Introduction: Feminist Mobilization, Claims Making and Policy Change for Gender Equality

Nitya Rao and Paola Cagna

ABSTRACT

Over two decades after the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, gender-equality policies have not delivered in the ways envisaged. This special cluster of papers seeks to understand why. Women's mobilization and feminist activism was central to the Beijing process and the advocacy that followed, yet their influence on policy processes seems constrained in the current context of global political and economic changes. The articles in this cluster explore the negotiations between different actors, institutions and discourses — and the tensions and contradictions therein — as explanations for why certain domains of women's rights remain at the margins of political agendas and others receive more attention. Specifically, why have women's labour rights and the demands of the unpaid-care economy failed to gain policy traction? The articles point to the importance of political practice, which includes 'framing' policy demands as compelling narratives, forming and managing alliances and engaging with state entities. There are, however, trade-offs inherent in each of these elements, for example, between transformative gender-equality objectives and the pragmatic impulse to frame claims in less politically and socially threatening ways. Further, in a context of increasing globalization, mobilization is required at multiple levels — from the local to the transnational. The articles thus seek to deepen our understanding of how policy change for women's rights occurs.

INTRODUCTION

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995[1], was a landmark event. It set in place a comprehensive global policy framework on women's rights and gender equality, and gave a fillip to feminist mobilization and alliance building within countries and transnationally. Twenty-two years have passed, and the record has been 'ambivalent'. Despite progress in education, life expectancy and political participation, gender inequalities have deepened in many parts of the world. Neoliberal policies, alongside the globalization of markets, trade and finance, have reinforced labour-market segregation and wage discrimination against women. These associated factors have also led to a shrinking of state responsibility for welfare, and indeed equality, and the devolution of power to local bodies without adequate resources. The gains made are further threatened by a rise in conservative coalitions and identity politics (Cornwall and Edwards, 2015; Molyneux and Razavi, 2005).

The articles in this special cluster are part of a discussion that was triggered by the 20-year anniversary of the conference and the concern that gender-equality policies are not delivering.[2] Despite the breadth of advocacy on a wide range of issues that culminated in the Beijing Platform for Action, the post-Beijing policy responses within and across countries have tended to focus on specific issues, such as violence against women. While this is undoubtedly very important, other issues, such as women's labour rights and the demands of the unpaid-care economy, have failed to gain serious policy traction. Through a set of nuanced and policy-aware political-economy pieces, we hope to provide some insight into the reasons for this uneven progress.

Why feminist mobilization? While it would be naive to limit the 'politics of policy formulation' (Mazur, 2002: 13) to women's movements and assume that they are always the main, or most important, agents of change, existing research suggests that the dynamism of women's movements plays a critical role in making visible inequalities and injustices, and in challenging gender-discriminatory norms and policies (Htun and Weldon, 2010). In the realm of policy change, however, these movements interact with and support other key actors. These include the political

---

[1] www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/fwcwn.html (accessed on 19 October 2017).

[2] The articles in this cluster come from the research project 'When and Why Do States Respond to Women's Claims? Understanding Gender-Egalitarian Policy Change in Asia'. The project was carried out between 2013 and 2015 under the auspices of UNRISD, with funding from the Ford Foundation and support from UNRISD's institutional budget provided by the governments of Sweden, Switzerland and Finland. All project outputs, including the country research reports, policy briefs and videos, are available open access at www.unrisd.org/gender-claims. See Cagna and Rao (2016) for details.

elites, wanting to project a modern image of the state, social movements, transnational forces, strategically positioned women's machineries within the state and individual 'champions' of women's rights. There is nevertheless an important task for feminist activism, and this relates to 'framing' the women's rights agenda, making sure that claims are not made invisible, instrumentalized within broader development goals or addressed in a tokenistic manner. More so, as women are not a homogenous category; their gender interests are shaped by their particular social positioning in terms of class, race, ethnicity, caste, age and subject-position, to name a few. Conceptualizations of the role women should play in society are then likely to vary as is the meaning of gender justice.

Building on the assessments of relative gains and losses in the last two decades, the articles in the cluster focus on the agency of women's movements and actors. They examine closely the complex and iterative processes through which advocates for women's rights articulate their demands, negotiate and strategize with other actors, institutions and discourses within and outside the state realm, and transnationally, to bring about policy change. They also scrutinize the 'blind spots'— issues that despite their centrality to women's lives and well-being elicit little advocacy, or where advocacy does not enter policy debates.

Drawing on the comparative political-science literature, the first article in this cluster, by Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins, directly addresses the following question: under what conditions is feminist mobilization for gender-equality policy advocacy successful? While cross-national, quantitative analyses (e.g. Htun and Weldon, 2010) help identify the role of autonomous feminist movements as key to effective claims making, hence making a case for greater support to such movements, they do not necessarily identify the conditions for their emergence, the drivers of difference across context and issue or, indeed, the reasons behind the variations in the capabilities of different actors at different times. Goetz and Jenkins hence highlight the need to focus on 'political practice', which includes at least three inter-related elements, namely 'framing' policy demands, forming and managing civil alliances and engaging with state entities. They point to the tensions and trade-offs inherent in each of these elements. They describe, for example, the tension between transformative gender-equality objectives and the pragmatic impulse to frame claims in less politically and socially threatening ways. They discuss how the formation of 'issue networks' across scales — from the local to the global and transnational — sometimes leads to a dilution of the key claims. They also explore the role of democratization and decentralization in strengthening women's voices in policy development. While multilevel governance systems can open up spaces and opportunities for experimentation and reform to women's organizations, these are accompanied

by risks — in particular, of strengthening political clientelism, reinforcing the power of local, conservative elites and fragmenting claims around larger issues.

Gender-equality policies are shown, thus, to emerge as outcomes of complex interactions between a multitude of actors — within and outside the state — representing different political interests and ideologies (Fraser, 1989). The negotiation of policy content too is likely to change over time and with shifts in context. For example, while women's equal participation in employment was a key demand of the women's movements globally in the 1970s, there is today a concern with the quality of such employment, of confronting low wages and poor working conditions in an increasingly globalized market. Neither do all issues of public concern find their place within national policy agendas; the conversion of a public issue into a policy agenda depends on institutional backing but could also reflect political expediency (Beland, 2005).

The second article in this cluster, by Naila Kabeer, focuses on the evolving politics of claims making by women workers in the global South in the context of increasing globalization. Importantly, the paper shifts the focus from the state to different forms of mobilization vis-a-vis a range of actors, including large corporations, middlemen and local and national government officials. Women workers are not a unified category. The article therefore distinguishes between two broad categories of workers based on their structural location: those working primarily for global markets, and those oriented to the domestic economy. There are also differences in terms of types of organizations: those working within unions, alongside them or developing alternate unions and associations. Additionally, there are varying leadership patterns and degrees of state/employer or transnational responsiveness to particular claims across these categories. The article reinforces the importance of 'framing'. It shows how the ability to shape claims into compelling narratives determines their effectiveness in mobilizing wider support and resonating with those who have the power to act on them. It also argues for the need to factor in the construction and consolidation of associational power as a strategy in itself, especially in the new terrain within which the politics of claims making is now playing out, where labour activism can no longer be confined to national boundaries. Protecting and sustaining such autonomous organizational spaces would allow women workers to develop an 'oppositional consciousness' that challenges taken-for-granted inequalities in their lives, and facilitate alliances with other actors from a position of strength.

The final article, by Nitya Rao, points to the importance of seeing gender-equality policy not in unitary terms but as operating differently across issues and contexts. It uses as an example women's unpaid care work and the mobilizations around it at global and national levels. The essay explores the changes in the framing of unpaid care work at the global level over the past four decades, and its growing visibility within international development agendas. Examining the

debates on unpaid domestic and care work across three of Asia's largest and most diverse countries — India, China and Indonesia — the article however finds little evidence of any straightforward translation of this advocacy into national agendas. Women's movements in the selected countries recognize unpaid care work as an additional burden on women's time and an obstacle to empowerment, yet it remains at the margins of their political agendas and is not prioritized in their mobilization and claims making. If taken on board at all, it gets subsumed within issues of child or elderly care or the rights to social protection. Mobilizing for the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work (Elson, 2008), in line with the global framing, challenges us to rethink intra-household relationships specifically but also class-based privilege and social inequalities more broadly.

Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Agenda prioritizes decent work, equal access to productive assets and reducing women's time burdens, among other aims[3]. It is yet unclear how this will be translated into action. Several of these priorities are hugely contentious, directly challenging patriarchal norms embedded in social, religious and wider institutional practices. They are hence likely to encounter resistance from those with power and authority. Progressive change in gender relations is the outcome of complex processes of negotiation involving multiple actors, with diverse and multidirectional causal influences. Nevertheless, what all the articles in this cluster highlight is that the presence of organized women remains crucial to the potential success of any claims-making processes around women's rights. While progress has been made, there is still a long road ahead to gender justice.

REFERENCES

Beland, D. (2005) 'Ideas and Social Policy: An Institutionalist Perspective', *Social Policy and Administration* 39(1): 1–18.

Cagna, P and N. Rao (2016) Feminist Mobilisation for Policy Change on Violence Against Women: Insights from Asia, *Gender & Development* 24(2): 277–90.

---

[3] On September 25th 2015, countries adopted a set of 17 goals to **end poverty**, **protect the planet**, and **ensure prosperity for all** as part of a new sustainable development agenda to transform the world. Each goal has specific targets to be achieved over the next 15 years. Goal 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. It sets nine targets to achieve this goal. See www.globalgoals.org/global-goals/gender-equality/

Cornwall, A and J. Edwards (2015). Introduction: Beijing+20 – Where now for gender equality? *IDS Bulletin* 46(4): 1–8.

Elson, D. (2008) 'The Three R's of Unpaid Work: Recognition, Reduction and Redistribution'. Paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting on Unpaid Work, Economic Development and Human Well-Being, UNDP, New York (November).

Fraser, N. (1989) *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Goetz, A.M. and R. Jenkins (this issue) 'Feminist Activism and the Politics of Reform When and Why Do States Respond to Demands for Gender-Equality Policies' *Development and Change*

Htun, M. and L. Weldon (2010) 'When Do Governments Promote Women's Rights? A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Sex Equality Policy', *Perspectives on Politics* 8(1): 207–16.

Kabeer, N. (this issue) 'Women Workers and the Politics of Claims Making: The Local and the Global'. *Development and Change*

Mazur, A.G. (2002) *Theorizing Feminist Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Molyneux, M. and S. Razavi (2005) 'Beijing Plus Ten: An Ambivalent Record on Gender Justice', *Development and Change* 36(6): 983–1010.

Rao, N. (this issue) 'Global Agendas, Local Norms: Mobilizing around Unpaid Care and Domestic Work in Asia'. *Development and Change,*

Nitya Rao (corresponding author; n.rao@uea.ac.uk) is Professor of Gender and Development at University of East Anglia, United Kingdom. Committed to gender equality, her current research interests include exploring the gendered changes in land and agrarian relations, migration and livelihoods, education and identities, intra-household relations and feminist activism. She has published extensively on these themes.

Paola Cagna (paola.cagna@gmail.com) was a research analyst for the UNRISD Gender and Development Research Programme (2013–2016). Currently, she collaborates with Italian non-profit organizations assisting migrants and women victims of gender-based violence.