferences and international legal instruments the principles of equal rights and equal treatment and the lobbying of the Security Council in the 1990s to include considerations of gender into its peacekeeping and peacemaking operations. Thus, feminist internationalism is flourishing.

Arguably, feminist internationalism has developed a unique set of strategies, contributing to the arsenal of feminist activism (Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2013). In this Critical Perspectives section, we discuss the women's human rights strategy (Zwingel), gender mainstreaming (Caglar), and strategies to move women into positions of political and — especially — economic decision-making (True). We consider these strategies to be international for various reasons: First, they are employed in feminist activism at the international level; second, they are nurtured and diffused by such activism; and, third, they have yielded impacts in countries around the globe. Thus, women's human rights are broadly employed in feminist lobbying, and gender mainstreaming and gender quotas have diffused through advocacy in transnational feminist networks. All three strategies are influencing local politics (Krook 2006; True and Mintrom 2001; Zwingel 2013b). What they have in common is that they involve an international policy dimension, a reaching outside the state for influence and inspiration.

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/13 $30.00 for The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X13000202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

International feminist strategizing faces two unique conditions that differentiate it from strategizing in domestic state contexts. The first dimension is institutional and cultural. The international arena is only thinly institutionalized, and social and cultural ties tend to be weak. Interstate and non-governmental organizations form the site of much activism, but there are no parties, no robust international media, and no international public sphere that could provide venues for debate and interest aggregation. Agreement often is informed by lowest common denominators and carried by broadly liberal and technocratic ideals. Mechanisms of implementation are lacking and rely on the willingness of states to push the issue forward. All these features conspire to make a politics of knowledge — of providing information and framing issues — particularly effective (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Second, international feminist strategizing has to deal with the extreme diversity of intersectional positions of activists. A collective identity as feminists emerges intermittently among international activists through a politics of coalitions and solidarity that establishes common causes (Basu 1995; Mohanty 2003). But alliances and identities are unstable and mobile. Furthermore, a diversity of actors subscribes to a diversity of goals and causes ranging from the fight to end violence against women in Lebanon to the struggle for land rights in Uganda and the inclusion of women in negotiating a democratic transition in Arab Spring countries (Sabat 2013; Tripp 2004). Feminists typically have little trouble supporting such concrete causes, but difficulties arise when causes are placed in political contexts and when feminist politics begin to intersect with politics from other status positions. Is the veil a symbol of women's oppression or an assertion of cultural identity? Is the fight against racism a matter of feminist politics or a distraction from feminist politics? Is prostitution a matter of economic rights or an exploitation of women? These types of questions often animate domestic feminist politics, but they multiply in international encounters, making visible differences in ethnic, religious, geographical, and class positioning. Institutional weakness, cultural poverty, and diversity of positioning and goals thus make international feminist strategizing particularly challenging.

The unique realities of international feminist strategizing inform debates in the literature. Some of these debates are familiar from comparative politics literature on feminist activism in domestic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X13000202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

politics, but some of them are peculiar to the international level. Three issues are particularly salient: First, at the domestic level, the state provides the target for feminist strategizing, serves as an arena for contestation, and codifies rules that regulate gender relations and distribute privilege (Sauer 2001). At the international level, international organizations (IOs) play similar roles, but they have to work with states in the codification of rules (Whitworth 1994). It is thus more difficult to think of IOs as patriarchal in a Marxist feminist sense, representing institutionalized compromises between social forces.

Indeed, in the struggle for gender equality in the last quarter of the 20th century, the UN often has been a leader pushing states toward advancing gender equality, and feminists frequently have seen the UN — and specifically feminists in international organizations — as allies against entrenched patriarchal commitments (Fraser and Tinker 2004; Hannan 2013). Feminist scholars also have emphasized that the liberal international gender equality regime has been an important tool for local activists and has helped advance gender equality across the globe (Kardam 2003; Levitt et al. 2013; Towns 2010; Zwingel 2005). Processes of international diffusion and imitation furthermore have encouraged the adoption of gender quotas in the political and now in the economic arena (Krook 2006; True 2013). International political forces, indeed, seem to support feminist aspirations.

But as is the case for domestic feminist politics, scholars have questioned the strategy of engaging with the international state. They have emphasized the overriding importance for women's movements to remain autonomous from intergovernmental institutions and regard engagement with international organizations skeptically (Stienstra 1994). Spivak (1996) has suggested that the UN women's conferences gathered "feminist apparatchiks" who forgot that the real work was elsewhere. A little more charitably, critics have pointed to the way in which engagements with international organizations have occasioned the taming of feminist agendas as they are adjusted to organizational logics, as evident in the recent World Bank focus on gender equality as "smart economics" or in the taming of designs of anti-war activists in the Security Council (Bedford 2012; Razavi 2012; von Braunmühl 2013). As Caglar shows in her contribution to this section, this type of criticism has become particularly salient with regard to gender mainstreaming, which has generated both discursive and institutional mechanisms distorting the intent of feminist strategizing. Similarly,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X13000202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there are questions about moving women into positions of economic and political power. They may be able to make some change, but as True shows in her contribution to this section, their presence also may generate backlash.

Second, feminist strategies operate within discursive environments that enable some kinds of goals while hindering others. In the orbit of the UN, this environment has been characterized as liberal internationalism. The type of feminism codified in international legal instruments (in particular CEDAW) is informed by liberal core values, such as the commitments to individual rights and equality. When projecting liberal visions of equality internationally, feminist strategy risks the accusation of imperialism.

The insensitivity with which international feminists sometimes have approached "traditional harmful practices" (a term used in UN discourse), such as female genital cutting or informal courts dealing with rape, have particularly often attracted the ire of activists. While these activists typically are critical of harmful practices, they are wary of strident outsider interventions that use such practices as a way of othering, of reconstituting the uncivilized colonial or the native victim (Kapur 2002; Merry 2006; Shell-Duncan 2008).

Quotas have received less attention from feminist critics, but the accusation of imperialism could hold here as well. For example, women's quotas in the Afghan parliament, established in the process of peace negotiations, have largely empowered women pursuing factional politics and generated violence against the few independent female parliamentarians. In the well-meaning liberal intent to abolish harmful practices or in forcing Afghan patriarchs to accept women in their political decision-making processes, feminist strategizing becomes imperial practice.

Zwingel's contribution to this forum is situated within this problem constellation and makes an argument in favor of judging such international feminist strategies by their potential to create critical knowledge and agency. The literature she draws on opens up debate by shifting the focus from the implementation of static rules to the negotiation of international rules through activism that draws in actors from throughout a global political space. She argues that human rights, including CEDAW, need to be considered not imperialist outside interventions, but rather "tools in development." In this understanding, international feminist politics becomes a global politics

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X13000202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of negotiation; international legal instruments are re-imagined as never complete.

A third fault line in the literature emerges around the question of the effectiveness of international feminist strategies. Do human rights make a difference? Does gender mainstreaming work? Does women's presence in decision-making make a difference? Lurking behind these questions is a rationalist understanding of strategy and of the policy process: It imagines calculating feminists who target their activism so that they can bring about desired ends. Once a treaty, an action, or a quota has been achieved, it needs to be implemented through administrative means. Literature about feminist movements, advocacy networks, or activists often conjures up this image of feminist strategic actors.

But as becomes clear from all three contributions to this section, the idea that policy processes proceed in a linear fashion is problematic. There clearly is some relationship between the means and ends of feminist strategizing; but a range of factors complicates this relationship. For one, feminist goals are not fixed in meaning. Rather, they are constantly negotiated and adjusted internally within groups in accordance with negotiations with partners and with allies in international bureaucracies (e.g., Cohn 2008). Furthermore, organizational politics intervene to deflect or detour the intentions of feminist strategies. The case of gender mainstreaming shows that when bureaucracies officially adopt a policy, implementation is not guaranteed (Caglar 2013; Prügl 2011a). Similarly, as True shows, targets or reporting on women's participation in economic decision-making have been largely ineffective. In a similar vein, as outlined by Zwingel's essay, international human rights norms are not static. In other words, strategies develop their own logic and acquire new meanings once they are deployed in different organizational and socio-political contexts. Unleashed from the intentions of agents, they gain a life of their own.

Finally, literature adopting a governmentality perspective suggests that feminist strategies in general — and gender mainstreaming in particular — participate in governing a population that is now conceived of as global by categorizing this population, ranking it in league tables from best to worst, and helping develop often indirect policies of incentives and identity formation to administer the conduct of this population (Prügl 2011b). For example, interventions combating violence against women are constituting new soldier

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X13000202 Published online by Cambridge University Press

subjects who self-monitor in order to live up to international standards of respectability, and development interventions are producing new, harmonious households imagined as heterosexual that enable women to participate in the workplace and encourage poor men — constructed as lazy — to take on more domestic responsibilities while absolving the state from investing in a care economy (Bedford 2009; Harrington 2006). As Caglar points out in her contribution, gender mainstreaming is not just subject to power struggles, but is itself also a technique of power.

In January of 2011, a new multilateral entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women took up operations. UN Women has at its disposal considerably more resources than previous women-focused UN agencies and is giving new momentum to feminist agendas at the international level. It can draw insight from literature on international feminist strategies, and such literature shows a mixed picture. Gender mainstreaming has been fiercely criticized but continues to be defended (e.g., Hannan 2013). Armed with conceptual innovations from anthropology, scholars have been rethinking human rights as key instruments for feminist activism at all levels. Finally, spiraling state activism to include women in political and, especially, economic decision-making is remarkable, but judging its feminist efficacy needs further study. Debates about the uses of organizations such as UN Women, about the inherent imperialism of international feminist strategies, and about their efficacy are likely to continue. UN Women is challenged to embrace these debates and bring to its policies an element of feminist reflexivity.

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Gender Mainstreaming

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X13000214

As a strategy to promote gender equality, gender mainstreaming has received considerable attention worldwide. The language of gender mainstreaming has been quickly adopted (True and Mintrom 2001), which is why, in the beginning, many hopes were pinned on this strategy. Scholars have shown that gender mainstreaming has triggered organizational and procedural changes within state bureaucracies, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations. Gender equality units have been established, new policy tools have been introduced, and new procedures have been created. But feminist scholars also have shown that, all these changes notwithstanding, gender mainstreaming has not proven to be successful in achieving gender equality (cf. True and Parisi 2013). More than 15 years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, there are serious problems in translating the commitment into action. This is, as many scholars

I would like to thank Elisabeth Prügl for valuable comments.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X13000202 Published online by Cambridge University Press