State Feminism since the 1980s: From Loose Notion to Operationalized Concept

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We argue that since the term *state feminism* first appeared in the 1980s, it has gone through three stages of development, becoming a formal concept useful in cross-national analysis in the last stage. Scholars first used the term loosely to describe a range of state activities with a gender/women's issues focus. Next, the concept became associated with the study of women's policy agencies. Most recently, a group of comparative gender and policy scholars — the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS) — has developed systematic nominal and operational definitions of state feminism to study if, how, and why women's policy agencies make alliances with women's movements within the state to achieve feminist outcomes.

Introduction

The story we tell here of the use of state feminism as an analytical concept unfolds amid a growing literature showing multiple approaches to feminist analysis. We take the position that defining and operationalizing concepts for empirical observation and analysis is necessary in order to expand and build a body of knowledge on gender and politics. Such conceptualization is essential whether one is exploring a single detailed case study or testing hypotheses through multivariate analysis of many cases. Our empirical feminist approach is also informed by a nonfeminist literature on concept formation (e.g., Adcock and Collier 2001; Collier and Mahon 1993; Goertz 2006).

Precise social science measurement and feminist approaches do not necessarily go hand in hand. Methodologists typically ignore gender and feminism. Self-proclaimed feminist scholars have faulted them for that from the early days (e.g., Carroll and Zerilli 1993; Githens 1983) to more recent evaluations of the flaws of formal social science research (e.g., Hawkesworth 2006). Many feminist analysts, inspired by postmodernism, social constructivism, or interpretivism, reject the very notion of developing formal concepts that are specifically operationalized

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for qualitative or quantitative analysis. The chapters in the edited volume of Brooke Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (2006), for example, avoid altogether the word "concept." At the same time, other feminist approaches that seek to develop midrange theories from comparative analysis of gender, politics and the state, particularly in Western, post industrial democracies, have turned their attention increasingly to the thorny and complicated process of operationalization and applying concepts that travel in cross-national analysis.[1]

In this essay, we argue that since *state feminism* was first used in the 1980s, the concept has gone through three stages of development, leading to an unprecedented level of formalization. This evolution has been driven by scholars from Western Europe, North America, and Australia who share "feminist empirical" approaches to the study of gender, policy, and the state, with a comparative/cross-national eye (Harding 1987).[2] Writers first used the term loosely to describe a range of state activities with a gender/women's issues focus. Next, the concept became associated with the study of women's policy agencies. Most recently, a group of comparative gender and policy scholars in the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS) have developed an operational definition of state feminism to study if, how, and why women's movements (WMA) make alliances with women's policy agencies (WPAs) within the state to achieve feminist outcomes.

The definition of feminism used here reflects a consensus in the scholarly community interested in using concepts in comparative analysis. These ideas include 1) an understanding of women as a group in the context of the social, economic, and cultural diversity of women; 2) the advancement of women's rights, status, or condition as a group in both the public and private spheres; and 3) the reduction or elimination of gender-based hierarchy or patriarchy that underpins basic inequalities between men and women in the public and private spheres (Mazur 2002, 2–3; 2007).

After tracing the development of state feminism through the three stages, we conclude by reflecting on the benefits and costs of the RNGS contribution, which, while allowing for greater scientific rigor, remains a limited approach to state feminism.

1. See for, example, Beckwith (2000). See Goertz and Mazur (forthcoming) for more on how a range of concepts are defined, operationalized and used in gender and politics research by feminist scholars.

2. For more on the emergence of the relatively new body of comparative gender and policy work, referred to by some as "feminist comparative policy" see Mazur (2002 and 2007).

Stage 1: Loose Notions about Gender, Feminism, and the State

Analysts began turning toward the state as a potential arena for feminist action in the early 1980s as a response to the decline of the new women's movements in Europe, North America, and Australia (Dahlerup 1986). Feminist theorists, especially in the United Kingdom and continental Europe, blamed the decline on what they saw as a patriarchal state systemically opposed to the feminist project.[3] It is no coincidence, therefore, that the term "state feminism" and its positive connotations came from the Nordic countries where the autonomous feminist movements and their antisystem stances were less prevalent and where feminists were much more willing to "engage with the state" (Chappell 2002) through political parties, trade unions, and parliament (Christensen and Raaum 1999). In addition, the particular arrangement of state–society relations in the Nordic countries made state feminism salient. Not only was the state seen as an important site of social justice that produces redistributive welfare policies, but state–society relations also followed a highly corporatist model, where sectional interests were represented through tripartite negotiations among the state, labor, and management to produce extensive social policies. Comparative work on feminism and public policy in other countries in the 1980s did not use the term "state feminism," although to be sure, women's policy agencies (WPAs) were on the radar (e.g., Lovenduski 1986; McBride Stetson 1987).

Helga Hernes is usually credited with coining the term (1987). From the Nordic context, with active social policies where women were both clients and practitioners, she identified state feminism as both a product and a driver of a woman-centered approach to state–society relations that produced a model of how states could be feminist in terms of actions and impact. Taken by itself, Hernes defined state feminism as "a variety of public policies and organizational measures, designed partly to solve general social and economic problems, partly to respond to women's demands" (ibid., 11). The concept implied not only these state-based actions; it also covered the outcomes of a process — "the interplay between agitation from below and integration from above" (ibid). Other Nordic scholars, in particular Birte Siim (1991), identified Hernes's "feminism from above" more specifically with the presence of women in

3. For a discussion of the critiques of the state made by feminist theorists see McBride Stetson and Mazur (1995b, 6–10).

elected and appointed offices in various government structures. The Scandinavian scholars writing on state feminism in this first period did not, for the most, part identify "feminism from above" specifically with the government gender equality bodies created to oversee the new equality policies, although they were assumed to be a part of these policies. Drude Dahlerup (1986, 1–26) was one of the few Nordic scholars to equate state feminism with WPAs in this early period.

Thus, the Nordic research laid some of the foundations for our current use of the term: a focus on interactions between individual feminists inside and outside of the state and their connection to women-friendly/feminist policy and, to a lesser degree, a focus on agencies and their ability to promote the ideas of gender equality. But these terms were used to describe specific cases, rather than to conduct comparative analysis or to develop testable propositions; as much of the literature pointed out, state feminism was still a rough idea needing further investigation and analysis.

Also in the 1980s, a group of scholars in West Germany used the term "state feminism" pejoratively to label the Communist Party's approach to women in the East and other Soviet bloc countries. They criticized established women's agencies and party-sponsored groups as a way of controlling women and co-opting women's movements, rather than encouraging an autonomous approach to women's rights.[4]

Stage 2: A Focus on Femocrats and Women's Policy Agencies

Building from the notion of state feminism as the activities of individual women in the state, Australian scholars in the early 1990s developed a new term, *femocrat*, that appealed to feminist analysts in Europe (e.g., Outshoorn 1992, 1994 and Van der Ros 1995). Australians Rosemary Pringle and S. Watson (1992) and S. Franzway, D. Court, and R. W. Connell (1989) put into question the notion of a monolithic patriarchal state by defining the state as a set of arenas divided by policy sector, level of government, and functional role. These theorists argued that feminist actors had the potential to enter and operate from within these different arenas. These assumptions set the stage for identifying not just individuals who could promote a feminist agenda but also arenas

4. Gisela Notz, a prominent German sociologist wrote about "staatsfeminismus" from this perspective in the 1980s. For more recent work that discusses state feminism in the communist context see for example, Robinson (1995) or Zheng (2005).

within the state where the patriarchal processes and policies of the state could be challenged and perhaps even eliminated.

In addition, the theory Australian feminist scholars developed came out of the particular political context they encountered, in the same way that Nordic scholars were inspired about their approach to state feminism. On the basis of the importance and prevalence of women's policy agencies at all levels of the Australian federal government during the 1980s, Australian analysts concentrated their attention on the individual state actors associated with the government's feminist agenda either through agencies or policies — the femocrats (Eisenstein 1990 and 1996; Franzway, Court, and Connell 1989; Sawer 1990; Watson 1990). They identified the general presence and activities of these femocrats as "official feminism" or "femocracy." While the Australians rarely referred to state feminism in their studies of femocracy, Joyce Outshoorn, a Dutch scholar inspired by both Australian and European work on state feminism, situated her study of femocrats in the Netherlands explicitly in the context of state feminism with a focus on WPAs — "the new structures and positions set up to develop women's equality policy and the policies themselves" (1994, 143).

The work of the Nordic and Australian scholars led to a more favorable view of the state among empirical feminist scholars as an arena for feminist action, enhancing the idea of state feminism as a complex process involving femocrats, the achievement of gender equality policy, and alliances between state actors and women's movements. At the same time, more and more governments were establishing or enhancing women's policy agencies. A growing international community of researchers interested in gender, politics, and the state in a comparative perspective turned their attention to these women's policy agencies as the prime object of analysis for state feminism.[5] The mid-1990s was also the heyday of worldwide mobilization around the United Nations women's policy process through the International Women's Policy Conferences to produce plans of action on women's rights and gender equality for member states.

The 1995 women's conference in Beijing was a major focal point for feminist mobilization at all levels: local, subnational, and transnational (Lycklama à Nijeholt, Sweibel, and Vargas 1998; Rai 2003a; Zwingel

5. In 2007, there were over 100 scholars studying feminist comparative policy issues in Western post industrial democracies. Controlling for country population, FCP scholars were evenly spread across these countries (Mazur 2007: 4).

2005). Women's policy agencies were at the center of the UN process: within member states to oversee the process of presenting national reports, often at subnational and national levels; at the UN level through its own policy machinery; and as the appointed agents of gender mainstreaming in the final program of action. As Shirin Rai and others assert, since the first Women's World Conference in 1975, the UN process had been a driving force in the establishment of women's policy offices in many member states; by the end of the 1990s, 127 member states had set up WPAs at the national level (2003b, 1). Given the unprecedented attention to and central role of WPAs in the development of what appeared to be a transnational women's movement around the UN's efforts in 1995, it was logical that researchers turned their attention to WPAs and that state feminism became a hot topic.

During this same period, some scholars used the term to capture a different set of phenomena found in countries outside of the West. Some research on authoritarian regimes used state feminism to describe policies and structures developed by male elites to gain the support of women, often with the help of individual female leaders not affiliated with any broad-based movement. They argued that such policies may advance women's status in the short term, particularly at moments of political change — revolution, coup d'états — but as the authoritarian leaders tighten control, the rights and benefits become less prominent or disappear altogether. In addition to the research on state feminism in communist regimes already mentioned, this authoritarian variant is mapped out by researchers in countries in the Middle East or with a significant Islamic influence in politics, including Egypt and Turkey (Abadan-Unat and Tokgöz 1994; Bodur and Franceschet 2002; Hatem 1994).

Reflecting the shift toward a focus on women's policy agencies in the Western context, our 1995 edited volume *Comparative State Feminism* (CSF) presented 14 national case analyses of a single WPA using a common analytical framework. In comparing the cases, the authors focused on whether the agencies promoted equal opportunity policy and formed alliances with women's movement organizations.[6] Methodological problems of this initial study, especially weaknesses in conceptualization and research design, limited its theoretical contributions and spurred some of the book contributors to form the Research Network on Gender and Politics and the State (RNGS) in 1995. The new group sought to design a more systematic cross-national study of the impact of WM-WPA

6. The two dimensions were based on Skocpol's research agenda for state-centered research (1985).

alliances and state feminism that would apply to all Western postindustrial democracies. One feminist analyst recently observed that this shift toward women's policy agencies as purveyors of state feminist action "embodies the most common usage of the term today" (Krook 2005, 8).

Stage 3: Toward a More Precise Definition of State Feminism

The RNGS research design proposed to study state feminism by comparing the effectiveness of women's policy agencies in advancing women's movement goals in the policymaking processes of postindustrial democracies (RNGS 2006). To proceed with the research plan, RNGS members developed a model that set forth the state response to women's movement demands as the dependent variable, movement resources and policy environment components as the independent variables, and women's policy agency activities as the intervening variable. To guide the 43 scholars who wrote case analyses for the project, the network developed definitions and empirical indicators for each of the variables in the model. To assess state feminism, there were two important typologies: State Responses to Women's Movements (WMA) and Women's Policy Agency Activities (WPAA). Taken together, the two typologies yield a way to identify various patterns of state feminism, defined as agencies that are effective allies of women's movements in gaining successes in policymaking processes. The first was composed of two variables: procedural responses and policy responses yielding four possible combinations: *Dual Response* for positive values on both variables; *Preemption* for cases where the policy outcome corresponded with women's movement demands but there was no procedural response; *Co-optation* where movement activists gained procedural access but not policy response; and *No Response* for neither procedural access or agreeable policy content.

The second typology to assess women's policy agency effectiveness in bringing women's movement goals into the policymaking process was composed of two variables as well: whether or not the agency promoted positions in the debate that reflected women's movement goals and whether or not the agency was effective in bringing these goals into the debate, or *gendering* the frame used by policy actors in the debate to include the issue definitions and policy goals of the women's movement.[7] The resulting typology has four categories: *Insider* where agencies' goals

7. This variable was based on the expectation that the content of the issue frame of a policy debate strongly affects both policy and procedural access. If a policy debate is defined as being about gender and particularly about feminist ideas about gender equality, it is highly likely that women's

reflect movement goals and the agency genders the issue frame of the debate; *Marginal* agencies that promote movement goals but are not able to change the issue frame; *Nonfeminist* category where the agency genders the debate but with ideas and goals that do not reflect women's movement ideas; and *Symbolic* where the agency takes no position and does not gender the debate. Empirically, instances of state feminism ran from complete — insider agencies achieving Dual Response — to none — symbolic agencies and No Response. In between, the combinations ranged from more or less effective agencies but partial state responses to degrees of movement success despite symbolic or marginal agencies.

The RNGS network used this conceptualization and operationalization of state feminism in the comparative analysis of each of the five issues in the study: abortion, job training, political representation, prostitution, and the priority or "hot" issues.[8] The final installment in the project is to be a book that will ask new questions about state feminism across the issues and the 13 countries and over the four decades covered by the cases. In developing the concluding analyses, thus, we have asked: What is *feminist* about state feminism? The typologies used in the study so far have used women's movement demands and activism as the test for the "feminism" in state feminism. The extent to which policy agencies and policy actors respond to women's movement actors is the extent to which we have called the results state feminism. At the same time, the cases have shown that many times, women's movement demands are not feminist; feminist ideology and activism is part of women's movements, but women's movement activism and ideas are not necessarily feminist (Beckwith 2005; Ferree 2006; Ferree and Mueller 2004).

Encountering this puzzle has led to a more precise conceptualization of state feminism for comparative analysis in postindustrial democracies. In this revised view, state feminism only occurs when the women's policy agency is bringing *feminist* actors and ideas into the state. Achieving state feminism, therefore, is more than the representation of women's interests or even demands of women's movement groups; it is the representation of feminist interests and actors making feminist claims to produce feminist outcomes.

movement actors will have a place in the process and that the content will in part reflect those ideas. Thus, if an agency can gender the debate, it is a significant women's movement inside the state.

8. The country case analyses were published in a book with a comparative conclusion on each issue (Mazur 2001; McBride Stetson 2001; Outshoorn 2004; Lovenduski 2005; Haussman and Sauer 2007).

Table 1. State feminism measures

Measure	*WMA/WPA Feminist Frames Match*	*WPA Gendered Policy Debate Feminist*	*Policy Content Feminist*	*Feminist WMA Participated*
6	YES	YES	YES	YES
5	YES	YES	YES/NO*	YES/NO*
4	YES	NO	YES	YES
3	YES	NO	YES/NO*	YES
2	YES	YES	NO	NO
1	NO	NO	YES/NO*	YES/NO*
0	NO	NO	NO	NO

* YES in at least one of these categories.

To operationalize, we injected the RNGS definition of feminism (see note 2), into the typologies used in the project design to devise a scale of state feminism. The components become:

1. Do WPA micro frames (definitions and policy goals) on the debate issue match feminist WMA micro frames on the issue or not?
2. Did the WPA gender the policy debate with a feminist micro frame, yes or no?
3. Did the policy content at the end of the debate match WMA feminist micro frames, yes or no?
4. Were feminist WMAs part of the policy subsystem at the end of the debate, yes or no?

The scale values are assigned according to the frequency of YES values for the four components as illustrated in Table 1.

Each policy debate has been assigned a value from 0 to 6, which represents, then, a degree of state feminism. While cases can be arrayed along the full range of values, only 5s and 6s show complete involvement of WPAs in feminist responses to the movement and influences in the policy processes and at least one feminist outcome. The absence of any WPA feminist response is shown with 0s and 1s, although cases measured as 1s show some state activity along WMA feminist lines.

Conclusion: Costs and Benefits of a Precise Definition of State Feminism

The RNGS research project produced 130 detailed case studies of policy debates. To make sense of this abundance of riches, we found it necessary to define, redefine, and refine the central concept in the ways

described in this essay. The payoff for the project is greater confidence in the validity of empirical observations and conclusions of the analysis and the theory that results. We now have empirical evidence that state agencies for gender equality and advancing the status of women have, since the 1970s, increased both substantive and descriptive representation of women across a variety of issues in 13 postindustrial democracies. The approach also allows RNGS to examine and amend resource mobilization and political opportunity theories of social movement success. Although the analysis is not yet final, the evidence is strong that such theories must take movement alliances with state partners into account. The RNGS approach also adds to democracy studies in Western societies by integrating gender and women's movement activism as an essential component of processes of democratization. Further, it departs from the tangle of debate over state feminism as an ideology and makes it a tool for empirical analysis. Thus, the extensive attention to precise conceptualization and measurement forms a pad that may launch other researchers interested in state feminism to use, critique, and revise the methods.

At the same time, these benefits may not help all scholars. Becoming more precise has narrowed the connotations of state feminism to focus on the agencies and their activities to the exclusion of other women/feminists inside the state. The empirical findings are not in themselves a test of the assertion of Pringle, Watson, and others that the state is a set of arenas. Rather, we have found instances of movement success and fewer instances of feminist success in specific policy debates about specific issues. Since the findings do not cover the state as a whole, the patriarchal state remains a subject for legitimate critique. Finally, as it has developed, state feminism is a concept most useful when studying Western democracies; its components are Western concepts from the politics of Western feminism. It allows researchers to better understand the complex relationship between movement and state and to map out how and to what effect one type of social movement has made incursions into the state. Many opportunities remain for scholars of other forms of politics to conceptualize the components of state feminism in authoritarian and non-Western contexts.

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The Challenge of Diversity: The Evolution of Women's Policy Agencies in Britain

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Introduction

Britain's use of state agencies to address gender relations has evolved significantly over the past 30 years and is currently entering a new phase, characterized by a commitment to a generic equalities, or "diversity," approach in which multiple equality strands are to be addressed via a single equalities body, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR). The CEHR will replace three existing equality commissions that focus on gender, race, and disability, respectively. This shift appears to involve the demise of a singular focus on gender equality and with it the justification for separate women's policy agencies.

This essay will document this shift, reflecting on the role that British women's policy agencies have played in this transition. It will suggest that while the transition was primarily motivated by exogenous pressures in the form of European Union directives (Fredman 2003, 1), British women's policy agencies have nonetheless played a positive role in facilitating the shift away from a separate approach to gender equality by