

Assess the Impact of Feminist Thought on Contemporary Politics

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KATIE SMITH, DEC 22 2007

Feminism is a relatively new force in politics. It addresses the underlying assumptions that make politics a male-dominated discipline and seeks to improve the position of women within it. In recent decades feminism has been present throughout the world in varying forms and has begun to make an impact in many regions.

'Feminist thought' can be broadly defined as the ideology of trying to advance the social role of women (Heywood, 2000: 58). However, the diversity of feminist ideas prevent clarification of the movement as a whole (Afshar, 1996: 16; Philips, 1998: 12). Assessing the impact of a movement so diverse is problematic. I will define feminism as aiming to improve the status of women, allowing the examination of varying movements.

'Politics' is also a broad term with many definitions. Numerous academics restrict politics to public activity, but feminists frequently extend the definition to cover power relations between private individuals (Philips, 1998: 9). Under this definition women's roles in society and the home are political. I will take the broader definition to assess the success of feminism on its own terms.

I will use case studies from around the world to examine changes made by feminism and the factors determining the extent to which feminist thought is accepted. I will conclude that feminist thought has begun to improve the position of women but its impact has been greatly varied and depends on many factors.

Feminist Change

Feminist thought has the potential to make a huge impact; it redefines politics and questions the basic assumptions upon which power is based (Griffiths, 1999: 219). Feminism can lead people to question gender roles by drawing attention to universal gender-based power relations which are otherwise overlooked (Heywood, 2000: 58).

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A common feminist aim is increased female participation within legislatures. Many have condemned the male domination of professional politics (Randall in Randall and Waylen, 1998: 187) and have promoted the belief that women's social experience gives them different expertise which would be valuable in government. In Japan, feminist groups have recently emphasised including women in formal politics and actively supported female candidates; as a result the number of Japanese women in the legislature has risen dramatically (Ling and Matsuno in Bystydzienski, 1992: 58). The Welsh Assembly is currently the only legislature to have 50% female participation but others are progressing (NI: 19). Norwegian feminists have had considerable success in getting women into decision making bodies with the result that 'women's issues' are more readily discussed and addressed (Bystydzienski, 1992; 20).

Norway is one of many countries to introduce sex-quotas for public bodies to achieve more equal representation. In 1993 the British Labour party used quotas in its selection of candidates, making the proportion of women in parliament rise significantly. Increased female participation in Latin America linked to quotas has led to very significant progress on divorce, child custody and domestic violence legislation (Randall: 201 and Craske: 101, in Randall and Waylen, 1998).

Ugandan women used a different method of increasing female political participation. During the 1981-5 guerrilla war, women used their significant contribution and the revolutionary movement's anti-discriminatory policies to establish their places on an equal footing with men in all levels of decision making and fighting (Byanyima in Bystydzienski, 1992: 135-41). Similar progress was made by Nicaraguan women who were very active in the Sandinista revolution of 1979 (Seitz in Bystydzienski, 1992: 172).

The act of forming women's groups can be positive even if no formal political progress is made. The spread of feminist thought can give women the ideas and confidence to make changes within their lives and communities (Bystydzienski, 1992: 206). Making women aware of their rights has been an essential element of this (NI: 10). Many women in Bodhgaya, India, participated in the Vahini land-reform movement which had a strong feminist element. The value accorded to women within the Vahini gave some the basic confidence needed to ask their husbands to help wash-up (Jacobs in Randall and Waylen, 1998: 135). For Mexican women, the organisation of small discussion groups taught them to become confident in arguing for rights (Pablos in Bystydzienski, 1992: 98)

An essential battleground for feminists is culture and individual opinions. For many feminists the personal is political; they identify social subjugation of women as a political problem which can, and must, be addressed. This idea has had worldwide impact (Afshar, 1996: 7) of which the emergence of domestic violence as an issue is an example. Domestic violence is so prolific that it is the principal cause of illness for 16-44 year old European women (NI: 26).

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Feminist thought has raised awareness of this problem; the White Ribbon campaign to stop violence against women has been internationally popular among men and shows a growing male acceptance of feminist ideas (official website). Similarly, Ecuador's campaign was supported by the country's top male football teams (NI: 28).

Support for feminist ideas has grown in many societies due to women's increasing role in raising public awareness. In Spain, solidarity campaigns with political prisoners were used to mobilise enough public support to make changes (Astelarra in Bystydzienski: 45). Britain has seen significant alteration in public opinion concerning abortion, housework and employment. Feminist ideas that seemed ludicrous in 1970 are widely accepted today (Lovenduski and Randall, 1993: 357)

The simple assertion by feminists that women have rights that should be protected has made a significant impact on worldwide politics and provided a starting point for women to question and change the rules and norms that govern them. The number of women in positions of power is increasing alongside changes in legislation and public opinion. However, to assess feminism's impact on politics as a whole is impossible; there are numerous factors which greatly affect the acceptance of feminist ideas.

Factors Affecting the Acceptance of Feminism

Feminism has had a very varied worldwide impact; political systems, values and culture are important factors in determining the acceptance of feminist ideas.

The electoral and representative systems of states significantly affect the likelihood of women being able to make changes. Generally, women tend to have most influence in more representative systems. Canada's feminist success relative to the UK is related to its proportional representation rather than the 'first past the post' election system as fewer barriers are posed for minorities (Afshar, 1996: 11; Bystydzienski, 1992: 204). Similarly, democracies tend to be much more accessible to women than authoritarian regimes. Reason for this inaccessibility is linked to the lack of civil society – the political area women tend to be most prominent (Randall in Randall and Waylen, 1998: 199).

The new left-wing Uruguayan government has led many to hope that women's rights and inclusion will improve in the country (NI, 23). This belief stems from the trend that links female political participation with left wing politics. The importance of equality in left-wing philosophy make it accessible to women and provides a starting point from which to demand rights; as has been done in Norway, Japan, Canada and Mexico (Bystydzienski, 1992: 204).

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Women's participation has notably decreased in countries emerging from socialism into systems further to the political right, usually accompanied by attacks on women's rights (NI: 11). In China, the move towards a market economy has been accompanied by a crash in women's wages from approximately 80% of men's in the 1980s to just 65% in 2004 (NI: 10-11). Similar changes are also a concern in the former USSR (Bystydzienski, 1992: 210). In Latin America the introduction of neo-liberal economics (to the political right) has been identified as an obstacle for feminism. Neo-liberalism tends to increase low-paid work, dominated by women balancing jobs and housework, leaving little time for politics (Craske in Randall and Waylen, 1998: 104, 106).

Feminism is often aided by revolutionary values; Ugandan and Nicaraguan women used the radical values of revolutions to ensure their equality with men (Banyima: 135, and Seitz: 171, both in Bystydzienski, 1992). A similar tactic was used by Iranian women following the 1979 revolution. They were able to hold the government to parts of its commitment to restore women's rights and dignity, despite the implementation of Shari'a law. Religious beliefs were used to improve their situation and respectability and family responsibility stressed to gain ground on education, economic rights and political participation (Afshar, 1996: 147-8, 158).

Women's position as 'mothers of the nation' often make them important symbols in revolutionary situations. In Nicaragua, mothers of Sandinista soldiers were highly respected and able to use this to their advantage (Puar in Afshar, 1996: 80). However, women's importance in this context can often lead to strict controls on their behaviour, aiming to ensure that they are appropriate representatives of their nation (Waylen in Afshar, 1996: 15). The enforcement of the hajid (Islamic veil) in Iran is such a measure and is objected to by many (Mir-Hosseini in Afshar, 1996: 154).

In popular revolutions, it is necessary for women to place their rights on the agenda and actively participate, as in the cases above. The Polish Solidarity movement demonstrates that women's rights will otherwise be ignored; without high level female participation or input, Solidarity's accession to power has threatened previous rights gained by Polish women (Bystydzienski, 1992: 210).

The culture and public opinion within which women's groups function plays a significant role in determining their impact. Throughout history women have had to change the attitudes of men to gain rights for themselves and this continues today. Cultural acceptance of women's rights is lacking worldwide; machismo culture and the influence of Catholicism within Latin America are just two examples of barriers to women's rights (Puar in Afshar, 1006: 79). In Uruguay the Catholic Church was able to prevent the passage of a bill legalising abortion, despite illegal abortions being the principal cause of death for pregnant women and majority public support for the bill (NI:22-23). Female

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genital mutilation (FGM) which is practiced in many African countries, often illegally, is a clear example of the power of public opinion. In Gambia around 80% of girls undergo the procedure which results in an exceptionally high number of maternal deaths during childbirth. Many parents oppose the practice but the risks of social exclusion and forced FGM for their children are seen to outweigh the risks (NI: 11-12).

Currently many women struggle not only against traditional cultures of male dominance but also against a recent religious and conservative backlash (NI: 10). Challenges to women are coming increasingly from men who believe that women's rights have gone too far. In Sweden's 1991 elections, the number of women in government declined for the first time. This is thought to be the result of a backlash triggered by the appointment of women to cabinet positions not seen to be traditionally 'feminine' (Davis, 1997: 86). The UK Men's Movement go as far as to say 'feminism is an aberration, like Nazism and communism – a blight on our society' (official website). Similarly, the rise of a culture of sexual violence in South Africa is partly a result of the social progress of women (NI: 12)

In terms of religion, Ali relates this backlash to the rise of identity politics in the 1990s which gave religion more prominence. He identifies religious restrictions on women's freedom in the former USSR, Arab states and the USA (Ali, 2002: 67). An example of the cultural restrictions of religious revival is the 2004 Indonesian presidential election, in which the country's largest Islamic organisation forbid Muslims from voting for the country's female president (NI: 11). In 1991, Islamic fundamentalism became powerful enough in Iraq to force Saddam Hussein to decriminalise 'honour killings' of supposedly disgraced women by their families (NI: 20). The current US administration has shown the lobbying power of right wing Christianity in its refusal to give funding to HIV/AIDS groups with ties to abortion (NI: 11). Abortion is seen by many feminists as a woman's right to choose. The strength of this religious and conservative backlash against feminism still remains to be seen but undoubtedly presents a serious challenge to women's groups around the world.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that feminism has had a significant impact on politics around the world. Feminist thought has made women aware of their rights and the possibility of improving their lives. It has increased their confidence by revealing the politics in their daily lives and encouraging political and social participation. Women's groups have succeeded in getting female candidates elected to all levels of government and altering legislation. They have also made changes in their daily lives, on a community and domestic level, and made significant steps towards changing public opinion.

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However, the impact that feminists can have depends on many factors outside their control. Women's participation in legislatures is aided by the presence of left-wing groups and ideas; particularly during revolutions in which women contribute substantially. In countries newly opened up to capitalism or neo-liberalism the effect is the opposite and women's rights tend to be threatened. Culture, in particular recent religious and conservative backlashes, has also served to restrict the impact of feminism.

In conclusion, feminist thought has had a significant impact on contemporary politics but in varying degrees worldwide.

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Date written: 2005