

## Gendered states

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As International Women's Day comes round again, a familiar list of issues rises up the agenda - rights, violence, education (and yoga, [apparently](#) [1]) - in a way that to many echoes rather than challenges what happens on the other days of the year, when women's priorities revert to "minority" concerns. Twelve years on from the Beijing Platform for Action, a major cause of the dissociative shift accompanying [women's day](#) [2] remains the same: women's participation in public life is still blocked by wearily familiar, entrenched barriers. Half the world's population remains overwhelmingly excluded from decision-making along gender lines. Women hold less than 17% of parliamentary seats [worldwide](#) [3]. Yet the problem rarely finds its way into headlines as a democratic issue.

Women's rights may be invoked in the service of "spreading democracy" - but what does it mean for citizenship and state if women are routinely excluded by political systems? Even longstanding western democracies that credit themselves with outgrowing the need for feminism, show the same patterns, coming low in [world rankings](#) [4].

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["Poetry amidst war](#) [5]"  
(8 April 2003)

["Mapping London's multicultural](#) [6]"  
(26 October 2004)

["Words on images: the cartoon controversy](#) [7]" (10 February 2006)

A story told at [One World Action's](#) [8] democracy and gender equity seminar on 1-2 March finds echoes the world over. According to established custom, the men of the village gather around the big tree in the afternoon to discuss community business. A big problem has arisen. They all agree it is a significant challenge to address, and sink into thought. After a while, someone suggests they sleep on it, and all agree. Each man goes home, and describes the problem to his wife. She mentions what she would do. The next morning each man arrives to the meeting full of a revelation he had overnight.

The overarching problem of women's exclusion from decision-making is cultural, though it has deep economic, historical, institutional and electoral roots. Zambia's case, highlighted at the seminar by [Tamala Tonga Kambikambi](#) [9] of the National Women's Lobby, illustrates this well. The political system enjoys some international legitimacy, despite multiple barriers to women's entry into politics: traditionally it has been unheard of for women to stand and speak in meetings; women remain more economically vulnerable than men, less able to afford the costs of entry into politics (and are worse affected by obstacles like the recent 1000 percent increase

in nomination fees); and there is little institutional and party support for women candidates, in an electoral landscape where parties still command the majority of the vote.

It is a significant challenge for women (and men presumably!) to convince themselves that politics is for or about women at all, according to the Maria Eugenia Gomez of the Nicaraguan *Grupo Venancia* [10]. The resurgence in Nicaragua [11] of *caudillismo*, strong-man politics, perpetuates the pattern that those women who do enter politics often achieve positions through family connections and suffer from a lack of grassroots legitimacy. The vast majority of women remain disenfranchised and excluded - the visible presence of female politicians is not necessarily an indicator of good democratic access for women. (The United Nations [12] target for preventing women merely functioning as a minority in the political system sets a participation rate of 30%-35%.)

## **A larger empowerment**

However, there are key trends towards women's inclusion that don't just seek to use them as window-dressing. Regional commitments represent some of the most promising tools for change, alongside the essential work of changing public attitudes and building political will. The European Union has driven important initiatives, and the African Union has made one of the most progressive statements in this area, promoting gender parity in decision-making [13].

Other powerful organisations, including the World Bank [14] and International Monetary Fund, are beginning to recognise ways in which women can be a strategic resource to the state, because of how they do things differently to men. In particular they are seen as trustworthy recipients of development aid. Cash entering women's pockets is more likely to be spent productively for the community, rather than being lost to bribery and corruption.

One such popular tool in Latin America is the conditional cash-transfer [15]. Designed to break the cycle of transmitting poverty from one generation to the next, a cash transfer is paid to mothers conditional on the school attendance of their children, connecting with the health services, and on the mothers contributing certain hours of work in the local community. Though this programme is credited with improved school attendance and putting the importance of girls' education [16] on the policy agenda, the conditions laid down serve to increase mothers' responsibilities in the family while placing no demands on fathers. Thus this mechanism has the counter-intuitive effect of burdening more than empowering women, while cementing gender relations.

Also in openDemocracy: our Women UNlimited blog [17] from and about the 2007 Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations

Plus: analysis and critique of the state of women's rights worldwide:

Patricia Daniel, "Women, violence and empowerment: the world we live in [18]"  
(23 February 2007)

Pinar Ilkkaracan, "Do women and girls have human rights? [19]"  
(26 February 2007)

The United Kingdom too has its version of this problem, in the form of women's "double burden", where in families where two heterosexual parents both have jobs, the woman will in the majority of cases shoulder the bulk of household work and childcare. The recent release of the Equalities Review [20] by the country's Equal Opportunities Commission has provoked much discussion

[21] of how gender relations continue to produce an unequal society, where men are freer to pursue life and ambitions beyond the home.

Developments that look good for women can in fact carry hidden costs. Women's access into the economic sphere [22] has won political backing in part because it has the useful effect of boosting the workforce. The flipside of this is that while the activities of "private life" remain denigrated and out of view, little time or space is left for family and education, care and community. The practice of politics - as public life - even seems increasingly to be defined against these, both in the popular mind and as states retreat from service provision while expanding their security role.

Empowering women as equal citizens alongside men entails a more interesting transformation of politics than the mere competition of interests it is often perceived to be (some male politicians faced with the idea of quotas for women in the Zambian [23] parliament asked, so which of us do you want to leave right now?). Whether women would do politics differently is an open question for now - and so too is the possibility that men themselves, as politicians or citizens, would do politics differently, were gender relations shifted, and public and private life better integrated and shared.

In the meantime, without such a shift, there is a danger of supposedly progressive measures solidifying women's traditional roles without creating the conditions for their meaningful, non-minority participation in public life.

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- [1] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,2028181,00.html>
- [2] <http://www.internationalwomensday.com/>
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- [12] <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/>
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- [15] [http://www.eldis.org/gender/socialprotection\\_conditionaltransfers.htm](http://www.eldis.org/gender/socialprotection_conditionaltransfers.htm)
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- [21] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,2023662,00.html>
- [22] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions\\_government/yunus\\_4030.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/yunus_4030.jsp)
- [23] <http://www.mmegi.bw/2006/October/Thursday5/7300762111942.html>



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