



WOMEN AND POLITICS IN A GLOBAL WORLD

SECOND EDITION

Sarah L. Henderson
Alana S. Jeydel

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
2010

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further Oxford University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education.

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

<http://www.oup.com>

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Henderson, Sarah, 1971–

Women and politics in a global world

Sarah L. Henderson, Alana S. Jeydel.—2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-538807-7 (pbk.: alk. paper) 1. Women in politics—

Cross-cultural studies. 2. Women—Government policy.

I. Jeydel, Alana S., 1968– II. Title.

HQ1236.H45 2010

320.082—dc22

2009024993

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*This book is dedicated to all who work
tirelessly to achieve equality of opportunity for all.*

PREFACE



Mao Tse-tung used the slogan “women hold up half the sky” to promote the equality of women as part of his larger goal to restructure Chinese society radically under his vision of communism. Since then, the phrase has been adopted by a myriad of organizations around the world to highlight the fact that even though women make up half of the population, their interests—political, economic, social, and personal—are often vastly underrepresented and undervalued. While they may hold up half the sky, women are not consistently rewarded or acknowledged for their work. Across countries, women make up a disproportionate share of the illiterate, the poor, the displaced, the elderly, the underpaid, the underemployed, and the underrepresented. Even though women have gained visibility and influence in a wide array of political and economic arenas, they are still far from equal to the position and status of men in society. However, beginning in the post-World War II era an explosion of women’s activism occurred globally, with the goals of equality, liberation, and better living conditions, not just for women, but for their families as well. This activism increased in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s as a second wave of women’s activism continued to highlight women’s often separate and unequal status around the world. *Women and Politics in a Global World* is written to serve as a central text for courses that address women and politics. We provide an overview of the ways in which women participate in politics, discuss some of the key policy issues that impact women, and define some of the critical transnational issues that confront women in the international community. This book is global in its coverage, and it compares women’s impact on politics and politics’ impact on women from a cross-national, comparative perspective.

We decided to write this book because as political scientists, we both teach classes that address women’s issues and politics from a comparative perspective. We found that while a vast literature on women and politics exists, past research tended to focus on the experiences of women in a single country. Alternatively, past comparative literature on women and politics tended to look

at the experiences of women in a single region, such as western Europe, Latin America, or Asia. The few books that did offer a comparison of women's activism across continents either were outdated or were edited volumes of case studies, which also did not quite match our needs. We never found that single text that pulled together all of the themes we wanted to emphasize and described the experiences of women not just from a particular country or region but from countries across the globe.

This comparative approach comes with inherent dangers. Is sisterhood really global? Can we really generalize about women's interests, given that women come from such vastly different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds? A white, wealthy, college-educated American woman seemingly has little in common with an illiterate Nigerian woman who was born into, and will in all likelihood die in, poverty; yet we discuss the condition of both in this book. Even within countries, vast disparities are found between how women define and advocate their interests; American women's gender identities, for example, often coexist with equally important ethnic, racial, religious, and class differences. Further, how can we compare the impact of women on policy and politics when there is such wide variation around the globe with respect to types of political regimes? France and Zimbabwe both claim to be democracies, yet any observer would agree that there are significant differences in how politics function in these two countries.

Despite these concerns, we argue that a global comparison is not only possible, but necessary. Certainly, a white, wealthy, college-educated woman in the United States faces different challenges than an illiterate woman in Nigeria does, and while these women probably have many concerns that they do not share, there is a set of core issues around which women have organized. In their study of women's political engagement in forty-three different countries, Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdury found that women around the world mobilized around four sets of common issues: ensuring their personal safety, security, and autonomy; providing reproductive rights and maternal and child health programs; equalizing access to public resources, such as education, employment, health care, and credit; and remaking the political and legal rules of the game to ensure women's access to political institutions and positions of authority.¹ In other words, women face common barriers, even though the specifics of those barriers may differ substantially from country to country. Also, cross-nationally, in broad ways, women have responded to these challenges similarly by organizing and advocating for greater roles for women in determining the direction of their lives. Of course there are numerous differences among women across nations and even within nations. But we find that women have many common experiences (being raped during war being but one example) and common ways of addressing issues they care about (mobilizing in a social movement, for example). We feel it is possible, and advantageous, to identify and discuss broad themes and experiences that women share across cultures and political contexts.

At the same time, we recognize that while sisterhood may be global, that does not mean that all women face identical situations or consistently respond in identical ways. Class, ethnic, religious, and cultural differences, for example, all intersect to enrich the variety of women's responses to issues that are important to them. A variety of scholars have tried to capture the complexity of women's diverse interests while simultaneously identifying larger commonalities. For example, Maxine Molyneux distinguishes between strategic and practical gender interests as a way to understand the varied ways in which women organize. While strategic gender interests are more explicitly feminist in orientation in that they seek ultimately to change the relations between the sexes to overcome women's subordination, practical gender interests "are usually a response to an immediate perceived need and they do not entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality."² Scholars who studied women's activism in Latin America and the Caribbean used this distinction to classify groups as "feminine" in orientation versus "feminist"; that is, "feminine" groups do not question the gender roles that men and women play in everyday life, but actually use these gendered roles as a justification for their activism. In contrast, feminist groups explicitly target issues that would change the relationship between the sexes.³ Thus, for example, women in both the United States and Brazil may mobilize over the issue of improved access to contraception, but they may be drawn into that activism for different reasons and may use different mobilization techniques and strategies that resonate with local cultures, customs, and needs. Some of these techniques may more overtly challenge existing patterns of gender relations, while others may reinforce them. These distinctions between practical and strategic gender interests and feminine versus feminist organizations are just a few illustrations of how women around the world can care about similar issues while expressing these concerns in very different ways. Commonalities among women can coexist with marked social differences, and thinking about women's activism in this way further explores how gender interacts with other social cleavages and dispels the idea that women's interests are unified and undifferentiated, without dismissing women's broad commonalities altogether.

Further, larger structural factors, such as a country's levels of economic development and social modernization, also affect the nature and impact of women's activism and the design of woman-friendly policy. In the previous few decades, a wealth of research based on survey data drawn from citizens from countries all over the world indicated that there are significant differences in the cultural views and attitudes of people living in agrarian, industrial, and post-industrial societies. This is because economic modernization creates systematic (and predictable) social change in terms of people's values. In particular, Ronald Inglehart argues that there is a rising and clearly distinct emphasis in postindustrial societies on self-expression, subjective well-being, and quality of life concerns rather than materialist concerns of basic security and survival.⁴

In terms of cultural attitudes about gender relations, drawing from survey data from over seventy countries, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris find that citizens of richer postindustrial societies are consistently more likely to support gender equality than are those in agrarian or industrial societies. As they point out, when people are no longer “restricted by widespread fears and insecurities based on life threatening challenges, then women and men gradually develop greater willingness to adopt interchangeable roles within the family and workforce.”⁵ Also, postindustrial societies are characterized by significantly large generational divides (which are not very large in other societies), in which younger respondents are even more likely to support gender equality than their parents or grandparents are. However, in their work only twenty countries are considered postindustrial, fifty-eight are industrial, and ninety-seven are classified as agrarian; thus, while this culture shift is significant, it is most noticeable in a minority of countries.⁶ Our larger point, however, is that, certainly, these differences in broad levels of modernization and cultural attitudes, norms, and customs will manifest themselves in terms of how women participate in politics as well as in the design and implementation of policy issues that affect women. Thus, when we compare the condition and status of women in Nigeria with women in the United States, we are aware of the socioeconomic backdrops that inform people’s values, interests, and identities.

In this book, we try to maintain the delicate balance between stressing the broad commonalities that women share while acknowledging the very real and substantial differences that separate them by carefully choosing which countries we discuss in each chapter. Thus, we try to avoid the “everything but the kitchen sink” approach to examples—bombarding the reader with a host of statistics and random examples from multiple countries that may bear little relation to one another. Each chapter expressly indicates which countries we are comparing and explains why those particular cases were selected. We carefully thought about which countries might illustrate broader theoretical points and when a global comparison would illuminate women’s commonalities and when it would superficially impose a “woman’s view” rather than “women’s views.” As a result, while the chapters in Part I tend to draw from the experiences of women around the world, the chapters in Part II focus on policy issues that impact women in the developed world and the chapters in Part III focus primarily on transnational issues that affect women in the developing world. Our aim in pursuing this strategy was to combine a global scope of inquiry with an appreciation for the limitations of such an approach.

Other obstacles to this type of study arise in addition to the thorny issue of defining women’s interests. As political scientists we bring certain assumptions and methodologies to this research. As political scientists we have been trained to study the state as a key actor in the lives of its citizens. We also discuss the state quite frequently, since the book addresses women’s impact on government institutions and policies and these institutions’ impact on women. By “state” we are referring to the various institutions within a country’s governing apparatus, such

as the legislature, the bureaucracy, and other related policy-making and implementing bodies, as well as the people who are employed by these institutions. Thus, we tend to ask questions that involve finding out more about the relationship between the state and its citizens (in this case, women) versus the role and impact of women in families or clans or villages. We also tend toward more macro-level analysis than other disciplines do. For example, an anthropologist might be more likely to study the role and impact of women in a specific town or village rather than in one country, in several countries, or even around the world.

We also had to think carefully about whether we wanted to present an analytical or a normative work. That is, should we simply present the condition and status of women, or should we take a position on what the condition and status should be? We decided to take the following normative position: When women's access to political and economic power is increased, women and society as a whole benefit. We echo the principals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, announced at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), which maintains that "women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including their participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development, and peace," as is helping women shape "their lives in accordance with their own aspirations."⁷ Thus, this book does advocate for women's equality, without confusing equality with "sameness." By women's equality, we mean that one sex is not superior to the other, nor should one sex have categorical control of the rights and opportunities of the other. Further, we assume that women's condition is socially constructed and historically shaped rather than preordained by God or nature.⁸ Thus, while we may discuss the role of women and/or organizations that view women as separate and unequal, we do not endorse this view.

At the same time, we try to avoid presenting women's impact and concerns from an overly narrow feminist perspective only. Feminism as an ideology is quite diverse; it includes liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist-socialist feminism, global feminism, black feminism, ecofeminism, and gender feminism. These strands of thought differ in their assessments of the nature and source of women's oppression as well as the strategies needed to overcome it. For example, liberal feminism, the oldest and probably most influential strand of feminist thought, focuses on the importance of increasing women's autonomy through working within the existing political system and structures to allow women equal access to opportunities and resources. In contrast, radical feminists argue that liberal feminists have been co-opted by the male hierarchy since their goal is to reform the system rather than replace it. A third perspective, global feminism, critiques liberal feminism because it evolved out of a specific Western tradition of Enlightenment values that is overly focused on the individual, which does not mesh well with other cultures' focus on community, rather than individualist, values. And conservative critics charge that feminism as a whole is out of touch with mainstream society, which values marriage, motherhood, and family.⁹

While the book does advocate the promotion of women's equality, it does not take a particular position on which strategy should be used to achieve that goal, although it does present a range of differing positions on improving women's status. Many of these strategies differ on how to resolve the tension between sex and gender, which are often used interchangeably in the popular press and media. The word "sex" refers to physical and biological differences between men and women. Males and females differ most obviously in their contribution to human reproduction; for example, females are unique in their abilities to give birth and to breastfeed. In contrast, "gender" refers to "socially determined attributes, including male and female roles."¹⁰ For example, women's roles in raising children after birth are socially defined gender roles, not physically defined biological functions. Women's inequality in society cannot be attributed to sex differences alone; rather, "it is how society interprets differences and values one quality over another that has the greatest impact on women's lives."¹¹

Women activists have pursued various strategies in their quest for women's equality, and they reflect differing attitudes about addressing what one scholar has termed the "paradox of gender equality"—that is, resolving demands of gender equality with biological differences between men and women.¹² Some advocates for women's equality have argued that the best way to ensure equality is to treat men and women the same by passing gender-neutral legislation. Thus, differences must be eliminated in laws and policies in order to foster equality. Others argue that treating men and women the same, given their biological and gendered differences, amounts to unfairness. According to proponents of this view, the solution lies in designing laws and policy that account for these differences by treating men and women differently, but fairly. Throughout this book we discuss this tension and show how it has been manifested in women's battles for greater political, economic, and human rights.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, "Women Impacting Politics," contains three chapters, all of which provide a different perspective on how women in developing and developed societies participate and achieve representation in the political arena. The first part of the book gives the reader a clear analysis of the impact of women on politics in a variety of political settings around the world. Chapter 1 looks at women's participation in political institutions. It covers women's impact in institutions such as legislatures, parliaments, executives, and bureaucracies. The increase in the number of women in public office has shaped irrevocably the way these institutions work and the policies that they produce. Chapter 2 covers women's involvement in and impact on interest groups and social movements. These organizations play a crucial role in expressing the demands of citizens to their state. Women's involvement in such groups has made a crucial difference in the actions that many states have taken regarding women's issues and concerns. Chapter 3 deals with women's roles in revolutionary movements. Lacking stable channels of participation toward the state, women have been crucial forces in revolutions, although they have not

always been rewarded consistently for their efforts with policies that substantially improve their lives.

Part II, “Gendering Public Policy,” moves from the topic of women’s influence on politics to the ways in which public policy shapes women’s lives in advanced industrialized nations. The three chapters explore the tension that exists between the quest for policy that creates gender equality (such as equal pay or antidiscrimination legislation) and the battle for policy that acknowledges the differences that exist between the sexes. Chapter 4 examines employment policy in the advanced industrialized world and its impact on women’s lives. How have states attempted to ensure women’s equality, and how have they designed policies to reflect that commitment? Chapter 5 explores the politics of difference. In other words, states also write gender-specific legislation, acknowledging the innate differences between men and women. Specifically, this chapter delves into how states have legislated balancing the needs of production (work) with reproduction (family care). Chapter 6 examines how states address issues of privacy by looking at ways that different countries have resolved the issue of abortion.

Part III, “Participation and Protest in the Global Community,” explores a variety of women’s issues that, although of global concern, tend to be concentrated in the countries of the developing world. This part is different than the first two; instead of long chapters we have chosen to write shorter chapters on a variety of issues that address critical and compelling global issues affecting women in countries on nearly every continent. Chapter 7 surveys how the international community has addressed gender issues and concerns. Chapter 8 examines the role of women in the global economy. We then turn to women and health care in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 examines women and education. Chapter 11 addresses the issue of sexual violence during war. Finally, Chapter 12 discusses women’s lack of physical autonomy in issues such as female genital mutilation.

For the second edition we decided to make several key changes. First we updated the data in all the chapters to reflect any recent relevant changes. Second, we expanded the content in each of the final six chapters, not only deepening the discussion of existing issues but also integrating new topics such as international trafficking of women, the increasing incidence of women soldiers in civil conflicts, the reintegration of child soldiers after war, global migration of women, and the impact of structural adjustment policies on women’s access to education. Third, we added text boxes to the chapters to enable students to get a feel for the individuals and groups relevant to the issues addressed. And finally, we added a “For More Information” section at the end of each chapter that provides links to websites where students can learn more information about these issues as well as the people and organizations working for critical change. This section also includes cites for memoirs and documentaries that may provide an alternative narrative for students. These final two changes were prompted by the desire to provide more active learning, to help the material come more alive for students.

Throughout the book we discuss a number of dilemmas that women have faced as they have battled for greater representation in political and economic institutions. As we shall see, countries differ dramatically in terms of the degree to which women have access to the state and are able to impact state policy. While there is not one correct way to resolve the demands for women's equality, hopefully we have provided enough information for you to think about various women's issues with your professor and your classmates so that you can continue to ponder your position on these issues long after the course has ended.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



We would like to acknowledge all those who supported us in the research and writing of this book. First and foremost, we would like to thank each other for providing the support, patience, and love necessary to write and revise this book while also raising small children. At different times, one of us would provide the critical push necessary, without which this book would never have seen the light of day. Alana would like to thank the Center for the Humanities at Oregon State University, which deserves special thanks for providing her with the resources needed to work on this project. Sarah would also like to thank her husband, Doug, for supporting her throughout the long process of researching and writing both editions. We would also like to thank Julie M. Bunck, University of Louisville; Marilyn Dantico, Arizona State University; Patricia F. Freeland, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville; Manjusha Gupte, North Dakota State University; Lynn H. Leverty, University of Florida; Dana Patton, University of Kentucky; Leslie Schwindt-Bayer, University of Missouri; Carisa R. Showden, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; Gina Woodall, Arizona State University; and Sharon D. Wright Austin, University of Florida, for their thoughtful comments. Finally, we would like to thank Jennifer Carpenter and Thomas Pold at Oxford University Press for believing in and supporting this project.

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