

How might Feminists transform futures for the production and use of evidence in public policy-making?

Do we need feminism today? To self-identify as a feminist in the UK over and above membership of other social change movements seems somewhat out of kilter. The influence of the association (misappropriation or otherwise) of the brand with a western white movement; the social media profile of the anti-women discourse amongst young men; the recognition of a spectrum of gender identities; and our awareness of a plurality of multiply held identities that affect the context of equality: have we chosen to, or even been asked to, move on? The generation of women that experienced the marriage bar at work have long retired, even if their younger colleagues are still around. No reasonable person would argue for limits to gender inclusion in these institutions; we have, in policy, normalised the last wave of economic, legal and social protections for participation; we have extended into supportive workplace policies for menopause, neurodivergence and non-binary genders (for example).

Nonetheless, when I look around at the institutional structures and behaviours in public policy-making, I see the long tail of patriarchal pathologies and discrimination acting to constrain pluralistic ways of knowing and making sense of the world, that might instead accelerate meaningful inclusion. Might this contain some element of feminism's relevance now? To build on Germaine Greer in Ivana Milojević (2024), that we (*across* generations) need to find feminism's evolving, emergent purpose. As a pluralistic social change movement, what could we imagine this deeper structural and epistemological inclusion looking like? Are these the keys to unlock changes in societal patterns that enable violence against women, people, ecosystems, every which way I turn? Does public policy-making *need* feminism?

In this short exploration of the relevance of feminism within public policy-making, I am building on two resonant themes within Ivana Milojević's (2024) monograph on feminism in futures. Firstly, the inclusive and social change oriented definition of feminism "an attempt to create a truly inclusive world that celebrates diversity and sees it as a source of enrichment rather than [superiority/] inferiority" (Lorde quoted in Milojević, 2024, p.46)

alongside the identification of pluralistic and inclusive ways of organising as preferred visions of feminist futurists (Milojević, 2024).

Secondly, the inclusion of the term “epistemological violence” (building on Johan Galtung) in the typology and description of gender-based violence. The recognition that to understand violence is to understand the underpinning conditions and structures that lead to “the avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs” (Galtung quoted in Milojević, 2024, p47-48). Such that understanding how and in what ways the “imposition of a worldview that is foreign” (Milojević, 2024, p48) can manifest in (for example) death, poverty, illness, alienation and oppression (Milojević, 2024). In my field of complex public policy issues, I see this manifesting in the predominance of the use of types of evidence over and above others. Epistemological violence being the exclusion of socially constructed, contextual, non-professionalised, episodic evidence (for example) that is necessary for working with the complex policy issues we face today.

One purposeful *practice of feminism* then, taking account of both of these themes, may be in engaging in the conditions for policy processes that behave as perceiving multiple diversities of evidence as enrichment and not flaws to be overcome. Diversities of evidence that are valued and understood in the absence of the current patterns of power that favour evidence types in their continuation of institutional logics.

We have this problem in our policy decision-making processes that in spite of the fit of futures theory and practice that takes complexity as a given (including in Poli, 2017, Poli 2019 and Miller, 2019 for example) and our use of this in how we work *on* public policy issues of climate change, net zero, social justice, intergenerational wellbeing, sufficiency (for example), I perceive that it remains at a surface level in the dominant systems. The intent is not mirrored in how we behave *in* how we organise ourselves. We are working *on* policy issues that necessitate working with diversities of people, of expertise, and working with groups that express competing interests (for example). But we are not organising how we work *in* policy to be as co-evolutionary and dialogical and open-ended and messy as this requires. We are talking about it, but not acting as if it is true for how we are.

Our discourse is changing, but the institutional logics and values *appear* to be closed to progressive, hopeful and emergent inclusive social change movements. Our governance systems, that constrain and enable the development of organisational social norms, may be lagging behind the problems they are seeking to address. Our reward mechanisms – in policy-making, perhaps also in academia (Park et al, 2023) and impact-driven organisations - are largely based on individually accrued benefits that get in the way of connectivity and emergence, features we need to engage with in complex social change, that cannot attribute impact individually. This overwhelm in straddling both worlds, is perhaps a facet of our “illnesses of responsibility” that Hammershøj (2024) speaks of as derived from freedom with acceleration of change; that makes it *even harder* to shift our collective actions.

So if feminism does have a future valid role in responding to this set of systemic issues in public policy-making, to transform these systems to be capable of holding multiple ways of knowing, what could this look like in practice?

Let's explore one context:

In healthcare, we have multiple intersections of ways of knowing playing out in the evidence that is paid attention to. Population health data that draws attention to overweight and obese groups (for example). Clinical trial evidence of the efficacy of behavioural, pharmaceutical and surgical interventions. Sociological evidence of the efficacy of social work, and other relational, community-based support systems that engage with systemic conditions. At the institutional level the primacy of these evidence types and the policy choices they represent, currently contingent upon the existing institutional logics that value replication over contextual variation and see evidence of human systems as fully and abstractedly knowable. The deficiencies in how evidence is valued and taken account of is perhaps even more stark in the act of engaging with advocates, activists, and others with non-professionalised knowledge. We speak of co-production: the (instrumental) value of engaging publics and sometimes niche citizen

types in the production of evidence. But the institutional logic remains as one of policy as instruction. A feminist future that sees validity and coherence in evidence through multiple contextually oriented ways of holding and knowing that evidence, might see policy-making as a *process of social change*, rather than a *process of instruction*.

Let's take a moment to look at this disconnect between the discourse of production and use of evidence, and its transformative promise. What is preventing the promise of its evolution towards practice that is coherent for a multiplicity of actors in multiple contexts?

With the insight of causal layered analysis (see Table 1 below) we can begin to make sense of the institutional logics and reward mechanisms that reinforce and protect quality of knowledge and expertise in well-defined systems. Even with present alternative practices that give us glimpses of more appropriate systems, my observation is that they tolerate existing institutional logics and adapt practices only in response to publicly acknowledged systemic failures.

Table1: Causal Layered Analysis of present dominant, alternative present and transformed futures for (UK perspective of) public policy making through an exploration of feminist futures without epistemological violence.

	Dominant present	Alternative present	Transformed futures
Litany	Public engagement in policy making. “Ladder of co-production”. People with “lived experience”. Hierarchy of evidence. Grey literature. Impact evaluation.	Emerging evidence. Participatory Futures. Intersectionality. Ecologies of co-production. Quality in qualitative evidence. Process evaluation. Human Learning Systems.	“Knowledge with...” (not “evidence of...”). Interactive, dynamic maps of ecologies of participation. School of Dialogue.
Systems	Public engagement “after the event” of evidence gathering for problematising (as it is otherwise implausible). Institutional logics must remain stable for practical purposes. Social norms separate production and consumption of policy; and abstract decisions from context. Dialogue as <i>instrument of</i> broadly, if not explicitly, defined policy outcomes, practised as an additional competency.	More open-ended dialogical processes in places where failure of policy processes in universally affected spaces is known and accepted (e.g. climate adaptation and welfare/care). Resources for experimental design of participatory processes where conditions allow.	Public policy is situated as open processes of social change that strengthen the connections between actors in multiple settings. Institutional actors located in open networks that continually produce and consume the logics that shape actions. Dialogue is the skill and capability in abundance that is underpinned by educational and organisational systems.
Worldview	Evidence is knowable across multiple contexts. Errors in policy outcomes derive from deficits with citizens. Quality of expertise must be protected within well-defined institutional and societal values and reward systems.	The complex policy problems of today and tomorrow can be engaged with through the adaptation and extension of how we know and make use of evidence and reward and value expertise.	Knowledge arises through the ongoing interactions of all actors in open systems. Expertise and evidence cannot be separated from its situational construct. Wisdom is strengthened, not by disciplinary standards but, by open learning systems.
Metaphor	Knowledge is benevolent power.	Knowledge is collaborative power.	Knowledge is agnostic to power.

On one level we can frame this issue as one of the progressive development of governance and organisational systems to be fit for purpose. We will work out that

complexity-oriented processes work better. We will include a variety of actors with diverse worldviews as a precondition for working with complexity. We will prioritise policy-making as a social process in our networked world.

Nonetheless, there remains a fundamental question of inclusion and exclusion. Futures practices can be misappropriated; can be used for socially exclusive purposes (Schultz, 2024). Which brings us to seeing futures that are less socially progressive, and one of the reasons why feminism still has a question to answer about its purposes and roles: do we step away from gender inclusion as a singular focus, and organise around *wherever* we can further more pluralistic inclusion? Recognising that the maturity of the movement, the creative and material capacities to hand, *can* enable feminist futurists to hold those shape-shifting roles, to host those liminal spaces where *everyone* can hold multiple identities, roles, values, worldviews. To hold and share power generatively. To value generative power over violence.

If this is my hope, what does this mean for us and me?

Our conceptions of power, how we use it, how it's derived, what it perpetuates, are at the heart of our practice of expansive and generative feminism. We *can* seek out the *processes* that help us create the *places* where we can be in these generative forms of feminism. We can forge more expansive alliances, where we can find the shared power to choose how to identify (Milojević, 2024). It is in these possibilities that my hopes lie to participate in feminism *and* find the power to identify as a generative feminist. With the shared and generative power to act in community to displace violence in all its forms.

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