1/Gender Politics in Bureaucracy: Theoretical Issues in Comparative Perspective

Kathleen Staudt

Over the international decade for women, 1975–1985, there were many dialogues, lobbying activities, legislative and policy mandates, yet barely a dent was made in the redistribution of resources and values from men to women. The oft-quoted statement from the 1980 Copenhagen Programme of Action starkly summarizes how one-half the world's population performs two-thirds of the world's work, receives one-tenth of world income, and owns less than 1 percent of world property.[1] At least at the aggregate level, little progress has been made in dismantling institutionalized male privilege. Such institutionalized privilege is deeply embedded in the state[2] and grounded in a western cultural heritage[3] that has spread throughout the world in different degrees. Prospects for redistributive change look grim.

At the same time, changes over the past century would appear to set the stage for gradual redistribution. First, states seek to legitimize themselves through public policy and participation-based accountability. State policies intrude, for better or worse, into a so-called private sphere in which women are located. Participation expands to include women as voters, group advocates, and decision makers.[4]

Second, a veritable explosion of women's organizational activity and political agenda setting transpired over the women's decade. Many activists hope to take a concrete feminist agenda into the bureaucracy and thereby broaden state accountability to women. Over the decade, what the United Nations terms "national machineries" for the advancement of women have

---

For reading and commenting on this chapter, I thank Judith Bruce, Jane Jaquette, Bonnie Shepard, Gay Young, and the reviewers associated with Temple University Press.

been promoted, such that 120 were counted by 1980[5] and 90 percent of governments were covered by 1985.[6] If the aim is to get a female foot in the door and work from within, a better understanding is needed of what approaches work best in which settings. More than one-half of the resolutions of *Forward Looking Strategies*, from the 1985 end-of-the-decade conference in Nairobi, call for action from governments, ranging from equalizing access to education and removing stereotypes from the media to providing credit and land ownership to women farmers.[7] Yet these are the very same governments that have heretofore perpetuated the kind of gendered policies that disempower women within gendered bureaucratic organizations. Should women work in, with, or against the state? Can state bureaucracies empower women?

States respond to calls for gender redistribution in varying ways; comparisons of institutions, their cultural, political, and economic contexts, and their inhabitants' prevailing ideologies should tell us why. Contributors in this book explore women's politics and programs in the bureaucracy, as well as the implementation processes. At minimum, this exploration leads to a focus on both attitudes and structures: the bureaucrats and their ideologies of gender and of household relations, and their interactions with the institutional settings in which they work. We need to know more about men who dominate decision making in the bureaucracy and how they vary in diverse institutional settings.

At the same time, we need to ask whether women will infuse a new sort of politics into male-oriented bureaucracy. Women have entered the realms of bureaucratic politics, and women's organizations increasingly form part of bureaucratic constituencies. Will women's very presence on the inside help women on the outside? Will women encourage bureaucracy to operate according to its Weberian "ideal" fashion, that is, in a neutral or gender-neutral fashion? (And is that a "good"?) Or does the hierarchical ordering of dominant-subordinate relationships in bureaucracy mire any prospects for gender redistribution? Some feminist theorists have argued that bureaucratic means are incompatible with feminist ends[8] and that the male-oriented state cannot accommodate or respond to women.[9]

This book takes the first step toward comparative analysis of gender redistributive policy by looking at its practices in international, governmental, and nongovernmental institutions in a wide variety of national and cultural contexts. This introductory essay examines the existing literature on bureaucratic movement toward gender redistribution, which suggests a grim scenario for upcoming decades. A discussion of "gendered bureaucracy" is then put forward to frame and explain the phenomenon in political terms. After that, the chapter explores possibilities for change. The closing contains an overview of the papers in the book, though discussion of their contents

is woven into the body of this essay as well. First, however, the connections between gender, development, and the state are laid out.

Women, Development Crisis, and State Bureaucracy

Women had little or no hand in the process of state formation and consolidation. Yet male control over women—specifically, their labor, sexuality, and reproduction—was central to laws and policies that governed the gender realm. In some cases male household authority was reproduced in collective male authority, whereas in others the structure of that collective male authority was transferred through colonialism. These legacies of male preference prompt a corresponding need for gender redistribution: in the allocation of public resources, in civic and participation rights, in positions of power and authority, in the value of men's and women's work. Such legacies transcend both the capitalist and socialist economic systems in which people work.[10] The historical foundations of state formation should forewarn that affirmative action or gender staff-balancing approaches are limited solutions. Bureaucrats act in institutional and political contexts that are more often reproduced than transformed. Such historical legacies also forewarn the likely contradictions that arise in the transitional process toward transformation.

Bureaucrats are responsible for an enormous number of tasks associated with this loose and loaded term *development*, ranging from education, family planning, and health to agricultural surplus generation, industrialization, and capital accumulation. Whether by choice or by default, states assume a lead role in aggregating the resources and hiring the technical expertise to help plan, regulate, or manage the development process—to the extent state capacity and popular acceptability permit. In many parts of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, states are the key employers. Yet capital and technical resources are often in short supply, so states look to official bilateral and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and to private voluntary organizations (PVOs) and banks. In so doing, they incur various costs or conditions, ranging from, most obviously, interest on loans to policy reform, expatriate personnel, external agency or PVO priorities, and other ideological baggage.

In the eyes of many, major state investments in economic and social development are necessary: to ensure political stability; to provide access to food, health, and education; and to sustain the kind of economic growth that supplies people with means to assure their livelihoods. Yet such investments are made in ways that allocate neither opportunities nor resources in an even manner. Urban bias has long been documented by development studies, and some of the newly industrializing countries contain the widest gaps between

rich and poor. Inequitable patterns within nations are overlaid by the contrasts among states in food/caloric availability, the wastage of life (expressed in life expectancy and infant mortality figures), per capita income, and vulnerable dependence associated with commodities offered in the world market.[11]

The gender dimensions of these stark contrasts can and must be illuminated further, for as the DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) international network concludes, women constitute "the majority of the poor, the underemployed, and the economically and socially disadvantaged in most societies."[12] Numerous academic studies, U.N. reports, and even official documents demonstrate the many inequitable gaps between men and women: in wages and job opportunities; in literacy and education; in adequate health care as evidenced by high maternal and infant mortality rates and intrusive family planning efforts; in extensive and arduous unpaid work in water and firewood collection and agricultural production; in control over land; and in political voice.[13]

In much of the early literature on women and development, analysts outlined the negative effects of development on women: it displaces their labor, strips them of past rights, and entrenches legal male control over women both in the family and the state. Such generalizations have now been modified with greater recognition of and attention to national historical specificity, mixed gains for women (such as *absolute* increases in life expectancy and literacy), indigenous cultural sources of subordination, and contradictory patterns. As an example of the last, Susan Joekes concludes that women's participation in the industrial labor force has expanded—to the extent that they constitute a majority of the manufacturing labor force in high export-oriented industrializing economies—but in the context of the vagaries of international trade and of the insecure but "feminized" garments and electronics industries.[14] Women and men experience the development process in different ways, ways that hardly empower women. Obviously, female subordination has not disappeared in the advanced or postindustrial economies. As the geographers Joni Seager and Ann Olson remark, "In the world of women there are few 'developed' nations."[15]

Whatever the nation-state, such gender gaps aggravate bureaucrats' efforts to develop economies and supply human services. According to U.N. reports, women are the majority of farmers in Africa, providing well over half the labor; in Asia and Latin America their contributions are also extensive. In many parts of the world women haul water and firewood to homes. Women labor in both the informal and formal economic sectors as traders, vendors, and factory laborers. Their income is crucial to household maintenance even in households other than the sizable number headed by fe-

males.[16] Whatever the development sector, women are central. Were bureaucracies to "integrate" women, an overall effect would be that by permitting them to better realize bureaucratic goals, women would empower bureaucrats rather than vice versa. Key, therefore, is the kind of voice women have—collectively or individually—in determining development or program strategies that meet their needs.

How would women fare under a supposed "free" market, avoiding bureaucracy altogether? The feminist critique of women in the modernization process actually emerged under capitalist market conditions, without bureaucratic attention to women's programs. Women's work in agriculture, informal trade, and reproduction is often unpaid and invisible. Women's responsibilities limit their "freedom" to seize opportunities, and gender ideologies color the supposed neutral hand of the market. Women generally figure prominently at the lower ends of market-generated class inequalities.[17] Thus, even their self-help efforts would draw on limited resources. The decade of the 1980s has seen an assault on state bureaucracy from academic, popular, and policy quarters. Even market-oriented development strategies occur in political and bureaucratic contexts. Rarely do gender researchers make specific policy recommendations.[18] Some radical theorists are reluctant to taint solutions within the existing political-economic establishment; instead, the obligatory call for revolutionary transformation is sounded for this or future lifetimes.

Are socialist economies any different? The dislocating effects of revolution along with the emancipatory proclamations of official ideology would appear to provide the kind of conditions under which gender redistribution could occur and occur quickly. Yet socialist societies, in pursuing the widened political agenda associated with wealth redistribution and social program expansion, usually enlarge the bureaucracy. Often, too, they rely on some of the very same personnel that "manned" the bureaucracy before revolution. In short, the questions posed about gendered bureaucracy and women's possible empowerment are perhaps even more relevant under socialism.

For better or worse, bureaucracies are with us for our lifetimes and probably for many generations to follow. Feminist strategies to avoid bureaucracy and mainstream policies have not long sustained themselves, and the absence of feminist voice may prolong a public status quo that is antithetical to female empowerment. Those opting to work in the mainstream, however, encounter deep resistance and face troubling ethical questions about where they invest their energies and the ends they thereby serve.

A Grim Scenario?

Great resistance has been faced by those working with women's programs in national and international agencies. Despite mandates—both internal to the agencies and from legislative authority—bureaucrats, operating in long-gendered bureaucracies, are reluctant to respond to women's work in its rich productive and reproductive dimensions. It is becoming increasingly clear that a key source of this problem is to be located in bureaucratic institutions and in the ideologies officials use as they act on gender issues.

The United Nations has long advocated that "machinery" be established to eliminate discrimination and to integrate women into the economic development process. Such machinery is of many types, including bureaus, ministries, commissions, committees or councils, political organs (such as a women's wing of the dominant political party), and nongovernmental organizations. Their tasks often involve data collection, project sponsorship, policy or program monitoring of other government agencies, and political mobilization.[19]

Despite great hope, this female machinery has accomplished little thus far. In an assessment of seventy-nine countries, machineries were found to be limited by small budgets and staff, by attitudes that legitimize female subordination, and by mandates that focus on welfare. Separate women's projects, a controversial mark of the decade that seemed to offer the beginnings of a compensatory approach to long years of male preference, rarely empowered women politically or economically. They were funded at miniscule levels, even as their importance was magnified in detractors' minds. Separate women's divisions and ministries are hard pressed to influence *all* of government. The obverse may occur as other agencies shift their responsibility for women onto the women's unit.[20] Such irresponsibility is also reproduced within agencies with a women's unit. Several contributors to this volume provide greater insight into the powerlessness of these units, for example, David Hirchmann on Malawi, or they elaborate further on the dynamics of women's bureaus: Nüket Kardam on the World Bank, where a women's unit operates uneasily amid technical units, and Barbara Lewis on the Cameroonian women's ministry's distance from its alleged constituents.

Also problematic, separate women's projects often contain a traditional social welfare focus that threatens no redistribution of economic resources and opportunities from men to women and, importantly, no conflict or confrontation in gender terms.[21] Perhaps even more troublesome politically, women's programs and projects create an appearance of activity, even if starved for funding and behind the closed doors of bureaucracy. Nice appearances placate constituents and incur political quiescence.[22] "Women's desks" in some countries are literally a desk and person charged with the