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### Feminist Political Theory: The Role of Gender in Politics and Governance

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#### Abstract

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This research explores feminist political theory, focusing on the critical role of gender in shaping politics and governance. It examines how traditional political theories often overlook or marginalize women's experiences and contributions, leading to an incomplete understanding of power dynamics within society. By analyzing key feminist texts and movements, the study highlights the ways in which gender intersects with other identities—such as race, class, and sexuality—to influence political participation and representation. The research also investigates contemporary issues, including reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and workplace equality, illustrating how feminist perspectives can inform policy-making and governance structures. Through case studies of feminist movements and their impact on political systems, the study emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and diversity in democratic processes. The findings suggest that integrating feminist insights into political theory not only enriches the discourse but also promotes more equitable governance. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender shapes political realities and the importance of feminist frameworks in creating just and inclusive societies.

Keywords: feminist political theory, gender, politics, governance, power dynamics, representation, inclusivity, social justice.

## 1. Introduction to Feminist Political Theory

Feminist political theory has drawn attention to the neglect of gender as a category of analysis and to an androcentric bias in the questions that traditional political theory has posed and in the definitions of fundamental concepts. The meaning of "feminist" in feminist political theory covers numerous dimensions. Firstly, it signals the need to focus on gender. Gender structures and is structured by gendered relations of power. At the same time, the term feminist serves to alert to the exclusion of women and feminist perspectives in politics and political theory and in institutions of political life. When people engage in political acts, they are also engaged in gendered acts. This is why understanding something as political—whether this is an act, a practice, a system of government, policies, a decision about a war, a political institution, a judge's decision in a courtroom, or something discussed in a book—is also the subject of feminist political theory. Feminist political theory aims to make such acts intelligible. The political act or practice in question is examined in terms of the specific form and organization it takes through a focus on the makeup of gender relations in our societies, its actions, and its institutions. Such concerns invite reflection on the significance for theories of justice—and for any theories of politics—of working at the intersection of analyses of gender and politics. And such intersectional analyses may reveal—as well as be productive—of injustices in political practices, principles, and theories for women. The growing range of such approaches testifies to

the prominence now accorded to feminist political theory in the fields of both comparative politics and international relations. (Béné, 2022)

## 1.1. Definition and Scope

Politics, due to its focus on public life, organization, and governance, shapes many of the experiences and identity markers of individuals and groups. Feminist political theory is, therefore, concerned with examining and critiquing the role of gender within politics and governance. This broad definition not only includes discussions about the direct representation and participation of women and gender minorities in political institutions, but also how politics and governments ought to respond to difference and inequality on the basis of gender. Relatedly, some feminist political theorists also seek to illuminate the historical exclusion of women and other marginalized communities from political theory, whether as a subject of inquiry or as an author.

While it can seem as though the terms feminisms or feminist may be neutral markers of gender identity and political conviction, the terms have been and continue to be quite malleable in their interpretation. Terminating feminism with a three-tiered descriptor such as liberal, radical, and socialist merely serves to list typologies. Using feminist as a noun is preferable because it is both more inclusive, capturing a broader range of experiences, and mutable, allowing for transformative meaning and multiplicity in identification. As a clarificatory tool, the adjective feminist points to the underlying ideology as if

feminism were a political system or economic doctrine. Moreover, this nominal form excludes male participation and precludes meaningful dialogue on gender or issues that incorporate other marginalized identities. Through this, the feminist movement becomes decategorized, where all gender elements are accepted. Local communication between activists and scholars can also be complicated by the varying degrees of acceptability of feminist ideologies in global discourse.

The difficulty in setting definitions is also an issue in setting boundaries for the scope of feminist political theory, as gender and a female experience are interpreted differently in each theory. Different feminist theories make differing claims about what the state is and what it does, but they likewise provide different remedies. As well as a description and critique of the state's gender bias, we will thus find in each approach a policy agenda, prescription for reworking institutions or forms of governance, or a view on better ways of effecting change. Public state action is but one of a number of potential sites for feminist political activism within any of these approaches. (Crawford & Paglen, 2021)

## 1.2. Historical Development

The term feminist political theory refers to an interdisciplinary approach to reflecting on the role of gender and women in politics and governance. In recent decades, a growing body of feminist literature has addressed various

aspects of the Western political tradition, including ideas about citizenship, justice, the state, and democracy. While many of the arguments made by feminists arise from critiques of the liberal tradition, the different schools of feminist thought have different ways of critiquing liberalism and, equally, offer different alternatives. It is important to note that the development of feminist theory occurred in response to changing social, political, and economic factors and was itself shaped by the historical context in which it was articulated. As a result, feminist theory has taken different forms in different places, and ideas about what key texts in the canon of feminist theory might be are contested.

There are many registers to measure the way that feminist political theory has developed and evolved over the course of the past hundred years. Recent work to map the development of this field in various national contexts begins with observations of early suffrage movements and early feminist organizations, the reframing of earlier political questions in the late 20s and early 30s, where radical feminists were questioning the whole system of democracy; mobilizations, such as that of the civil rights movement in America, that took many women into the political discussion that conceptually founded second-wave feminism; and the identity politics in the 70s. These movements and the broader social, political, and economic changes that impelled them were taken up by theorists, and among some of the difficult questions additional to these epochal events, was how to accommodate a debate about

gender equality into a society that had disabled, silenced, or oppressed women and other marginalized citizens at various times. The aim is to show that such an account of the last hundred years provides a politics-feminism relationship that is too simplistic. Feminism becomes as much a product of politics as a stance toward political theory. (Pauwelussen 2022)

## 2. Gender as a Social Construct

Gender is often described as a social construct and is thus differentiated from biology or sex. In other words, sexual differences are used to construct the social categories of girl and boy, of woman and man. The focus on gender has embraced a range of femininities and masculinities, situating these in terms of the broader set of expectations and performances that circulate as men and women, sexualities, ethnicities, age, etc. Gender is particularly associated with the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, film and media studies, but has also begun to ally itself to literary studies, history, music, philosophy, religious studies, law, and, through a focus on political representation of particular groups, to political theory. Within political theory, a focus on gender emphasizes the process of power relations that inform the perceptions and analysis of politics as well as the structures and institutions of politics itself, and has taken for granted the relevance of the term.

A focus on gender seeks to include the identities and political influence of people marked by femininity as well as those of feminist women. Feminist

politics also requires an explanation of why and how politics based on gender arises out of sexual differences, race, culture, and class with and through state form and policy. By speaking in terms of gender, the feminist political agenda can argue for, for example, changes to the ways in which women's and men's social, political, and economic lives are differently shaped, or for the importance of equal representation in political participation for everyone, whether male, female, marked by femininity, working class, LGBT, disabled, or of an ethnic minority. As well as allowing feminists to produce inclusive political projects and policies, focusing on gender challenges essentialist and conservative conceptions of women and men and encourages a focus on the social processes of power. Although not all of these feminist political arguments use the term gender, they emerge out of it. (Armstrong et al., 2022)

## 2.1. Theoretical Foundations

Gender has emerged as an established theoretical construct in feminist political studies. The constructivist approach regards gender as socially and culturally constructed and, therefore, reconceptualizes femaleness and maleness in reference to men and women, thereby transforming the relationship between gender and power. Numerous feminist and gender studies theorists have challenged the assumption that feminism and politics should be associated with mere empirical referents of female and male. Feminist theorists challenge male-centered, masculine political theory as universal and presume that men's experiences reflect the experiences of all

people. This section lays the theoretical foundations necessary to understand how the concept of gender can be used to explore and address political questions. A brief history of some of the key figures and theorists in this area will also guide the reader through the development of ideas and empirical studies.

Intersectional theories argue that the experience of women is better understood using other categories of identity – race, class, sexuality, and ability – as the primary or sole categorization. Socialization feminists argue that while there is no fixed meaning of male or female, a society's stories do shape "correct" gender identities and roles. The critical insight of the gender approach is that beliefs or stories shape women's experiences of politics and law: as voters, leaders, activists, and concerned citizens. Gendered experiences matter to questions of political interest and rights. Policymaking could be different if one chose to focus on the aspects of life where women have different experiences from men. This one very simple statement about the gender approach – we can influence politics if we understand and appreciate what women see, think, and feel – is so powerful and isn't talked about enough. The theories also do not deny there are differences between men and women that devolve from biology. But they argue that the political significance of biology is often at best exaggerated, and at worst unsubstantiated. Natural differences are not sufficient to explain the experiences and significant gaps in opportunities that exist between men and



women in the socio-political context, particularly as biology is socially constructed. Even where there are differences that seem to arise from biology, there is a chicken and egg problem. Do women behave differently because they are more "naturally" empathic, or are men ranking higher on empathy scales since they don't want to appear unmasculine? Or do women have XX chromosomes and lower levels of testosterone than men? It is very difficult to separate out the social and the biological. Feminism uses gender theory as a way of understanding the world rather than positing an approach that simply says 'change policies!' In trying to understand and analyze the world through a gendered approach, and to see how gender is pivotal, it is hoped that feminism leads to a clearer understanding of the nature of barriers confronting women, men, and other genders – solutions to addressing many of these apply to more than one gender – at both an individual and collective level. (Stauffer, 2021)

### 3. Intersectionality and Feminist Political Theory

#### Intersectionality

1. Intersectionality has become a central concept within feminist political theory, although it is also used within other disciplines. This concept has historic roots in Black feminist movements and has been adopted into much of feminist discourse. Within this literature, it is used as an acknowledgment that identity is complex and that different aspects of identity intersect to shape

different experiences in fundamental ways. When someone is at the intersection of different facets of identity, gendered experiences and the resultant dynamics cannot be adequately understood within a single dimension. For instance, race, class, sexual orientation, and religion all intersect with gender. If someone is situated at the intersection of blackness, maleness, and queerness, then they experience the world differently than someone who identifies as a white woman. There is no unified category described as "women" that accounts for the experiences of all or even most people who identify with the label.

2. The significance of this concept in terms of political analysis is that it helps demonstrate how the feminist movement itself is not a monolithic category, but rather is constituted of different groups of women and feminists subject to different structures of oppression. Powerful narratives often dominate political discourse and have the capacity to erase and marginalize the voices of those who do not belong to the main narrative. Internal to states and politics, this has often resulted in excluding the interests and experiences of migrant women, indigenous women, and trans women among others from policy deliberation. If we take intersectionality seriously, then we will look to these experiences of inequality to enrich our analysis of the feminist movement and to be aware of the mechanism by which we may share the same label but want different things. This understanding is significant for the end to which pro-equality policy ideally speaks, and so there are implications for policy and

political activism. To ignore intersectionality is to perpetuate and reinforce systems of oppression. (Vallée et al.2021)

## 4. Feminist Approaches to Governance

There is an emerging literature in feminist political theory that considers governance. Governance is concerned with new ways of governing that are transnational, across several political and social levels. Feminist theorists have critiqued those governance practices and have formulated what feminist governance should entail. Governance would therefore include some of the same concerns as those in participation and representation sections. It would also involve work on the gender-blind and gendered norms in political culture that act as a barrier to making some forms of political participation more legitimate than others.

There is a move in some parts of the world to change political institutions so that women are more fully part of them than they have been in the past. Here are differently described initiatives, yet they have the same basic goal outlined. These initiatives have been described as ensuring the increased representation of female interests. The underlying principle is that women have different interests from men because of the differences in their sex/gender roles and life experiences. In terms of governance, it is asserted that there are geographical differences, local cultures to consider, and solidarity to involve. Gendering governance touches on poorer and

economically disenfranchised or oppressed women. Many women in this world have no or very limited voice in their governance.

The relevance of feminist approaches to governance can also be seen in the crisis in governance. Transforming governance is a way to change the exclusionary architecture of governance, rebranding it so that it is seen as being of the people, for the people. This view recognizes the ways that power operates through exclusions to ensure that what we take for rich democratic governance is not given to the poor and to men, as well as borrowing from people rather than the other way around. It could also include recognizing that women who have been seen as able and positioned to support families need living wages and support to do that. If governance were being transformed, it might be organizing the standard 40-hour week and other working time support around caring and receiving care in relation to responsibilities agreed at the local, regional, national, and global levels, and then deciding how individual working hours can fit into that shared blanket. Making this so would require seeing children and old people as a social responsibility. (An et al., 2022)

#### 4.1. Representation and Participation

Feminist political theorists believe that representation and participation are central to feminist governance. Women are grossly underrepresented in political offices and other elite decision-making positions. As a result, their

voice is missing in the public debate about the definition of problems and proper solutions. Some barriers to women's effective participation in these leadership roles and processes are structural: Women are disproportionately impoverished and busy with care for dependents. Other barriers are cultural: Women are socialized away from political ambition and confrontation. Women tend to be financially active but not political. Finally, some barriers are institutional: Women face persistent, implicit, and explicit discrimination from their time on women-friendly after-work committees to their treatment in a political campaign.

The presence of more women in political institutions is quite different from having democratic inputs from women in study groups. The presence of women in political leadership does not ensure that they can shape policy to better align with the public interests in rough proportion to their numbers. Women in political leadership roles can and do invalidate public opinion and make policies, particularly on international affairs, unresponsive to the interests or beliefs of the median woman and even their supporters. Efforts to appeal to public opinion to win elections increase consensus to manufacture centrist proposals reducing rights. To say that a policy or judicial outcome is unresponsive to the median woman is to say that decisions favor the interests of a few women over the interests of the many. (Poljak, 2022)

## 5. Challenges and Future Directions

- Challenges - The global situation of women - Backlash: the negative response to feminist achievements - The current picture: a global trend of young women ' s resistance - 'Feminism' they do not like: Black, brown, indigenous, Muslim, migrant, disabled feminisms - Unfulfilled promise - A new wave - Challenges in the discipline - A field deeply divided - Future directions - Coalition-building - Research activities to intensify - Strategies and public philosophies to reinvent - Conclusion: The times they are changing

Challenges A globe at the crossroads? Merely reviewing the current political moment may already hint at the challenges we are facing in our effort to think together. After several decades of international mobilization and global governance, there is a sense of about-turn in some quarters of the world. New or renewed right-wing or conservative parties have gained in popularity and power in, among other countries, the United States, Poland, Germany, and the Philippines. The situation of women at most levels of the political hierarchy is taking a dive. More generally, strong feminist movements at the grassroots across the globe are giving rise to a data-driven backlash from men and women on the right to the left. There is opposition, also in academic institutions and independent public forums, for example in the media, to any attempt by feminists to uncover and remedy the structural bases of gender discrimination in all areas of public and private life. In some countries, the very

concept of gender is excised from legislation and public discourse. (Hillman & Radel, 2022)

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