

## CHAPTER 26

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# WOMEN'S POLICY AGENCIES AND STATE FEMINISM

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WHEN a government creates a Ministry for Women's Affairs, a Commission on Gender Equality, or a Bureau for Women and Work, it could be an act of subversion against male-dominated politics: a legitimate center for gender equality within the state. The Platform of Action adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 certainly recognized such a potential: agencies would be mechanisms "...to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender equality perspective in all policy areas" (United Nations 1996). Agencies also have the potential to promote increased women's representation and to develop and implement meaningful and authoritative policies on their behalf. Given their promise, the study of the extent to which these structures successfully promote women's claims and gender equality is the study of the extent to which there is state feminism.<sup>1</sup>

Feminist researchers from across the globe have looked at women's policy agencies and the prospects for state feminism. With increasing dialogue and collaboration, these scholars today form a community that has the capacity to sustain a global research agenda. This chapter draws from their work to describe the phenomenon of women's policy agencies and to set forth some major questions, issues, findings, and emerging research agendas. The first part of the chapter maps out the development and proliferation of agencies over the twentieth century. The second section addresses three assumptions central to the study

of agencies and state feminism. The third and main part of the chapter describes the framework, methods, research results, and theory of state feminism in Western postindustrial democracies based on the work of the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS). It then shows how RNGS research results challenge conventional wisdom—in fact, myths—about the effectiveness of agencies. The conclusion returns to the implications of the research findings and agendas for understanding state feminism and gendering the broader study of democratization.

## WOMEN'S POLICY AGENCIES WORLDWIDE<sup>2</sup>

### The Three Waves of Women's Policy Agencies

In this chapter we define women's policy agencies as state-based structures at all levels and across all formal government arenas assigned to promote the rights, status, and condition of women or strike down gender-based hierarchies.<sup>3</sup> Such agencies appeared in the early twentieth century, but it was the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women in 1947 and the International Women's Year (IWY) Conference process in the 1970s that provided a template for adoption. At the same time, agencies were a product of the efforts of national governments to address women's movement demands from the 1960s to the present. Looking at the establishment of agencies, scholars identify three stages that followed the initiative of the UN women's policy process and the ebbs and flows of women's movements (Rai 2003a; Squires 2007).

In the first wave, prior to the 1970s, a handful of women's policy agencies were set up in Western democracies, for example, the Women's Bureau in the United States, created in 1920, the Women's Bureau in Canada created in 1954, and the Study Group on Women's Work in France created in 1965. Such offices were always focused on the status or condition of women and women's issues, most often in the area of employment. Following the first UN conference in Mexico City in 1975, which called for countries to establish women's policy machinery, and the explosion of women's movements in Western countries governments responded by systematically setting up more agencies. By the mid-1980s all Western countries and by the mid-1990s 127 countries across the globe had national offices (Rai 2003a). This second wave of women's policy agency growth coincided with a trend toward focusing on gender equality rather than women's condition alone. A part of this second stage of agency development was the pursuit of gender mainstreaming—incorporating a gender perspective into all areas of policy—a charge usually, but not always,

given to the women's policy agencies.<sup>4</sup> The link between gender mainstreaming and women's policy agencies, once again, clearly came from the international arena—the United Nations as well as other international organizations (True and Mintrom 2001; Staudt 2003).

In the final phase, beginning in the late 1990s and particularly in Western European countries, agencies shifted from a focus on women and gender toward diversity goals with responsibility for inequalities due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and disability. The trend toward diversity agencies has also coincided with a scholarly shift toward assessing intersectionality, that is, how different systems of oppression intersect to produce variation in effects for groups of women from different ethnic backgrounds and with various socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., Weldon 2008; see also the chapter by Hill Collins and Chepp in this volume). As Lovenduski (2007) and Squires (2007) show in the case of the U.K. agencies, this trend provides both opportunities and challenges for addressing issues of gender equality. In the United States, for example, the women's movement benefited from the wide reach of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission because it could base its claims for gender equality on effective legal arguments for race equality. In the French case, on the other hand, the establishment of a new authority that incorporates all forms of discrimination coincided with the downgrading of developed women's policy machinery at the national and subnational levels (Lépinard and Mazur 2009). It remains to be seen the degree to which the development of the new diversity agencies will contribute to the disappearance of women's policy machineries altogether—a question of keen interest on the state feminist research agenda.<sup>5</sup>

## ISSUES IN STUDYING WOMEN'S POLICY AGENCIES AND STATE FEMINISM

The special focus of RNGS scholars on women's policy agencies and state feminism has provided many lessons of use to others interested in the topic. In this section we address three of them. These pertain to assumptions that some of us in the network had believed, a but subsequently found were not only incorrect but also barriers to a clear understanding of the role of agencies and the phenomenon of state feminism. The first pertains to the importance of rigor in conceptualization of state feminism; the second addresses assumptions about Western bias; and the third cautions against the expectation that countries in the same geographical region will have similar experiences with agencies.

### **Assumption 1: State Feminism Is a Synonym for Women's Policy Agencies**

It is important not to assume that the existence of agencies is proof of feminist outcomes. While the terms *state feminism* and *women's policy agencies* are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between the structures themselves and the process of state feminism in which the women's policy agencies are a central player. The relationship between the two concepts is part of the genesis of their use by those international researchers who, for the most part, have studied agencies in Western postindustrial countries where the concept of state feminism moved from "a loose notion to an operationalized concept" (McBride and Mazur 2007, 501).

To summarize this shift in the idea of state feminism, beginning in the 1980s the term was associated with the presence of women's policy agencies themselves. Later in the 1990s, when the RINGS network took on a systematic study of women's policy agencies we sharpened the concept of state feminism to assess what agencies did: the degree to which women's policy machineries effectively promoted women's interests within the state, through advancing women's movements actors' ideas and claims in policy debates and content and helping the actors that forwarded those claims to gain access to state governing arenas. Although some researchers continue to use the loose notion of state feminism as a synonym for women's policy agencies, the more precise idea that agencies are separate from the process of state feminism permits empirical research into the activities, effectiveness, and impacts of agencies. It sets the stage to study the extent to which agencies do, in fact, promote the status of women and gender equality.

### **Assumption 2: Western Bias Prevents Global Research**

A more controversial issue in state feminism research is the question of Western bias (Valiente 2007). The idea of creating a government structure for women's interests is based on ideas of specialized bureaucracies that fit democratic and comparative wealthy and economically developed societies.<sup>6</sup> For non-Western observers, there is a question of whether such a mechanism could be transposed to societies outside the West, especially to nondemocratic, authoritarian settings or unstable and economically challenged countries. In the final analysis, it is thus possible that these agencies are only a by-product of the level of political and economic development of postindustrial democracies and will always be irrelevant in other contexts.

Historically, women's policy machineries are associated with Western notions of government and specific levels of postindustrial democratic development. Nevertheless, the United Nations beginning in the 1970s systematically placed the establishment of women's policy agencies at the center of its campaign to

promote gender equality worldwide. National agencies became important players at the international policy conferences as potential instruments for promoting gender equality in the context of democratic and economic development. Also, other international organizations have made the establishment of women's policy agencies a criterion for a host of economic related aid, trade status, and membership. The European Union, for example, requires that postcommunist states in Central Eastern Europe include a women's policy agency in their transitional governments before being considered for EU membership. Having a gender equality mechanism is seen today as an essential feature of a democratic state. Thus, it was not a big leap to make these agencies the linchpin of gender mainstreaming for developing non-Western countries.

The focus on Western postindustrial democracies played out in the scholarly community that emerged in the 1990s around the study of women's policy agencies and state feminism. It was scholars interested in gender politics in the Western democracies that developed the concept of state feminism to study the new phenomena of women's policy agencies in the West. From the beginning they were careful to tailor their research to that context. The concepts and theories did not assume a global reach or apply automatically to non-Western contexts.

It is up to experts in non-Western gender politics to decide whether the tools to study state feminism—concepts, theories, and findings—can travel for research outside of the west. Some scholars have already suggested topics that are especially important in this regard. As Rai and others (2003a) show in a study of women's policy agencies conducted for the UN, some factors that help agencies achieve real change in the developing countries were not important in Western countries, for example, state capacity, the nature of civil society, availability of resources, and, perhaps most important, whether there was a stable democracy. "Democratization processes are therefore crucial for embedding national machineries in the architecture of government" (38). Similarly, Valiente (2007) identified the deep differences between the contexts in Western postindustrial democracies and other parts of the world, including the different ways state and society interrelate, the absence of certain sectors of policy, and the absence of well-organized women's movements. What the proliferation of women's policy agencies in non-Western parts of the world means for the condition of women and gender equality is not self-evident, nor can it be assumed; it is a question for study and must be carefully examined by experts of the various countries and regions.

### **Assumption 3: Regional Patterns of Women's Policy Agencies**

Given the range, diversity, and complexity of governments, politics, and societies, many find it helps to generalize about regions of the world. Even the previous discussion of West and non-Western countries falls into that convenient

approach. However, we caution against the tendency to assume regional patterns and group agencies in, for example, Latin America, South Asia, or the Middle East. One of the major findings of the RNGS study of the characteristics of women's policy agencies in Western postindustrial democracies is that there are virtually no structural patterns by region, whether geographically or in terms of state–society relations. Rather than common trends in state feminism by regional grouping of country, we found that women's policy agencies' impact and influence varied more by the policy context in which they operated within a given country.

So far, there has not been systematic study of women's policy agencies and state feminism outside the West. There are numerous individual case studies in a broad range of national contexts, some of which provide a great deal of detail, but there is little effort to analyze trends across countries or regions. Rai (2003a) is one of the few studies that examine state feminism across more than one region. Goetz (2003) and Kardam and Acuner (2003) compare agencies in more than one country, and many other studies examine agencies within single countries without making any regional generalizations.<sup>7</sup> Thus, evidence for regional or national patterns is limited. At the same time, analyses suggest that there is a similar diversity of structures and effectiveness that may have less to do with specific national or regional contexts than with levels of economic or political development. For example, in authoritarian systems women's policy agencies tend to have few links to women's movements and are highly symbolic being used by the ruling regime to legitimate power (Robinson 1995; Zheng 2005).

Still, any conclusions about women's policy agencies outside of the West must await a more systematic analysis of the monographs in the secondary literature and in turn the development of systematic studies that compare with the findings about women's policy agencies and state feminism in the West.

## AGENCIES, MOVEMENTS, AND STATE FEMINISM IN POSTINDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACIES: THE RNGS STUDY

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### The Evolution of the Concept of State Feminism

RNGS connects the development of the concept of state feminism to the changing relationships between women's movements and states beginning in the 1960s. At first, movements mobilized women through autonomous, informal groups engaged in spontaneous protest; they often viewed the state as the enemy—the embodiment of patriarchal dominance.<sup>8</sup> After the decline of these grassroots

autonomous movements in many countries after the 1970s, movement actors and analysts began to look to the state as a means to overcome social and economic inequality (for more discussion of the state see the chapter by Chappell in this volume). This process was closely tied to growing interest in studying women's policy agencies and the idea of state feminism (see Mazur and McBride 2008).

Pioneers in this area were in Scandinavian countries whose women's movements had been less from the grassroots and whose attitudes toward the state were generally positive. Helga Hernes (1987) favored the term in her book *Welfare States and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism*. Her view was comprehensive: state feminism included a range of public policies and rules but also "the interplay between agitation from below and integration from above" that would lead to a "woman-friendly polity" (15). Siim (1991) called Hernes's idea *feminism from above*, a term that meant not only favorable policies but also the presence of feminist women in government offices. "The expression then referred to both feminists employed as administrators and bureaucrats in positions of power and to women politicians advocating gender equality policies" (189). While most Scandinavian scholars used the term to label some type of interaction between activists outside the state and sympathetic feminists inside the state, a few focused on women's policy agencies (Nielsen 1983; Dahlerup 1986), but none offered a definition of feminism. A woman-friendly polity usually meant the smooth relationship for women between their family, working and public life. Was that feminist?

Unlike the Scandinavian scholars, Australians had an active tradition of feminist skepticism of the patriarchal state. However, in the late 1980s, Australian researchers observed the growing number and relevance of women's policy agencies in their own country and directed their work to understanding what these offices did for women. This led to new theorizing about feminism and the state (Sawer 1990; Eisenstein 1996). Work of Australian scholars Pringle and Watson (1992) and Franzway, Court, and Connell (1989) challenged the claim of the monolithic patriarchal state by observing that states, in fact, comprise many different arenas for political and administrative action. This more complex view of states opened the way for many scholars to see them not as enemies but as a means by which feminist activists could challenge the male-dominated way of doing things and be successful. Rather than focus on the complex array of agencies they found at all levels of government, however, Australian researchers were primarily interested in the individuals—called *femocrats*—who worked in those agencies and elsewhere and who promoted a feminist agenda through those structures. They called this system a *femocracy* and therefore did not embrace the concept of state feminism in their work.

## Origins of the RNGS State Feminism Framework

While scholars and activists were reconsidering the relationships between women's movement demands and states between the 1970s and 1990s, the United

Nations elevated the importance of institutional machineries for gender equality through its IWY Policy Conferences. Each conference produced a detailed plan of action for women's rights and gender equality to be followed by member-states.<sup>9</sup> Government-based women's policy machineries charged with implementing policies to achieve the goals for improving conditions for women were a central component of these plans. Thus, in this period there was a rapid spread of agencies throughout the world; these initiatives attracted the attention of more and more scholars and activists who were mostly interested in the activities of agencies in their own countries.

A group of these scholars contributed case studies of agencies in a range of countries from Australia to Scandinavia, United States and Canada to Spain and Italy, Great Britain to Poland for the edited volume *Comparative State Feminism* (McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995). This book, which included a comparative analysis of the cases, was the first to use the concept of state feminism to mean women's policy agencies as structures, their origins, resources, relation to women's movements, and effects. Despite its contribution to recognizing the importance of the growing phenomena of women's policy machineries, both the conceptualization and research design for the book were weak, casting doubt on the comparative analysis. It was clear to the contributors that more work needed to be done. Thus, in 1995, the RNGS was formed and set to work developing a coherent and rigorous research design and refining the concept of state feminism to facilitate carrying out the design. We settled on this initial nominal definition: state feminism occurs when women's policy agencies acting as allies of women's movement actors achieve policy goals and procedural access to policy-making arenas.

To carry out the RNGS research design, more than forty experts on gender policy signed up to study individual policy debates between the 1960s and 2000s on abortion, job training, political representation, and prostitution and debates on priority topics of the 1990s (called hot issues) in one of thirteen postindustrial democracies.<sup>10</sup> To complete the debates and report the results for each of the issues in the study took over ten years.<sup>11</sup> These studies of separate issues used methods of process tracing and descriptive statistics. As the case studies were completed, the concept of state feminism was refined and the state feminism theoretical framework began to take shape. The framework thus combines features of the initial RNGS research design and research model with ongoing comparative analysis of policy debates as well as insights from four bodies of theory: representation; social movements; institutionalization; and framing and policy making. The framework proposes that women's movements are more likely to receive favorable responses from the state when they ally with women's policy agencies. That alliance is observed first by looking for the extent to which there is agreement between actors and agencies on motivational and strategic frames expressed on the issue under consideration in a debate. Second, looking at the extent to which agencies gender the issue frames used by



policy actors reveals the success of the agency as an ally. The success of the women's movement actors is found when the policy content at the end of the debate coincides with movement goals (a substantive outcome) and when movement actors are included as part of the policy subsystem at the end of the debate (a procedural outcome).

When agency–movement alliances achieve these movement procedural and substantive goals, the result is movement state feminism; when agency–movement alliances achieve feminist movement procedural and substantive goals, the result is transformative state feminism. This delineation of two types of state feminism—movement and transformative—arises from the conceptualization of women's movement and feminism in the framework. This conceptualization is, for many, one of the most important contributions of the RNGS state feminism framework: it offers, for the first time in comparative gender politics research, a tool to study women's and feminist movements cross-nationally and over time (see the full description in McBride and Mazur 2008). Briefly, for the state feminism framework, women's movement is defined as having two components: the discourse developed by women as they contemplate their own gender consciousness in relation to society; and the actors who present that discourse in public life. The actors—such as organizations, individuals, and groups—are the focus of empirical research; they are identified as part of the women's movement by their discourse.

Women's movement discourse has three essential components: identity with women as a group; language that is explicitly gendered; and ideas that are expressed as women representing women. Feminist discourse has the same components but is a subcategory that includes other features: the goal of changing the status of women in society and politics and the challenge to gender-based hierarchies and structures of subordination of women. Just as the women's movement actors are those who express movement discourse, the feminist movement actors are those who express feminist discourse; thus, the feminist movement is a subcategory of the women's movement.

To summarize, the state feminism framework delineates two types of agency movement alliances: movement state feminism where agencies help movement actors gain procedural and substantive responses; and transformative state feminism where agencies successfully aid feminist movement actors achieve feminist substantive and procedural responses. With the accumulation of both kinds of substantive and procedural success over time, governments become more democratic. State feminism is a continuous concept; that is, there are degrees of state feminism in terms of the extent to which agencies represent movement frames, whether agencies are successful in gendering the issue frame of the debate, and whether agencies help movement actors achieve substantive or procedural success or both. The state feminism framework looks for explanations for patterns of state feminism in terms of combinations of agency resources and structural characteristics, women's movement characteristics, policy environment characteristics, and elements of left-wing support.

## Theoretical Foundations for the State Feminism Framework

The framework benefits from the insights of four strands of theory: institutionalism and state; social movement; democracy and representation; and policy and framing. Here we briefly summarize the contributions of each.

### *Institutionalism and the State*

The growing interest in the 1980s in women's policy agencies coincided with the rise in attention more generally to studying the state as an entity as set forth in Skocpol's (1985) introduction to *Bringing the State Back In*. Two themes in this "return to the state" informed the development of the state feminism framework. First was attention to the capacity of the state to have an impact on society generally. Second was the assumption that rather than being only the object of interest groups, state processes themselves had effects on the organization of political groups; for example, interest groups and social movements were affected by interaction with state structures.

Other scholars identified with *new institutionalism* also challenged the notion that the state was a monolith and called for attention to specific structures and their effects. This fit nicely with Australian feminist critiques of traditional state theory. The message of this work was that the meaning of the state is relative to specific cultures. Since there was no consensus on a definition of the state, authors were free to adapt the meaning to the needs of the particular research context. Conceiving of the postindustrial democratic state as a set of arenas opened opportunities to explore these arenas through different policy subsystems instead of the government as a whole. It then became reasonable to assume that interest groups and social movements face an array of opportunities—some more accessible than others—to enter state arenas and be heard. For RINGS, this meant that one could look among the policy subsystems and debates for those contexts where agencies and women's movement and feminist movement actors might form alliances and seek positive state responses. At last, there would be a way to answer Dahlerup's (1986) call for more attention to the question of whether the state or state agencies have helped or hurt women.

### *Social Movements and Women's Movements*

Who speaks for women? Can there be agreement about whether specific state actions help or hurt women? Social and women's movement theory helped RINGS address this controversial question. No entity speaks for all women, but since the 1960s the mobilization of women has spread second-wave movements across countries of Europe and North America. Knowing what women's movement actors want comes closer than any other indicator of knowing what women want from the state. The question becomes, then, to what extent have movement actors been effective in achieving their goals? In other words, what is the outcome of movement mobilization?

Rather than looking at outcomes, however, most social movement theory has focused on understanding and explaining the formation and development of movements. An exception was the work of William Gamson (1975), who studied the impact of social movement organizations on the state in the United States. Years later, Giugni (1995, 1998) and Diani (1997) pushed for more attention to the impact of social movements. Despite their interest there were problems in defining and measuring outcomes and being able to say convincingly that whatever happened was due to the activities of movement actors. To solve the problem, RINGS took another look at Gamson's typology. He offered two kinds of responses to movement demands: (1) procedural, or the recognition of movement activists within policy-making institutions; and (2) substantive, or gaining new advantages through policy change. RINGS was able to adapt this framework to assess the outcomes of movement activism. The most successful outcome was called dual response, both substantive policy and procedural access; the least successful was no response.

Movement theory suggested explanations or drivers of movement success with the state that have been used for explaining both the development and outcomes of movements (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Most can be grouped under two types: (1) *resource mobilization*, where one examines the internal features of movements, their membership, activities and protests, organizations and mobilization; and (2) *political opportunity structure*, which concentrates on external factors such as state organization, political parties, legislative process, points of access, and cultural compatibility. From this approach the state feminism framework proposed and adapted explanations grouped according to characteristics of women's movement actors (resource mobilization) and characteristics of the policy environment at the time of each debate (political opportunity structure). In addition, studies of movements have often mentioned left-wing support, that is, close ideological and organizational relations with leftist political parties and trade unions, as particularly important in movement success. They argue that, since left-wing parties and unions typically include change and equality as part of their ideologies, it seems likely that when those parties are in power, the state will be more favorable to demands from social movements for equality. And, when those movements are close to the left-wing parties and unions, movement actors will take leadership positions and provide direct links. Such left-wing support is also likely to favor an active role for women's policy agencies in assisting movement actors in achieving their goals.

### *Democracy and Representation*

Both feminist and nonfeminist assessments of democracy and representation suggest ways that state feminism may have an effect on enhancing representativeness and thus democratization of established Western democracies. Following Hanna Pitkin's (1967) framework, there is the widespread recognition of two

types of representation pertaining to women and the state: descriptive and substantive. These coincide with those indicators of movement success offered by Gamson (1975) and adapted to the state feminism framework. Descriptive representation refers to the presence in government of people who share similar characteristics with groups in the citizenry. So with respect to women's movements, descriptive representation is achieved for women when movement actors are included in decision-making arenas, what Gamson labeled *procedural access*. Substantive representation refers to advancing the policy preferences of a group, that is, when movement goals are included in policy content. Thus, according to the framework, state feminism increases both these types of representation. It follows, then that the more instances of state feminism found, the greater the democratization.

### *Policy Conflict and Framing*

Frames—definitions of issues that set forth the policy problem and desired solution—are the language of policy conflict. Framing theory connects many parts of the state feminism framework: comparing frames is a means of locating alliances between agencies and movement actors; the influence of agencies in policy debates comes by their ability to influence issue frames, or definitions of alternatives, used by policy actors; and the assessment of whether substantive or procedural success is achieved is shown by comparing frames expressed by actors in the subsystem and the content of policy outputs with women's movement actor frames.

Policy conflict theory connects frames to policy processes. At the core of the conflict is the distribution of power: "The *definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power* (Schattschneider 1960, 66, emphasis in original). The definition of alternatives in a particular debate is an issue frame. Issue frames determine who has influence and who is permitted to sit at the table where policy is made. If the issue frame is about women or gender, for example, this invites women's representatives to have a say. Thus a goal of women's movement actors is to influence the issue frame of the debate to reflect their perspectives, either directly or with the help of other state actors such as women's policy agencies.

## **Theory of State Feminism**

The state feminism framework served as the basis for the analysis of data from policy debates studied by RNGS researchers. There were several propositions, including the following: (1) women's movement actors have been successful in getting positive responses from the state over the years from 1960s to early 2000s; (2) women's policy agencies formed alliances with movement actors; (3) movement actors were more likely to be successful when they allied with agencies; and (4) explanations for both movement success and women's policy agency

effectiveness in aiding movement actors were found among characteristics of the movement generally, favorable characteristics of the policy environment, favorable characteristics of the agencies, and support from left-wing parties, trade unions, and governments. To examine these propositions we used an integrative mixed methods approach—qualitative comparative analysis (crisp set) (csQCA); bivariate correlation and ordinal regression; and case studies tracing causal mechanisms. Each of these methods offered a different angle on the data. CsQCA permitted us to examine the way the presence or absence of various explanatory conditions combined to produce outcomes. Correlations and ordinal regression made use of the RNGS quantitative data set (nominative and ordinal measures) to assess the influence of single variables on the outcomes. The case studies analysis looked in detail at the descriptive data on each policy debate.

The results of this mixed-methods analysis made it possible to offer a new set of theoretically powerful and empirically robust propositions that move the framework to the status of a theory. Building from the state feminism framework, this theory of state feminism presents a more complex picture of the movement agency relations and their effects than the framework offered and also recognizes the subtle effects of various policy contexts. In addition, the theory rejects single-variable and global generalizations in favor a more complex picture of causation, that is, the many configurations of conditions that produce particular outcomes of interest—the success of women’s movement actors and the effectiveness of agencies in that success.

Here we offer the description of the theory abridged from the capstone book for the state feminism project, *The Politics of State Feminism: Innovation in Comparative Research* (McBride and Mazur 2010, 258–260).<sup>12</sup>

Women’s policy agencies can and do form alliances with women’s movement actors to achieve procedural access and policy change in favor of movement goals. Agencies can facilitate movement success by adopting microframes that are compatible with or match women’s movement actors’ frames: Gendering issue definitions used by policy actors with those frames brings about access, policy success, and political cultural change in specific policy subsystems and in the state, more broadly speaking. The degree of activism of agencies is a significant cause of more favorable state responses to movement demands. The most effective agencies—Insiders—play a necessary backup role in gaining complete movement success, Dual Responses, if usually favorable conditions are not present.<sup>13</sup> Agencies also may form partial alliances or fail completely when movements are still successful in achieving their goals. The result is women’s movement success, but not state feminism. The patterns of successful agency-movement alliances are patterns of state feminism. Alliances that achieve specifically feminist goals are cases of Transformative State Feminism; those that achieve movement goals more broadly are Movement State Feminism. There is limited ability of

feminist movement actors to gain complete success in debates, but the likelihood is greater when agencies gender policy debates in feminist terms that match movement actor claims. With the accumulation of women's movement success over time in a given country, democratic governments become more democratic through increased substantive and descriptive representation of advocates for women, a previously excluded constituency.

Women's policy agencies on their own are not a cause of expanded inclusiveness of women in democracies in this broad sense. Instead, agencies tend to be effective allies when women's movement actors confront conditions that are unfavorable to their success in particular debates, but are not a continuing influence over time—once again a backup role.

The most promising explanations for movement success are combinations of agency activities and characteristics of movement, policy environments, agencies, and Left support. These features include the type of agency and its leadership, the priority of the debate issue to the movement as a whole, the support of women members of Parliament, the degree of openness of the policy subsystem, and the degree to which the issue frame at the beginning of the debate fits with women's movement microframes. Agency effectiveness may also be affected in a path-dependent manner by characteristics of previous debates on the issue and of previous coalitions with women's movement actors.

Patterns of state feminism vary by types of policy sectors. Any path-dependent effects occur by sector and not by country or by regional groupings of countries. Country patterns in state feminism may exist but will not be as important as patterns within different policy sectors that transcend national or regional contexts.

## DEBATES: DEBUNKING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

It is easy to be skeptical of the assertions made by state feminism theory. After all, looking at politics in most postindustrial democracies, rarely are any agencies in the news; they seem to be small and insignificant in relation to the vastness of contemporary governments and bureaucracies, and they are not part of the central business of government—defense, finance, justice, immigration, foreign affairs, or environment. Further, agencies devoted to women or gender may seem old-fashioned in the age of diversity or quite limited with respect to the more fashionable broad goals of gender mainstreaming.

Such skepticism is not new. From the beginning feminist critics and other critics considered agencies to be instruments of the political classes—little more than lame attempts to appease newly mobilized women’s movements. As the UN Plans of Action rolled out, they called for more agencies. As seen in Action 296 in the 1995 Platform, this admonition from the UN seemed to involve writing a report to the UN that would have little internal effect:

In order for the Platform for Action to be implemented, it will be necessary for Governments to establish or improve the effectiveness of national machineries for the advancement of women at the highest political level, appropriate intra- and inter-ministerial procedures and staffing, and other institutions with the mandate and capacity to broaden women’s participation and integrate gender analysis into policies and programmes. The first step in this process for all institutions should be to review their objectives, programmes and operational procedures in terms of the actions called for in the Platform. A key activity should be to promote public awareness and support for the goals of the Platform for Action, *inter alia*, through the mass media and public education. (United Nations 1996, 120)

In fact, it is not surprising that many see agencies as having to do more with the requirements of international bodies like the EU and the UN than with the interests of women and activists for women internally.

The last section of this chapter takes on some of the criticisms of agencies and shows that based on our empirical findings they are, for the most part, myths. This list comes from no single published source but rather from the scholarly and movement discourse we, as researchers, have observed. The integrative mixed methods analysis of over one hundred policy debates across the issues and countries in the RNGS study offers concrete and empirically replicable results that counter some of the sweeping generalizations. With this discussion, we encourage more systematic research using concepts and methods that further refine these nuanced findings about the potential of agencies to be allies of women’s movements and the conditions for their success.

### **Myth 1: Agencies are mostly just symbolic as far as women’s movements are concerned. They really don’t make any difference**

To determine whether agencies make any difference, the RNGS research measured the degree of movement state feminism in two ways. One was a typology that classified the agencies in terms of whether the microframes they offered in each debate were compatible with women’s movement microframes and whether they were effective in gendering the issue frame of the policy debate with those movement-friendly microframes. The result was four types: insiders (agencies did both); marginals (agencies had movement-friendly microframes but were not effective in the debate); antimovement agencies (agencies were effective but

did not support movement goals); and symbolics (agencies did not take a position and did not gender the debate). In 108 debates studied in thirteen countries across issues of abortion, job training, political representation, prostitution, and priority issues of the 1990s, agencies were symbolic in only 27 percent, or twenty-nine debates. They took up movement goals in 66 percent, or seventy-two debates, and were effective insiders on behalf of the movement in 35 percent, or thirty-eight debates. There was issue variation: agencies were most effective in political representation debates and least on priority issues and job training. The highest level of symbolic agencies was in priority issue or hot issues (41 percent) and abortion (30 percent). By no means were the agencies mostly symbolic.

The other way of looking at movement state feminism was an ordinal measure of the degree of activity of agencies, from doing nothing or working against the movement to matching movement demands and gendering the issue frame. Running a bivariate analysis, we found a significant correlation between the degree of agency activity and the degree of state response.<sup>14</sup> Using ordinal regression, with models that included agency activity with other explanatory variables such as the policy environment model, women's movement strength model and left support model, the analysis confirmed the significant independent influence of agencies on state response to movement demands.

## **Myth 2: Agencies and their leaders are susceptible to becoming tools of patriarchy. The state would never allow institutions that undermine the system**

According to the state feminism framework, cases of transformative state feminism show the extent to which the state accepts feminist demands from movement actors and agencies to challenge gender hierarchies and the subordination of women. In these cases, feminist insider agencies bring about feminist state responses (either procedural or substantive or both). Looking at the achievements of feminist movement actors, overall they have been less successful than the more general movement actors in gaining policy change along feminist lines, although they have been quite successful in penetrating policy subsystems. Agencies have not been reluctant to promote feminist microframes, however. In the debates where agencies took a position (excluding symbolic agencies), a majority (62 percent) advanced a feminist microframe. Among the insider agencies, half were feminist; that is, they were effective in gendering the issue frame with those feminist ideas. Further, feminist insiders were always successful in getting a feminist outcome, either procedural, policy content, or both. This means that, by accepting feminist policies and procedural inputs, the states in postindustrial democracies have made legitimate those ideas that challenge the traditional gender hierarchies. Over time, these have the potential to undermine the male dominated policy subsystems across the issues. There



are, however, no trends across time that suggest transformative state feminism is on the increase, nor are there any countries that are consistently more feminist than others.

### **Myth 3: Agencies can't do anything unless they have feminist leaders who are responsible to the women's movement rather than to the political bosses**

There are many policy debates where feminist leaders made the difference between success and failure for the movement–agency alliances. At the same time, feminist leaders have been at the head of symbolic agencies. Their presence seems to be most important in explaining cases of transformative state feminism: the most feminist insiders—both presenting feminist movement goals and gendering debates with those feminist ideas—tend to be ministries close to power, led by leaders with ties to feminist movement actors and in a position to propose policies. But feminist ties do not negate the need for agency heads to be responsible to the political bosses. Among the agencies that took an anti-movement stand, and there were relatively few, the feminist heads of ministries followed the lead of the government bosses, not the proposals of feminist movement actors. In other debates on other issues at other times, a feminist minister could push the agency to full effectiveness on behalf of movement goals.

With respect to movement state feminism, comparing the effective agency allies (insiders) with the ineffective allies (marginals) we found the effective ones were, in fact, less likely to have leaders with experience in the women's movement or feminist movement. Feminist leadership did not show up as part of any consistently winning combination of conditions that led to positive outcomes for movement actors (using csQCA). As with many of the conclusions of the study, the specific context of the policy arena affects the value of feminist expertise on the effectiveness of the agency. Some debates are already gendered at the beginning, leaving less for agencies to do in gendering debates. In other cases, the feminist leader almost singlehandedly has pushed the movement demands through parliamentary processes.

### **Myth 4: Governments never give agencies enough resources to do any good. They are too small and buried to be effective allies of women's movements. It's better to address the parliament directly**

Agencies may be small and weak in comparison with parliaments and conventional ministries, but they can be effective allies all the same. Sometimes, parliaments, due to tight party control, may be closed to outside organizations. In

those cases, working through an executive commission, for example, that is in proximity to cabinet offices or through a quasi-women's policy agency in a dominant political party is the only way for women's movement actors to be heard.

Although generally small, agencies vary in the number and extent of resources granted by the government. Some governments endow agencies with resources, and these have remained in place or even increased over time. We have found that administrative capacity—staff, budget, divisions, field offices—is often a condition, along with others, for agency effectiveness in gendering debates. But big does not always mean better. Placement in the political hierarchy can be key; executive commissions typically have small staffs, no divisions or field offices, yet they are close to the power brokers and may be headed by a powerbroker herself. At the same time, some agencies have lots of resources but little influence over policy making (for example, the Institute for Women in Spain). These may remain in an advisory or policy recommending role, dependent on others to refer proposals for response. The findings from causal mechanism case studies remind us that it is wise to assess the importance of administrative resources and structural characteristics in relation to subsystems when decisions are made and, consequently, to expect this to vary with the issue and topic for debate. These lessons remind us to avoid the sweeping generalizations often represented by conventional wisdom. Close and rigorous observation shows the complexity of agencies as they operate in dynamic policy environments.

### **Myth 5: The era of agencies is over; they have disappeared along with the feminist movement**

Neither feminist movements nor gender machineries are a thing of the past. Movement actors continue to work with agencies to influence policy debates. And while agencies may not be essential for movement success, they often make the difference when usually favorable conditions for movement success are not present. This is the back-up role we have already talked about. These agencies are not on the wane either. On the contrary, looking at the agencies that appeared in policy debates in this study, we see that the trend over time is for agencies to persist and to grow in number, power, and resources from the 1960s to early 2000s. Another trend is that offices have moved closer to centers of decision-making power. At the same time, although the majority of machineries are well established and not in decline, we also find agencies that are weak or have disappeared.

The role of women's policy agencies in promoting women's movement goals has remained important since the end of the period covered by these debates (early 2000s). Activists continue to turn to agencies as allies and state feminism continues to be found. Similarly, women's movements and, specifically, feminist movements are not dying away and as long as they persist women's

policy agencies will be resources for them. Agencies are resilient, and although a change in political leadership may temporarily decrease their resources and access (e.g., the United States under Republican domination in the early 2000s) they are revived with a change in administration, for example, under the Barack Obama administration in the United States. As long as the idea of the disaggregated state remains a useful approach to the study of politics, policy, and influence, we will continue to find the place of agencies, and movement influence will vary according to the issue being considered and the resulting policy subsystems and arenas. Some arenas are open to movement access, but others are not; in that case, often an agency that is located inside the policy subsystem, such as advisory bureaus and councils, can bring the movement perspective to the policy makers.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shown the various ways women's policy agencies through state feminism are important sites of representation, policy change, and ultimately democratization. The theory of state feminism in the Western context indicates the importance of women's policy agencies as a back-up for women's movements when all else fails. The RINGS analysis clearly shows the complexity of the determinants and dynamics of state feminism. The absence of national and regional patterns makes the analyst drill down to the sectoral level. It is not clear how women's policy agencies and state feminism are going to weather the diversity–intersectional moment or the perspective of serious economic decline. If the past predicts the future, then women's policy agencies will find a niche and fill the cracks left by nonfeminist actors and perhaps even bring a feminist perspective into diversity politics. But this is a question for ongoing and future state feminism research.<sup>15</sup>

Given the nascent nature of research on women's policy agencies and state feminism outside of the West, there is much work to be done. First and foremost, the new scholars who have conducted the deep descriptive studies of agencies need to assess what can be done with state feminism theory and approaches developed for studying the West. Expanding dialogue between the various research communities seems to be the most productive way forward. But resources must be marshaled to help support the time-consuming and labor-intensive studies that are necessary to examine issues of agencies and state feminism systematically across the entire globe. The investment of time and effort will be worth it, in the final analysis, given the degree of new insight and systematic understanding such a gendered analysis of the state will bring to democracies—struggling, emerging, and consolidating—and their critical processes.

## NOTES

1. This idea of state feminism—the effectiveness and impact of women's policy agencies as allies of advocates for women and equality—has been developed through the research of the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS). For more on RNGS go to [libarts.wsu.edu/pppa/rngs/index.html](http://libarts.wsu.edu/pppa/rngs/index.html)
2. The use of the term of *worldwide* makes references to the international comparative study of women and politics published in 1994 and coedited by Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury. This monumental work brought together scholars to write on gender and politics in forty-three countries of the world using a common analytical framework. In each case, experts from the particular country wrote about gender and politics issues.
3. RNGS discovered a form of agency similar to these but not fully located within the state; these are called quasi-women's policy agencies (QUAWPA). Examples include women's commissions in political parties and certain women's parliamentary commissions without formal statutory authority.
4. In the RNGS study of seventy-five women's policy agencies in thirteen Western postindustrial democracies from the 1960s to the 2000s, only 10 percent had mandates that sought to systematically promote gender across all policy areas; 75 percent had mandates to promote gender equality over several but not all policy areas.
5. For more on women's policy agencies and intersectionality also see the forthcoming special issue in *Social Politics*, "Intersectionality in the Equality Architecture," edited by Sylvia Walby and Mieke Verloo.
6. These ideas are associated with the work of Max Weber, who set forth the elements of rational government organization appropriate to industrialized societies.
7. Rai (2003a) and Ugalde (2003); Honculada and Ofreneo (2003) Lycklama à; and Kwesiga (2003) and Rai (2003b) examine agencies in single countries. Nijeholt, Vargas, and Wieringa (1998) take on agencies in Latin American and the Caribbean, but in single-country studies on Peru (Anderson 1998), Jamaica (McKenzie 1998), Brazil (Pitanguy 1998), Mexico (Lamas 1998), and Chile (Molina 1998). Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) compare state feminism in Africa and Latin America. There have been quite a few monographs of state feminism in certain but not all Latin American countries (see, e.g., Alvarez 1990; Baldez 1991, 2001; Matear 1995; Schild 1995; Lievesley 1996; Waylen 1996; Friedman 2000a, 2000b; Franceschet 2003; Richards 2003, 2004) and some recent work on sub-Saharan African countries (Ghana—Madsen 2010; Cameroon, Mozambique, and Uganda—Tripp, Casimiro, and Kwesiga 2009).
8. An exception in the 1960s was liberal feminism, a component of women's movements in the United States and Great Britain. From the beginning of the second wave, these feminists sought to work with government believing that by changing state laws, equality could be advanced.
9. IWY conferences were held in Mexico City (1975); Copenhagen (1980); Nairobi (1985); and Beijing (1995).
10. At the beginning, sixteen countries and the European Union were sites for study and analysis. By the end RNGS had coverage of three to five issues in thirteen countries, the basis for the findings discussed in this paper: Austria; Belgium;

- Canada; Finland; France; Germany; Great Britain; Ireland; Italy; Netherlands; Spain; Sweden; and the United States.
11. There are books that cover each of the issues published during this period: abortion (McBride Stetson 2001); job training (Mazur 2001); prostitution (Outshoorn 2004); political representation (Lovenduski 2005); hot issue (Hausman and Sauer 2007).
  12. This section includes only the theory based on findings of the integrated mixed methods analysis of the policy debates, using the state feminism framework. The book also includes additions to the theory based on the work of contributing authors. These authors focused on contributions of the RNGS studies to the four founding theories of social movement, representation, framing, and new institutionalism: Joyce Outshoorn, Joni Lovenduski and Marila Guadagnini, Birgit Sauer, and Dorothy McBride and Amy Mazur. Their chapters provided some information that permitted deepening and broadening the state feminism theory but did not change the central elements.
  13. Insiders are those agencies that gender the issue frame of a debate with ideas that are congruent with women's movement claims.
  14. Spearman's rho of .279 ( $p < .003$ ). These ordinal measures were:
    - State Response
      - o.State does nothing
        1. WMA policy change or procedural access
        2. WMA policy change and procedural access
      - WPA Activity
        - o. WPA does nothing or has anti WM microframe
          1. WPA compatible/mixed with WMA
          2. WPA matches WMA
          3. WPA compatible/mixed and gender issue frame
          4. WPA matches and gender issue frame
  15. The forthcoming special issue of *Social Politics* edited by Verloo and Walby, with national case studies of how gender equality machineries have integrated issues of ethnic diversity and intersectionality, will be an important source of information and analysis.

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