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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

# *State Feminism Reconsidered*

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In 1995, Amy Mazur and Dorothy McBride (Stetson) published *Comparative State Feminism*, an edited volume analyzing women's policy agencies in various advanced industrial democracies. Research on state feminism took off after the publication of the book, even though, as Mazur and McBride point out in their essay here, the term "state feminism" originated in studies of the Scandinavian welfare state in the 1980s. The catalytic appeal of the concept of state feminism in the 1990s owes much to the context of global feminism in which the book appeared, particularly the Fourth World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Conference, as well as the innumerable activities that preceded and followed it, sought to commit the governments of the world to dedicate more resources to women; scholars followed up with scores of assessments of how well or poorly states carried out this mission. Research on state feminist topics also spread, thanks to the indefatigable efforts of Mazur and McBride themselves. Together they created the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State, colloquially known as the RNGS Project. The network grew out of a small conference and has since evolved into a vast research community that involves more than a hundred scholars from 16 Western postindustrial countries. The scholars in RNGS have won grants totaling some three-quarters of a million euros, published six books and numerous articles in scholarly journals, and perhaps more importantly, have developed methodologies and data sets that will facilitate new research for years to come. In this edition of Critical Perspectives, we asked Mazur and McBride to cast a retrospective gaze at how the concept of state feminism, and the research it has generated, have evolved over time.

Judith Squires's essay also provides a look back at developments in state feminism over time, specifically how women's policy agencies have changed in Britain. Initially, many people thought that state feminism referred only to women's policy agencies, the government entities

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devoted primarily to women's issues that were the focus of the chapters in *Comparative State Feminism*. Not only do we define state feminism more broadly now, but women's policy agencies have also expanded beyond their initial mandate in some cases. Squires documents a shift in the way the British government has incorporated marginalized groups, from a tripartite focus on gender, race, and ethnicity to an emphasis on diversity, a more encompassing but more generic concept. This shift may entail the demise of women's policy agencies entirely, but (in Britain at least) those same agencies have welcomed the new approach as a way to streamline service provision and enhance equity, as well as an opportunity to press for new legislation and higher bureaucratic status. The phenomenon that Squires describes warrants close attention by state feminist scholars well beyond Britain, to the extent that it presages policy outcomes that better address intersecting forms of discrimination.

Like all new research paradigms, state feminism is not without its critics. From the outset, proponents and skeptics alike raised questions about this new research agenda. Does "state feminism" mean that the state drives feminism? Does it mean that feminists must enter the state in order to promulgate feminist policy? What is feminism? How portable is state feminism, in terms of its relevance to the developing world? How should it be operationalized? What are the alternative explanations for state feminist phenomena? Celia Valiente takes up these questions and others explicitly in her contribution to Critical Perspectives. She identifies as problematic three aspects of state feminist research. First, the literature underestimates the heterogeneity of women as a group, and incorrectly presumes that feminist outcomes benefit all women. Second, definitions of state feminism tend to be either so restrictive as to be unattainable or so general as to be uninteresting. Finally, she maintains that state feminist research rests on the assumption that state actors can be neatly separated from actors within women's movements, an assumption she finds untenable. Valiente illustrates these criticisms with reference to specific examples within the state feminist literature and suggests that greater attention to state feminism within the developing and democratizing world will address limitations with the existing literature. Her provocative analysis of state feminism should spur debate and, we hope, new research in this exciting field.