

*Feminism, liberal democracy and the  
politics of inclusion and exclusion*

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What does feminism have to contribute to the issue of inclusion and exclusion within liberal democracy? Feminism and exclusion appear inextricably linked, since this issue lies at the heart of feminist movement. Although feminism is a vastly diverse entity, comprising of multifarious theoretical and practical approaches, its fundamental aim is to ‘empower’ women. This can take both a negative and positive form, from exposing and eradicating the discrimination that prevents women from fulfilling their potential, to exploring new means of actively enhancing women’s position. At its root lies the historical subjugation of women in social, economic and political life and the disproportionate allocation of power to men – women’s exclusion; and the desire to redress such a situation – women’s inclusion. The politics of exclusion and inclusion are equally fundamental to the theory and practice of democracy: “Democracy is about inclusion and exclusion, about access to power, about the privileges that go with inclusion and the penalties that accompany exclusion” (Horowitz, 1993).

The concerns of feminism both mirror the concerns of democratic practice and arise from its inadequacies. Whilst both are about inclusion and exclusion, feminism’s contribution to the subject stem from liberal democracy’s continued exclusionary nature. As such, feminist theory and practice highlights the systematic and ingrained barriers against women’s political participation. In doing so, it examines and challenges the theory and practice of democracy, both within and beyond the strict confines of the arena within which inclusion and exclusion would typically be placed. It tackles the assumptions and spatial limitations of liberal democracy, expanding the notion of the political and delineating a conception of democracy as a more participatory, fluid and principle-based system, rooted in everyday attitudes and actions as well as institutions.

Two quite different interpretations and approaches are evident. The first, which I will call the ‘institutional approach’, challenges the form and methods of political institutions, and aims to redress exclusion by ‘tinkering’ within the parameters of established institutional politics activity. The second, which I shall call the ‘holistic approach’, reinterprets the very understanding of what constitutes the political and what the appropriate sites for democratic implementation are. The suggestion is that inclusion is only possible by shifting the boundaries of what we understand the political to be, and by ‘treating’ – or addressing - the

whole body of society, rather than merely the limb which displays the symptoms. (but is that the issue? Rather that politics refuses to step outside its demarcated territory?) There is a third intermediary ground. This recognises that uneven relationships of power outside the political sphere impede participation within it. Its emphasis remains focused on increasing participation within the established political sphere however, rather than identifying all power relations as constituting a legitimate site of democracy and a means to an end in its own right.

Although the two key approaches reflect divergent emphasis concerning the causes of exclusion and means of inclusion, I would suggest that they are ultimately complementary. For an inclusive democratic society to exist, neither can nor indeed should exist independently of the other. The conclusions of each approach can also be pertinent to other subordinated groups, particularly within increasingly multicultural societies.

This paper outlines the contribution of feminist theory to firstly, understanding of the scale of exclusion; secondly, investigating its causes; and thirdly, exploring possible means of encouraging greater inclusion. In doing so, it implicitly assumes that exclusion has deeply negative implications for the welfare and status of women themselves, and for the perceived legitimacy and consequent success of a democratic system. This subject will be dealt with at greater length later in the paper.

## **a. THE SCALE OF POLITICAL EXCLUSION**

### **i) Institutionally based exclusion**

The problem of political exclusion along gender lines within liberal democracies is vast. Women currently constitute half the world's population, but are consistently under-represented in liberal democracies. Since the U.K 1997 election, women account for only 17.7 percent of MPs, a figure that is still double that of the previous government. In Greece, women constitute just 6.3 percent of representatives in the national Parliament. France has just nine percent of women in government, Austria 14.1 percent, and the Netherlands 33.8 percent ([http://www.db-decision.de/Factsheet/Parliament\\_E.html](http://www.db-decision.de/Factsheet/Parliament_E.html)). Only Swedish democracy has almost equal numbers of each sex in government. After the 1998

parliamentary elections, women comprised 43 percent of representatives in the Riksdag; three of the Riksdag speakers are women; seven of the sixteen Riksdag committees currently have female chairpersons and, since 1994, half of ministers of government have been women ([http://www.riksdagen.se/factabl/f08\\_kvinn\\_en.htm](http://www.riksdagen.se/factabl/f08_kvinn_en.htm)).

## ii) Why does exclusion matter?

The limited nature of female participation and representation in national decision-making institutions has important consequences for women, and for the legitimacy of the institutions themselves. Women constitute half the population in a political system that espouses equality and where both sexes are legally eligible for political office. The law of probability suggests that women should attend in equal numbers as men. The very fact that they do not suggests in itself that deep flaws exist within the political system. Representation is not only a means of overcoming the problems of individual participation in a geographically and demographically large state. If we accept that the responsibility of representatives is to act on behalf of the constituents who elected them and reflect the ideas and aspirations of the wider populace, it appears that the concerns of half the population cannot be sufficiently attended to or acted upon. Even if democracy is, at its most minimal conception, a system for organised conflict resolution (see Schumpeter, 1976), then women's disproportionate absence denies their viewpoints sufficient opportunity to contend.

At the other end of the spectrum, democracy can be conceived of as a participatory, educative and developmental process. The works of Rousseau, Mill and Tocqueville propose that a citizen's active political participation beneficially educates the mind and shapes morality, an experience which enlarges the capabilities of both the citizen and, as a consequence, the democratic system itself (Rousseau, 1968; Mill, 1992; Tocqueville, 1994). Under present conditions women would be largely exempt from such benefits. By insufficiently addressing the issue, democracy might consequently be depriving itself of its full potential.

Certainly, not all of women's concerns are indelibly connected with being women *per se*, but are influenced according to class, ethnic, cultural and other manifold concerns. In this respect it might be argued that such issues could be reasonably represented by male MP's. Feminists suggest however, that some issues are particularly female, due to either biological or socially

constructed causes, and as such, are unlikely to be attended to by men (Tong, 1989). Without a sufficient female presence in the national decision-making bodies, it seems unlikely that issues which women as a group are more likely to be faced with - concerning reproduction or challenging other inequalities within the social and economic sphere - would be addressed.

### **iii) The wider parameters of exclusion**

A major concern within feminism regards the pervasive power of 'patriarchy' as the prime cause of women's subjugation and exclusion. Patriarchy represents an insidious system of attitudes and ideas, embodied in institutions and interpersonal relations, which effectively elevates the position and opportunities of men and oppresses women (Coole, 1988). Its most clear manifestation lies in the sexual division of labour, which has historically relegated women to the domestic sphere, with few opportunities beyond caring for children and the household, while men engaged in paid work and public interaction. A consequence and cause of patriarchy is that political theory and practice embodies and perpetuates patriarchal ideas, assuming that men are the norm and prioritising traditionally male experiences. Accordingly, Anne Phillips asserts that supposedly gender-neutral terms, such as the 'citizen', the 'worker', the 'individual', actually prioritise characteristics and activities more likely to be associated with men (Phillips, 1991). The legal exclusion of women in politics until 1918 in the U.K, 1920 in the U.S and as late as 1971 in Switzerland, allowed political institutions, terminology, and practices to be established by men for men. As a result, women were excluded, in person and in thought, from centuries of discussion about the citizen, the individual and political life.

Whilst prioritisation of values and activities more likely to be associated with men was in some way inevitable in a system which only admitted men, it continues virtually unchanged, despite the fact that women now have equal political rights. Democratic theorists still behave as if men alone constituted the 'citizen' and the 'individual'. Numerous texts in the field of politics solely refer to men as subjects of discussion. In the same vein Susan Moller Okin criticises John Rawls' 'Theory of Justice' for his implication that individuals are actually male household heads. He suggests that people could arrive at fair and just principles by being ignorant of their own class, wealth, intelligence and strength, but fails to include gender as a criteria. This either implicitly assumes that his subjects are all men and ignores women altogether, or pretends that gender does not matter, which in a century of protracted lobbying

for women's rights surely cannot be justified (Moller Okin in Phillips, 1993). A more explicit exemplification of democratic theorist's preoccupation with male citizens and dismissal of female citizens is found in Schumpeter's assertion that the absence of female suffrage should not invalidate a democracy (Schumpeter in Pateman, 1989).

The prioritisation of men is also identified in democratic practice. Jenny Chapman asserts that the conditions required for political participation give men an advantage by giving greater credence to activities men are more likely to undertake. As such, political office typically demands time, relative freedom of movement, and high economic and social status (Chapman, 1993). These remain at odds with the realities of women's lives, both biologically determined and socially constructed. Feminism distinguishes between 'sex' – an unchangeable biological fact, and 'gender' - a potentially changeable social construct determined along the lines of sex. The fact that women bear children is inevitable, the fact that women must always care for the children is not (Pateman, 1989). In practice however, women are more likely to adopt a caring role, and the resulting consumption of time, lack of flexibility, relative difficulty of finding a well-paid job to fit caring duties, is fundamentally at odds with the conditions of political office.

This is reflected by the experiences of women who have attained political positions. Vicky Randall's overview of women's political participation in Britain and the U.S.A revealed that the vast majority of the small proportion of female members of government did not have children under ten years of age (Randall, 1987). Equally, Tessa Kingham, a Labour MP with two young children, blamed the "archaic and family-wrecking House of Commons working hours" for her decision to step down in the next British election (The Observer, 21 November, 1999). In the European Parliament, age limits for senior jobs directly conflict with the life-cycles of women. The average European woman is estimated to bear children at the age of twenty-nine, when she is too young to apply for a senior post. By the time children are past the age of full-time parental care, a woman is already too old for the post (The Guardian, 7 May 1998). It appears that the conditions for political participation explicitly rests on the assumption that "someone else is taking care of the children" (Phillips, 1991). This either requires a compromise in a woman's own life, a redistribution of domestic labour, or sufficient funds for childcare outside the home.

Democratic practice therefore, actively impedes women's ability to participate in political life and compete for political office. Not only are men's experiences regarded as the norm, but the experiences of women are consequently regarded as impairments that require 'help'. Mendus comments that pregnancy, a normal occurrence for half the population, is nevertheless often treated as an illness, with maternity leave regarded as a special case of sick-leave (Mendus, 1992). As such, Chapman concludes that the patriarchal system has ensured that whatever is associated with success amongst men, women have less of it, and whatever women have that men do not, will be of no use to them in competition with men (Chapman, 1993). Women who do succeed will have the attributes of winning men. Those who do not conform to male standards will "be damned" (Phillips, 1991: 5).

These criticisms rest upon the premise that there are real and distinct differences between men and women. There are problems with attributing essentialist characteristic to each sex, since this has been, and potentially could be used as an excuse for exclusion. Many women, fighting for basic political rights at the turn of the twentieth century, argued that women had distinct and particular characteristics that could benefit politics (Rowbotham, 1999). Others justified equal rights by vociferously denying any difference between the sexes. The debate has raged ever since. It should be noted, however obvious it may now appear, that equal rights do not mean, or invariably lead to, equal opportunities (Chapman, 1993). Admittance to the political sphere on pre-existing terms has proved insufficient, for the question is now whether the terms of admission are either fair or equal. The conclusion can only be that the theory of equality supposedly underpinning the democratic system is consistently compromised by the realities of a male-dominated democratic tradition.

#### **iv) Beyond the 'political' and into the political**

Feminist approaches also locate the causes of political exclusion and inclusion as lying outside the established public political domain. By denying the liberal presumption that politics only exists within the public sphere or that it can be understood without reference to social or economic life, feminists aim to redraw the boundaries and understanding of democratic practice and democratic equality. It appears erroneous for democratic writers to assert that women and men can interact freely as equals because of their status as enfranchised

democratic citizens (Pateman, 1989). Patriarchal attitudes beyond the political sphere deter, devalue, and confuse ideas about women as political participants. This is manifested in manifold ways, from cultural attitudes about the role and abilities of women, to the practical limitations women face due to the sexual division of labour.

As such, Pateman points to the “structure of everyday life, including marriage, [which] is constituted by the beliefs and practices which presuppose that women are naturally subject to men” (Pateman, 1989: 213). This is reflected even in the basic marriage contract: whilst a married man merely remains a ‘man’, a married woman becomes a ‘wife’, called upon to renounce her family name and ‘obey’. There is surely tension between the idea that a woman is less than equal than her husband and the democratic assertion that all adults have equal worth: enunciated in the ‘one person, one vote’ premise. Equally, women’s subjection lies at odds with the liberal democratic emphasis on negative freedoms, which attempts to prevent oppression of individuals by the state. The liberal emphasis on the public-private divide however, allows the oppression of individuals by other individuals to continue unchecked. This is equally manifested in the dubious attitudes towards women’s right to refuse consent, reflected in the difficulty that women face in securing convictions of rapists, on the basis that ‘no’ actually meant ‘yes’ (Pateman, 1989). Whilst informed, rational consent constitutes an important facet of democratic governance, the doubt cast upon women’s ability to do so outside the political process by implication casts doubt upon their worth as a democratic citizen.

The media’s treatment of women within the political process also reflects certain ingrained biases about women’s roles and devalues their activities within the democratic process. A study of this issue revealed that the media often treated women as aberrations at best or in a patronising and insulting manner at worst. One female MP recorded how, “Because three of the four candidates were women it was described as the “menopausal contest” by a number of commentators” (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, 1996: 112). Others agreed that female MPs were often described in more emotional and less serious terms than their male counterparts: “X makes statements and I make outbursts”. In doing so the media perpetuate the idea of women as hysterical, irrational, and frivolous, undermining the contributions of women to the

political process and perpetuating the idea that they are merely “diversions from the serious male game of politics” (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, 1996: 116).

## **b. TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY**

Feminist solutions to the exclusionary nature of democratic practice reflect their interpretation of its causes, and thus work at several levels. Some theoreticians propose changes within the established boundaries of political theory and practice; some suggest democracy must extend its reach to domestic and economic life; others contest the very nature of liberal democracy itself, seeking a more personal and deconstructed interpretation of democratic practice. The combined impression is that whilst it is essential that political theory and practice recognise differences between the sexes and the problems women face as a gender, society at large must also reassess its conception of gender. Equally, the definition of the political, and therefore the site for democratic practice, must also be reconsidered.

### **i) The acceptance of difference**

Theorists like Phillips and Pateman challenge the liberal conception of equality as understood through the denial of difference. Whilst the formal barriers preventing women’s participation have been lifted, feminists determine that a corresponding change must occur in the assumptions and practices of democracy. Phillips contends that equality can only be achieved through an understanding, acceptance and incorporation of sexual difference into democratic theory and practice (Phillips, 1991). Denying the pertinence of gender both ignores and reinforces the existing male bias within democracy. One of the greatest contributions of feminism to democratic theory could be construed as the assertion that some differences cannot and should not be eliminated. Pressure for conformity as a precondition to democratic participation, could be seen as anathema to the freedoms enshrined in liberal democracy. Negative freedoms, which protect against coercion, and positive freedoms, which encourage individuality and action, are at odds with attempts to eliminate difference. Mendus goes so far as suggest that such attitudes are more suited to an oppressive and exclusive society than a democratic one (Mendus, 1992).

The problem of concentrating too much on individual difference is not only that it has been used to justify exclusion, but also that it can effectively undermine the premise of a cohesive citizen body. Where the differences between citizens are manifold, a democratic polity also requires bonds of mutuality in order that it may, at least on one level, exist as a comprehensive entity. Phillips stresses however, the interplay between sexually specific and universal modes of thought found in the works of Eisenstein, Carol Gilligan, and Iris Young. She suggests that a new universalism must be created, without the male bias of old-style abstractions and without denying the features which constitute individuals (Phillips, 1993). What this means in practice is a re-examination of the assumptions that political theorists and political practitioners make about the people participating in democratic processes. The recognition that citizens have different experiences outside the political sphere, and the acceptance that these are all equally valid, ought to lead to a more inclusive understanding of citizenship and the conditions required for political participation.

Dahl distinguishes between the principle of inclusion, which can only be met by denying difference, and the principle of equality, which can only be met by recognising and accommodating difference (Dahl, in Mendus, 1992). It would appear however, that recognising difference is relevant to both, since the disproportionate number of women in politics surely invalidates the idea that denying difference can facilitate a satisfactory level of inclusion. Perhaps instead, the usefulness of difference lies in clarifying its relationship with the issues of exclusion and inclusion in a democratic polity, and appreciating its potentiality as both an exclusionary and inclusionary force. In this respect, difference ought to be *ignored* as legitimate criteria for exclusion. That any adult should *not* be excluded is consistent with democracy's emphasis on equality, but leaves a wide spectrum of possibilities, from the citizen who chooses not to exercise their right to vote, to those who run for political office. The issue of inclusion is a more active, positive desire for an increasingly participatory democracy. It is here that the acceptance of difference is most useful, as a means of facilitating political opportunities for all citizens.

## **ii) The institutional approach**

Vicky Randall concentrates on more institutionally based changes, contending that proportional representation is better at including women in formal politics than the first-past-the-post system. Proportional representation encourages national parties to devise slates of candidates who represent the main groups in society. Where only one candidate is eligible for selection the pressure is to choose the “standard product”: a white, middle-class, middle-aged male (Randall, 1987:140). She cites the example of the French National Assembly, where numbers of women representatives fell by 4.3 percent after plurality voting replaced proportional representation in 1958. Equally, when proportional representation was used in the 1978 European elections the number of female French representatives rose by 21 percent (Randall, 1987: 141).

### **iii) The ‘Holistic’ Approach**

Feminism not only looks outside the institutions and practices of the formal political sphere to determine causes for women’s exclusion, but suggests that inclusion on equal terms can only arise when democracy is extended to the rest of society. Pateman asks how democracy can be achieved unless it infiltrates the bedroom and the kitchen too (Pateman, 1989). The narrow conception of politics is undermined with the argument that democracy needs to be situated at the level of everyday life: “politics is about personal life, not simply about electoral battles and ambitious individuals”(Duchen in Coole, 1988). Some women, particularly in 1970’s America and Britain, aimed to achieve a “politics of everyday life, which is no longer limited to choices between impotence or occasional and highly ritualised acts”(Coole, 1988). Politics can be broadly interpreted as the negotiation of power, and democracy as one system of deciding its distribution. In this approach, the democracy is understood as the embodiment of the principle of equality, or at least an anticipation of an equal contribution in all areas where power is sited. If patriarchy pervades all aspects of personal, social, economic and political life, then it ought to be combated in all these areas. Democracy, as the antithesis of patriarchy, of hierarchy, of client and patron, the ruler and the ruled, is the means by which this can be achieved. Democracy must logically be implemented in all sites of power, from the home to the state, if patriarchy and women’s subordination is to be combated.

Women’s economic movements can be seen as pertinent to political inclusion as those dealing directly with the political sphere, therefore. The Self-Employed Women’s Organisation

(SEWA), based in Gujarat, India, is an example of how democratic principles can be implemented in a non-political site. Its activities range from generating economic security and independence through local co-operatives, to organising group rallies against social injustice, child-care and education. Its organisation is non-hierarchical and participatory, allowing greater interaction between castes, and in a small way is regarded as surmounting the traditional barriers of inferiority and exclusion present in much of Indian society (Bumiller, <http://www.soc.titech.ac.jp/icm/sewa>). Moreover, Indian women are often financially dependent and socially subservient to their husbands. Engaging in work outside the household and handling their own savings can build confidence and independence, and allow them greater status within the family (Miller, 1991). Such claims are by no means concrete or inevitable of course. The realities of women's lives in developed and developing countries are very different, and it could be argued that a prime motivation in building co-operatives is merely to be able to feed one's family. It seems however, that the very method of doing so requires changing attitudes, acquiring skills, and adopting practices that are amenable to democratic and feminist aims.

Similarly, women-only communities, such as that found at Greenham Common's Women's Peace Camp, are an example of the symbiotic relationship between democracy, feminism, and inclusion. Working along feminist principles of self-determination, those at Greenham ran the peace camp in a democratic and inclusionary manner: "deciding things among themselves", "talking together as women" and "working out women's ways of doing things" (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/specialFreport/1999/11/99/greenham>). Admittedly, the camp was unusual on several counts and can hardly be blankly applied to wider society. Firstly, the women were united in a single purpose – to rid the Common of the American cruise missiles based on the site and to protest against nuclear weapons in general. The community was small, and many of the women who came to the camp arrived with a participatory and 'free-minded' ethos. Equally, whilst the community may have been internally inclusive, welcome was not always extended to those who did not wholly submerge themselves in the lifestyle. Day visitors or 'weekenders' were often viewed with suspicion and excluded from activities, although this is partially explicable in view of the sensitive aims and activities of the camp. At the same time, it does illustrate that a democratic, inclusive *lifestyle* is achievable to those who actively seek to achieve it.

## **Complementary approaches?**

The 'holistic approach' expands the definition of the political to include *all* relationships that involve power and decision-making - from the home to the state, and consequently suggests that democracy is applicable and necessary in all these sites. If this is the case, where does the issue of inclusion and exclusion fit? Women have not been *absent* from marriage or the workplace or the home, but historically subordinate within it. At the same time, enforced impotence of actions is at least as exclusionary as physical absence. Social dictates that prevent women from attaining an equal role in decision-making - be it over their own lives or on behalf of others - remains a form of exclusion. Whilst it may not be as evident as the dearth of female faces in the House of Commons, it has in fact proved to be the most insidious, least identified and most difficult aspect of exclusion to overcome.

Whilst exposing disaffection with institutional democracy and attempting to look above and beyond its confines, such an approach is not necessarily at odds with a more government orientated plan. Indeed, a more 'grassroots' approach could logically facilitate greater participation in government by combating patriarchy and the subjugation of women from the bottom up. Although institutional participation is not the aim, changing relations of power within the household, the workplace and personal relationships may nevertheless facilitate such a shift. It might appear that the only hope for greater inclusion within institutionalised democracy is the extension and enactment of democratic principles beyond the established political sphere.

## **Conclusions**

Feminism contributes to the inclusion/exclusion problem within liberal democracies at both a theoretical and practical level. As a critique it exposes the tension between democratic theory and democratic implementation, and reveals the inadequacies of liberal democracy's solution to political exclusion on gender lines. The proposed solutions suggest not only that the assumptions at the heart of democratic theory and practice are fundamentally flawed, but also that any one defect can only be remedied by attending to the entire structure. It challenges the line drawn between the political and the personal world, exposing the intimate connection between the two and repudiating the idea that inequality can be redressed in one domain without corresponding action in another. Democracy is conceived of as an expansive,

participatory entity, based on the experiences and interpersonal relationships of everyday life as well as the institutions of national governments. The ideals, ideas and practices of feminism aim to remedy exclusion and its accompanying penalties at all levels of society: to build a democratic life as well as a democratic government.