

## Gender democracy: the legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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### ABSTRACT

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a momentous one for gender politics. Beginning with the spread of women's voting rights, the political participation and engagement of women expanded during the years that followed. Links were forged between women's workforce participation and their active involvement in public affairs. Women's liberation movements reached across age, class and racial barriers to forge new policy demands. Gender inequalities in representation, too, mobilised coalitions of women determined to open up formal politics. Along the way, there were some notable achievements. There were also disappointments. This lecture dwells on the legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for women's civic and political engagement and participation. Using the concept of gender democracy, it suggests that women steadily engaged with democratic processes, practices and institutions as the century wore on. This process of democratic ownership was incomplete by 2000, and its legacy shapes gender politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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The theme of this conference 'Living Together – Civic, Political and Cultural Engagement among Migrants, Minorities and National Populations' is a very appropriate one for reflecting on democratic engagement from a gender perspective. This morning, I would like to reflect on this theme by charting the increasing engagement of women in civic and public affairs during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will first set a conceptual context for the trends of which I will shortly speak. That context is "gender democracy". Following this discussion, I will chart the expanding civic and political participation and engagement of women during the course of the last century. I will conclude with some reflections on the current context for women's engagement in addressing the major issues of today.

### **Gender Democracy**

The concept of gender refers to "the socially constructed roles, behaviours, attributes and activities that a given society sees as appropriate for men and women".<sup>2</sup> It has now become the preferred analytical term in exploring differences between women's and men's social roles and behaviours. At the century's end, investigations into gender differences in civic, social, and cultural life had found a foothold in all disciplines, and given those of us interested in such matters a rich seam of theoretical and methodological tools for interrogating how 'being' a woman in society was different from 'being' a man in that society.

In the context of engagement, gender places an emphasis on the behaviour and activities of women and men in civic and political institutions and processes. Much scholarship of this kind emphasises the engagement and participation of women, exclusively. This is partly a response to the real-life marginalisation of women from the public sphere. It reflects the need to rewrite women into the public domain as civil society participants in ways that are similar to, and different from, the public engagement of men. It is also an ideational challenge to the male hegemony of the public and political world. It considers power as a gendered force, and exposes the masculinism pervading democratic decision-making (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, 1996).

Yet, political studies in general, though borrowing heavily from other social science breakthroughs, has been relatively slow to adopt feminist insights into the gendered nature of public decision-making. Certainly, concepts such as gender mainstreaming

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/index.html>, accessed 22 June 2010.

have opened a gender-sensitive interrogation of policy-making, and has led to practical training for policy-makers. Critical frame analysis helps reveal the gendered imprint of public decision-making. And theoretical reflections on justice and democracy have provided researchers with normative tools for unpacking the gender contract between the state and the citizen. Thus, while gender-focused research on discrete aspects of democratic practice have yielded important insights, the focus on gender relations is only now beginning to find a purchase in the mainstream empirical study of democracy and democratic processes.

The interrogation of political institutions being carried out by Fiona Mackay, Georgina Waylen and others is one strand of this new research agenda. The critique of the European Union's gender equality code by Catherine Hoskyns, Roberta Guerrina, Lucie Coley and others is another instance of this exciting turn in bringing a gender-aware dimension to politics research. The fresh interest in political leadership by, for example, Karen O'Connor, Fiona Buckley, and Manon Tremblay is another welcome development. And the feminist understanding of the role of gender in international relations, as explored by Ann Tickner, Marisya Zalewski and Cynthia Enloe, has brought many new insights to bear on the different public positioning of women and men.

I would like to bring an additional strand to this new conceptual trend in political studies: that of Gender Democracy.

Putting the words 'gender' and 'democracy' together, without the 'and' in between draws attention to seeing democracy as a deeply gendered construct and democratic manifestations as deeply gendered practices. Political philosophers such as Carol Pateman, Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young have, in their own ways, brought this insight to our attention. But empirical researchers have not, until now, taken up the challenge of developing a gendered critique of democracy in action as a whole. This is a task that we in Queen's focus on. Our concept, Gender Democracy, permits us to highlight one of the fundamental principles on which democracy is based, that of political equality, and give it a gendered analysis. It enables us to use a gender lens to interrogate procedural and substantive dimensions of democratic power so as to reveal its masculinist imprint. It is, in other words, about assessing the quality of democracy through a gender lens. In doing so, our objective is not only

to critique, but to actively contribute to a refashioning of democratic behaviour, activities, institutions and processes along gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive lines. And in that context, the civic and political engagement and participation of women and men is a central component.

I will now turn to exploring women's civic and political activism as manifest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the concept of gender democracy in mind. In spanning a century of women's public engagement, I am conscious of addressing breadth and sacrificing depth. Yet, in taking this broad view, I hope to show that, through their civic and political engagement, women have continually found ways of challenging the masculinist constructs of democracy.

### **Women's suffrage**

In 1906, Finland became the first country in the world to give women the right to vote and to stand for election. In 1907, one year later, 19 women were returned to the Finnish parliament.

This is an important moment in the story of women's participation in public affairs. It is the moment when involvement in democratic politics became a right for all women, and not the privilege of some. It was also to mark a century of unprecedented activism on gender equality.

The right to vote and be elected to parliament was an agenda around which the first great wave of women's mobilisation rallied. The movement became a global one, as this banner from Australia shows.

For the first time in history, women were claiming a civic identity that did not have an association with privilege, wealth, or class.

The suffrage movement spread rapidly, with mass demonstrations, rallies and marches. They were met with attitudinal, verbal and physical resistance. Suffragist leaders were lampooned as bad mothers, the more militant among them jailed on account of their protest actions.

Winning the vote created a demand for women to become political party activists, speakers at public meetings, and candidates, though their latter role was largely tokenist. It realised, in some measure, the dreams of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century women's

rights advocates such as Olympe de Gouge, Mary Woolstonecraft and Harriet Taylor Mill. It signalled that for a democratic government to be legitimate, women's endorsement, as well as that of men, was needed. Although suffrage did not bring about full gender equality, it did mark an important moment in democratic participation.

However, not all countries accorded women the right to vote at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was well into the middle of the century before many women could access this political right.

Spain accorded women voting rights in 1931, France in 1944 and Italy in 1946. Indonesian women won the vote in 1945, while Peruvian women followed a decade later in 1955. Switzerland finally extended the franchise to women in 1971, while the Kuwaiti parliament passed a law enfranchising women in 2005.

Indeed, while voting is something we take for granted in our privileged societies, enfranchising illiterate women, and empowering them to have their say as voters and candidates is a particular challenge in others. In the April elections in southern Sudan, for example, voters were confronted with 12 different ballots, while voter illiteracy rate was 85%. This scenario, replicated in many developing countries to a greater or lesser degree, shows how monumental is the task of engaging women in the democratic process.

In circumstances of this kind, women's right to freely choose representatives can be compromised by patriarchal cultural traditions. Male heads of households have been known to take women's ballot papers and fill them in; instruct women in the polling booth on how they should cast their vote; and even take multiple ballot papers for family members from polling clerks. These male-power abuses of women's electoral participation continue in many parts of the world. Their persistence shows how difficult it is for women to claim their right to a basic democratic engagement in the face of deep-seated patriarchal cultural belief systems.

### **WWII and women's engagement**

To return to our historical tour of gender democracy: as the century moved on, women's sense of civic identity became linked with their ambitions for personal fulfilment. The years of the second world war were defining in this regard.

The armaments industry, and the various services supporting the war effort drew increasing numbers of women into the workplace. This was in contrast to the depression of the 1930s when the few women in paid employment were pressured to exit the workforce so as to make jobs available to men.

War-induced employment, presented as a patriotic act, provided low paid women already in work with better jobs and conditions, and brought married women into the workforce. However, we must be careful not to over-estimate the numbers of women in employment during this time. Most women of working age remained in the home. After the war working women either returned to the home or were squeezed back into lower paid positions. Women's status declined, the gender wage gap increased, and as Wilma Rule noted (1974: 1715) "many left [employment] voluntarily in the ideological milieu of a new familialism buttressed by a popularised Freudianism which portrayed the nonhomebound woman as psychologically afflicted".

What has this got to do with the gendered nature of civic participation and engagement? Indeed, the general link between employment and political awareness is long established. The world of work provides networks of various kinds, informal and formal, where current issues are discussed, opinions are formed and views exchanged. For women and men, these networks offer opportunities for socialisation to political, public and civic activities. Work, then, provides much more than an economic reward. It provides a context in which an individual's capacity to partake in society is enhanced. Women, who in the 1950s were expected by society to marry and be full-time homemakers, lost out on the orientation to civic and public affairs offered by employment.

### **The post-war period**

That did not mean, though, that women were not civically engaged. On the contrary: women's associational life during the 1950s was, by all accounts, active and vibrant. Hundreds of thousands of home-based women joined locally-based voluntary women's organisations such as the Mother's Union and Women's Institutes in Britain, the General Federation of Women's Clubs and the Women's Division of Christian Service in the US (Beaumont 2010, Mathews-Gardiner 2004).

They focused on church and charity-related volunteering, improving home-making skills, civic engagement, and education. Associational activity was engaged in for its own sake, not as a political enterprise. These networks provided a structure for women's social interactions, and facilitated a modest level of women's opinion formation along with their engagement in 'good works' (Mathews-Gardiner 2004).

However, as Catriona Beaumont (2010) argues, there was more to the 1950's housewife than is portrayed in conventional historiography and popular imagination. She uncovers the multiple identities of the stay-at-home woman – wife, mother, employee, consumer, active citizen and campaigner for women's rights. Importantly, though, by encouraging the citizen housewife (Kristin Skoog, 2010), she and others suggest that these associational groups contributed to the blurring of the distinction between the public and the private worlds of women.

By the 1960s, women's membership of these associations had suffered a severe decline. The decade of 'homemakers and housewives' was supplanted by the decade of 'feminists and women's liberation' (Mathews-Gardiner 34). Many of these women's associations became redefined as locally-based civic bodies with national and international advocacy roles co-ordinated by a professionalised leadership. But that was in the future. In the 1960s and 70s, housewives were faced with the task of reconciling their associational understanding of civic engagement with that of the more forceful, action-oriented and protest-focused politics of their daughters and sisters in the women's liberation movement.

### **Women's Liberation**

The 1960s ushered in a new phase of economic and social development in industrialised societies that in turn impacted on women's social roles. Women's educational attainment, an important contributor to social and civic empowerment, had risen and, in the United States and Europe, began to outstrip that of men (Devand 1968: 65; Barro and Lee 2000). Employment opportunities, a technological revolution that drove a new phase in consumerism and communications, and the expansion of 'middle class' aspirations, began to chip away at traditional gender role contracts, in both public and private spheres.

The anti-war, civil rights, and student protest movements of the 1960s in advanced democracies provided the impulse for the second wave of feminism. Even in these contexts, challenging the gender hierarchy in participation and influence was obvious. As Taylor (1999: 8-9, quoted in Beckwith 2001: 384) notes: “Even in movements that purport to be gender inclusive, the mobilization, leadership patterns, strategies, ideologies, and even the outcomes of social movements are gendered”. Indeed, it was the experience of sexism in the social movements of the time, when women were expected to cook and clean for their male volunteer counterparts, that led the New York Radical Women to spark the women’s rights movement<sup>3</sup>.

In 1968, Robin Morgan led a number of other members of the New York Radical Women in a protest at the sexism and racism of the Miss America pageant. They encouraged women attending the pageant to place items of restrictive women’s clothing, such as bras, in a “Freedom Bin” – and the image of feminists as bra-burning, man-hating women was born.

The popularising of authors Betty Friedan – the ‘mother’ of modern feminism – Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer through the new media of television brought the issue of women’s oppression into homes across industrialised post-war democracies. At around the same time, legislation in the UK and the USA had begun to tackle pay and other discriminations against women in the workplace. Government reports in many countries documented women’s disadvantaged legal and social status, and made recommendations for reform.

The UK women’s movement identified four initial areas for policy attention in 1971– equal pay, equal job and educational opportunities, 24-hour childcare, contraception and abortion on demand.

Women’s liberation in Britain, and US and other countries, engaged in a period of intense activity. Regional and national meetings that attracted hundreds of women, local consciousness-raising groups, marches on parliament and other high-visibility protests characterised the movement. Connections were made across class and race lines, and for a brief time all women were united in their commitment to end

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/peopleevents/e\\_feminists.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/peopleevents/e_feminists.html), accessed 24 June 2010



discrimination. The sisterly solidarity fragmented shortly afterwards, with class, race and other deep-seated social and political divisions reasserting themselves.

The lasting legacy of the women's movement, though, was to change social attitudes towards women's role and status. It had a long-term effect on public policy, on socio-cultural norms, and on women's aspirations. Just as importantly, it mobilized and engaged a generation of women, and affected the attitudes of a generation of men. Their awareness of gender inequalities even today is more acute than that of their sons, daughters and voting age grandchildren.

### **Globalising women's empowerment**

However, our story of gender democracy across the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not end here. The final chapter sees the global diffusion of gender equality norms. This was supported by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which in turn is dedicated to gender equality and the advancement of women. Responding to the momentum generated by the women's movement in the 1970s, the General Assembly declared 1975 International Women's Year and organised the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City, followed by one in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). In 1979, the UN adopted the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), seen as the International Bill of Human Rights for women. In 1995 it adopted the Beijing Commitments and Platform for Action to secure gender equality, and peace. In 2000 it adopted Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, calling for women's inclusion in peace-building processes. In 2009 it added to this by mandating peacekeeping forces to protect women and children from sexual violence during armed conflict.

This slight institutional turn in this address is for a purpose: it is to highlight that none of these policies and events would have occurred in the absence of a concerted, focused transnational impetus from women. Transnational activism is the women's movement of the century's end. It links local issues with global concerns, builds connections across borders, creates dialogue between feminists in the global north and the global south. It began in the mid-1980s, as preparations for the Nairobi World Conference on Women got underway. However, it took some time before women from the global north and global south could agree on a common agenda.

The clash of interests and aspirations Two paradigm shifts in the economic and cultural world order prompted consensus-building among First world and Third world women: - the assertion of transnational neo-liberal markets dependant on cheap labour, often provided by women, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. These were seen as global threats to women's equality and empowerment.<sup>4</sup> A more united transnational feminist activism quickly proliferated and particularly after the Beijing conference. From this consensus, a global feminist campaign to end all forms of violence against women was initiated. In 1993, the UN adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against women, committing member states to this task.

In 1996, transnational feminist networks united on this issue, and in 2009, as a result of their concerted lobbying, it became a priority for United Nations policy action.

In parallel with this transnational civic and political engagement of women, awareness of the absence of women from elite decision-making grew. The importance of their presence for bringing gender equality about, and for representing women's concerns resulted in the widespread adoption of gender quotas in political and public life. By 2000, many European and Latin American countries had adopted some form of gender quota, along with a range of countries in Asia, largely due to women's engagement with party and political systems.

Even still, women's equality with men in political decision-making had some considerable way to go, standing at 18 percent at century's end worldwide.

## **Conclusion**

These reflections on the nature and context of gender democracy has sought to draw out the strands of women's civic and political participation and engagement over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In retrospect, one can find a pattern of activism, abeyance, and renewed mobilisation. Each phase reinterpreted women's cultural, economic and social inequalities in ways relevant for the time. And each phase brought with it particular challenges to the democratic order manifest in states and in the transnational sphere. Solidarity among women in their quest for gender justice is a defining feature of each phase. As with their mobilization, it has ebbed and flowed.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/modern/International-to-Transnational-Feminism.html> (accessed 26 June 2009)

Yet, consensus on a reform agenda has been a persistent feature of women's civic and political engagement.

The legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century makes clear that political equality is a gendered construct. Through the century, women have sought to challenge the masculinist hegemony in civic and public affairs in order to fashion a better life for all women. In doing so, they have confronted national and international economic, religious, social and political orders. They have persistently challenged the inherent sexism, discrimination and devaluing of women. In different ways throughout the century, women have taken ownership of their society, and sought to change it for the better.

There is an element of closure to this story at century's end. It began with the international suffrage movement, with specific country iterations. It ended with its modern equivalent, transnational feminist activism, working at global and national levels to secure women's rights.

We may not be able to see into the future for women's activism, but one thing is clear: in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's civic engagement has been an extraordinary force for change in the world. It brought about a social and cultural autonomy and empowerment unimaginable at the beginning of that era.

That process of democratic ownership is incomplete. The globalised world of today holds different challenges. Finding solutions to the democracy-testing challenges currently facing the world, such as climate change, security in all its aspects, and the endemic problem of hunger, will require the talents, wisdom and active engagement of women alongside men.

At the end of the 21st century, the story of women's taking ownership of democracy will be a different one. It will build, though, on women's experience of working together, during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to bring about a more gender-just world.

And on that point, I will conclude and I thank you for your attention.