Representation, radicalism and compromise: 
a discursive approach to state feminism

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Abstract
This paper proposes an approach to the analysis of women’s representation which draws upon discourse theory as well as upon literature concerning social movements and the state. The paper is roughly divided into two parts. The first half utilises the case of British abortion politics to highlight some lacunas in research into state feminism, arguing that recent studies have been unable to fully explain why women’s movement campaigners have been successful in defending the 1967 Abortion Act but have not achieved further reform. It concludes that feminist concerns over the ‘deradicalisation’ of women’s movements must be taken seriously even if one disagrees with the conclusion that feminist goals cannot be achieved by working with the state. The second half sets out a framework for doing so. It stresses the need to take into account the governmental rationalities which face women’s movement actors, as well as emphasising a particular conceptualisation of ‘radicalism’.

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Introduction

In the 1970s and 80s, there was little in the way of feminist theorizing on the state, although feminists were generally happy to talk about a ‘patriarchal state’. Franzway et al. explain that while there may not have been much in the way of feminist state theory, feminists at this time still had a theoretical attitude towards the state (1989: 27), although they have oscillated between believing the state to be a (potentially) neutral arbiter of competing interests and believing the state to be merely a tool of oppression. Catharine MacKinnon’s (1989) early attempt to develop a feminist theory of the state has been widely cited. MacKinnon advances a theory of the state as ‘male in the feminist sense’ (161). The liberal state, she argues, constitutes the social order in men’s interests. Crucially, it is the norm of objectivity which institutionalizes male power:

Objectivity is liberal legalism’s conception of itself. It legitimates itself by reflecting its view of society, a society it helps make by so seeing it, and calling that view, and that relation, rationality. Since rationality is measured by point-of-viewlessness, what counts as reason is that which corresponds to the way things are. Practical rationality, in this approach, means that which can be done without changing anything. (162)

Thus, the law both legitimates male dominance and makes it invisible. Importantly, it is norms and procedures – rather than composition or internal structure – which make the state patriarchal. Laws and adjudications enact male power over women: ‘the law sees and treats women the way men see and treat women’ (161-2); or, worded differently, the state enforces the ‘epistemology’ of male dominance through law (xi). This negative attitude towards the state was also prevalent in the work of those writing on ‘bureaucratic feminism’ – the idea that bureaucratic institutions might be altered once women began to enter them in large numbers:

To equate the upward mobility of individual women with the success of feminism is simply to embrace a new and self-serving version of the old laissez-faire myth that the sum of the self-interests of each individual equals the interest of the whole (Ferguson, 1984: x).

Hence, many earlier feminist writers felt that feminists should not attempt to engage with the state; such engagement could only result in co-optation and assimilation. However, more recently there has been a general shift away from this view. Authors have noted that ‘the state’ as an entity is far too complex and contradictory for general pronouncements to be made about its nature, its aims or its desires (see for example Allen, 1990; Halford, 1992; Beckwith, 2003). Hence, many argue that it is too simplistic to argue that feminist engagement with the state leads inevitably to co-optation. The state is not ‘naturally’ anti-feminist; besides, the notion of simple co-optation assumes that those co-opted are completely passive, and ‘grants such omnipotence to the state that everything is grist to its mill’ (Franzway et al., 1989: 148).

Following this shift, there has been a renewed focus on the activities of feminists working within states rather than against them. Much of this research has examined the extent to which women elected to legislatures are able to substantively represent the interests of women (see for example Childs, 2002; Grey, 2002; Lovenduski and Norris, 2003; Campbell
et al., 2010). However, my emphasis here is on the ‘state feminism’ literature, which examines the extent to which women’s movement actors are able to insert their ideas into the policy process and achieve policy outcomes in line with their goals.

This paper focuses on the methodology employed by the international Research Network on Gender and the State (RNGS). The RNGS carried out an ambitious, large-scale comparative project, looking at multiple policy areas across 17 post-industrial countries. However, I wish to focus on one particular RNGS case in order to demonstrate what may be overlooked by such an approach. McBride Stetson (2001b) finds that in the case of British abortion policy, feminists have been successful both in establishing the framing of abortion as a matter of women’s rights, and in achieving policy outcomes in line with their goals. However, she does not explain why, given this success, feminists have not managed to achieve their long-term goal of further reform to abortion law.

The UK’s 1967 Abortion Act, while a step forward in that it significantly opened up women’s access to abortion, has been widely criticised by feminists. The Act did not technically grant women a ‘right to choose’; rather, it requires the permission of two doctors for an abortion to be carried out, who must agree that to continue the pregnancy would damage the pregnant woman’s physical or mental health. While doctors now interpret ‘health’ very liberally, with many arguing that to continue any unwanted pregnancy would damage a woman’s mental health, anti-abortion doctors can still obstruct women’s access to abortion (Sheldon, 1997). The RNGS approach does not explain why this legal situation persists, if feminists have been successful in inserting their ideas about abortion into the policy process.

In this paper, I demonstrate the need for closer analysis of the content of the ‘feminist’ ideas inserted into the policy process when trying to make sense of situations like the above. In order to do so, I sketch out some developments of the RNGS’ concept of ‘Transformative State Feminism’ that can aid analysis, drawing on post-structuralist literature on radicalism and contestation. I wish in particular to draw attention to the unevenness of ‘transformative’ feminisms, and argue that the ability to recognise this unevenness requires an understanding of the historical and discursive context of a particular policy area. Unlike much recent work, which focuses on the activities of women’s policy agencies (WPAs), my focus is on MPs and Parliamentary debate. This is because in the UK, abortion is generally considered a ‘conscience’ issue and WPAs tend to stay quiet on the issue (Lovenduski, 2007: 160). However, the concepts developed here should travel to research on WPAs.

Firstly, the paper offers an overview of RNGS and its innovative mixed-methods approach, focusing particular on its use of frame analysis to explore how feminist ideas are inserted into policy debates. I argue that the methodology used does not closely examine the content of ‘feminist frames’, and therefore does not have an answer to concerns over state feminist complicity in problematic policy regimes. Thereafter, I turn to the case of British abortion policy in order to illuminate some things which are left unexplained by the RNGS approach. Next, I develop the concept of transformative state feminism, drawing on conceptualisation of radicalism put forward by Jonathan Dean (2008; 2010). Finally, I demonstrate how this
approach may be applied, again to the case of British abortion policy, to reveal how ‘transformative’ feminism has entered the state unevenly.

Researching state feminism

The term ‘state feminism’ designates the ways in which actors within the state can pursue feminist or ‘woman-friendly’ actions and policies. It was coined by the Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes to indicate, broadly, ‘feminism from above in the form of gender equality and social policies’ (Hernes, 1987: 153). More recently, research into state feminist projects has tended to focus on the work of WPAs (see for example Outshoorn, 2004; Lovenduski ed., 2005; Outshoorn and Kantola eds., 2007; Squires, 2008; McBride and Mazur, 2010). Much of this work was produced by members of the RNGS. Over fifteen years, the RNGS carried out a large-scale comparative project into the interface between women’s movements and women’s policy agencies, the findings of which were published in several books but culminated in *The Politics of State Feminism* (McBride and Mazur, 2010).

The RNGS projects employed a mixed-methods approach, examining how favourable policy outcomes were to the women’s movements as well as how successful women’s movements and WPAs were in inserting feminist ideas and language into policy debates on a variety of issues concerning women. They note four possible outcomes of women’s movements’ engagement with the state:

- **dual response**, where the state accepts women into the process and effects policy which coincides with movement goals;
- **co-optation**, where the policy-makers bring women participants into the process but do not render policy the movement desires;
- **pre-emption**, where the state gives policy satisfaction to the movement but does not include women into the policy process on the issue; and finally
- **no response**, where the movement achieves neither access for women nor policy success. (McBride Stetson, 2001a: 12)

The RNGS found that over the last 30 years, women’s movements have been successful in expanding women’s political representation, especially when they have forged alliances with WPAs (Lovenduski, 2008: 173-4). WPAs took up women’s movement causes in the majority of cases, though while they often help women’s movements achieve positive responses from the state, the existence of WPAs is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of women’s movement success, and movements need not always align themselves with WPAs in order to achieve their goals (McBride and Mazur, 2010). Nonetheless, these findings are important as they demonstrate that the state is not always merely a tool of patriarchal oppression, as often assumed by an earlier generation of feminist writers.

A key innovation of the RNGS is its use of the concept of ‘framing’ to help identify women’s movement success. ‘Frames’ are ‘explicit expression[s] of why the issue deserves government attention and action’ (McBride Stetson, 2001a: 3) which call our attention to certain events and their underlying causes and direct our attention away from others. At the same time, they organize and make coherent an apparently diverse array
of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is at stake on the issue. Framing deals with the gestalt or pattern-organizing aspect of meaning. (Ferree et al., 2002: 14)

Moreover, frames are a means for inserting feminist ideas into the policy process. According to the RNGS, if a feminist frame can be established in a policy debate, the women’s movement is much more likely to be able to influence the policy outcome: ‘the definition of the conflict is the key to power’ (McBride and Mazur, 2010: 12). This focus on policy process as well as outcome is welcome. However, determining what makes a frame ‘feminist’ as opposed to simply ‘about women’ is difficult. The RNGS identify a common theme in definitions of feminism, namely that it involves some degree of identification and contestation of patriarchy (McBride and Mazur, 2010: 33). For Beckwith, for example, women’s movements emphasise women’s experiences, women’s issues, and women’s decision-making, while feminist movements

are distinguished by their challenge of patriarchy. Feminist movements share a gendered power analysis of women’s subordination and contest political, social, and other power arrangements of domination and subordination on the basis of gender. (Beckwith, 200: 437)

Accordingly, the RNGS differentiate between Movement State Feminism (MSF) and Transformative State Feminism (TSF). The former involves a ‘gender consciousness’ which includes ‘identity with women as a group, explicitly gendered language about women, and representation of women as women in public life’ (McBride and Mazur, 2010: 33). The latter involves all this, plus

a view that because there is something wrong with the treatment and status of women, goals must seek to advance the status of women; and second, a view that, explicitly or implicitly, challenges gender hierarchies and forms of women’s subordination. (McBride and Mazur, 2010: 33; emphasis in original)

However, despite the distinction between MSF and TSF, for the RNGS ‘feminism’ remains relatively undifferentiated. We know that even ‘transformative’ feminisms are not all alike, differing, for example, in where they identify patriarchy, which gender hierarchies they emphasise, and what their strategy is for doing so. In fairness, the RNGS project had the difficult task of finding a relatively uncontroversial definition of feminism with which to work. Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate, flattening the terrain of feminism in this way has consequences for analysis.

An additional drawback of this approach is that a ‘feminist frame’ is conceptualised as a discrete and unchanging unit to be ‘inserted’ into a policy debate, much like a wedge. The potential consequences for feminism of this insertion could be more fully considered. The RNGS scholars do note the potential danger of ‘co-optation’ of women’s movement actors, who may become assimilated to the state and no longer push a transformative feminist agenda. However, in the model of possible state responses utilised by the RNGS, co-optation is defined as ‘where the policy-makers bring women participants into the process but do not render policy the movement desires’ (McBride Stetson, 2001a: 12) – in other words,
(descriptive) representation without feminism. The possibility that feminist ideas might be brought into the policy arena, and transformed in the process, is not considered.

Yet, other feminist authors have raised concerns about the implications of ‘state feminist’ projects. Dobrowolsky, for example, has noted the sharp division between grassroots activism and ‘gender mainstreaming’ agendas in the UK, arguing that the achievements of British state feminists have been ‘at best modest, at worst worrisome’ (Dobrowolsky, 2003: 129). She suggests that this may be due to neoliberal imperatives. This line of argument is taken further by Squires, who notes that ‘the particular portrayal of gender relations generated by many women’s policy agencies tend to privilege those forms of gender identity that resonate most closely with dominant policy paradigms’ (Squires, 2008: 195), in particular neoliberal policy commitments. State feminism, Squires observes, has become increasingly technocratic, involving the formation of professionalised networks of gender experts, and demands for gender equality are increasingly justified with utility-based arguments, with ‘the effect of marginalizing rights-based gender equality arguments and side-lining more democratic participatory approaches to its pursuit’ (Squires, 2007: 2).

Anna Yeatman has also recognised that feminist engagements with the state may produce different kinds of ‘feminist’ policies. Yeatman notes that feminism has been ambiguous in what it requires from the state: does it require the state to respect women’s personhood, or does it require the state to protect women from men, thus generating a ‘paternalistic-patriarchal’ state (Yeatman, 1997: 145)? This ambiguity has resulted in problematic ‘state responses’ to feminism:

For example, the contemporary state has adopted an equal opportunity approach to income support in so far as it now requires women to participate in labor market programs regardless of whether they are mothers of small children or not. This is a market-oriented version of self-regulation which withdraws paternalistic protection from women, and thereby challenges the patriarchal division between a master and his dependents. Feminism, of course, legitimized this extension of the tyranny of market freedom to women workers even though the employment contract is still governed by the employer’s prerogative. (Yeatman, 1997: 155)

Multiple ‘state feminisms’ may therefore result from feminist engagement with the state, not all of which will necessarily be benign. Of course, it is difficult to incorporate such concerns into a large-scale comparative analysis of state feminist projects. Nonetheless, close analysis of individual RNGS cases demonstrates the importance of considering the content of state feminist projects.

The case of British abortion legislation

The chapters in Abortion Politics, Women’s Movements and the Democratic State (McBride Stetson ed., 2001) apply the RNGS framework to the issue of abortion cross-nationally. Like other RNGS projects, they evaluate how far women’s movements and WPAs have been able to ‘gender the dominant frames of the policy debates in terms that would improve the status of women’ (McBride Stetson, 2001a: 4). The chapter dealing with abortion politics in Britain
explores several separate Parliamentary debates. Firstly, it explores two 1970s debates: the 1975 White Bill, which would have restricted the grounds for legal abortion and the freedom of abortion clinics, the equally restrictive 1979 Corrie Bill. Secondly, it examines the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology (HFE) Act, which lowered the time limit for legal abortion from 28 to 24 weeks’ gestation (McBride Stetson, 2001b). The HFE Act was not originally intended to deal with abortion, but ended up incorporating debates over ‘late’ abortion instigated by the Alton Bill of the late 1980s.

WPAs were not heavily involved in the latter two debates. Nonetheless, women MPs were highly active, and McBride Stetson finds that feminists were consistently successful in achieving their goals with respect to abortion policy. The White and Corrie Bills failed, and while the HFE Act did technically lower the time limit, this outcome was generally regarded as a success for the pro-choice movement: many exceptions were secured for women who needed later abortions, a potential lowering of the time limit to 18 weeks was avoided, and in any case a limit of 24 weeks was already considered to have been achieved in clinical practice (Hohmeyer, 1995: 42). Moreover, by 1990 the women’s movements’ issue frame – that abortion is primarily a matter of women’s rights – had been successfully established in policy debates. McBride Stetson asserts that in each debate, movements secured a dual response from the state, with women included in the policy process and outcomes in line with movement goals. She concludes that ‘policy makers have reached a resolution of the conflict over the abortion law’ (McBride Stetson, 2001b: 155).

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems unlikely that such a resolution was ever truly reached. Abortion is once again a hot topic in the UK. In 2011, Parliament debated an amendment to the Coalition government’s Health and Social Care (HSC) Bill introduced by Conservative MP Nadine Dorries and her Labour co-sponsor Frank Field, which would have stripped abortion providers of the ability to provide counselling to women seeking abortions, instead requiring that this counselling be provided by independent organisations. This amendment was widely regarded as an attempt to slowly erode access to legal abortion (Henebury, undated). In early 2012, the Telegraph exposed three doctors illegally offering to arrange abortions on the grounds that the foetuses were female, prompting an investigation by health officials. Not long afterwards, the then Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, announced a wave of shock inspections on abortion clinics following claims that doctors were ‘pre-signing’ abortion paperwork without seeing patients.

More pertinently, however, the RNGS approach leaves certain events of the 1980s and 1990s unexplained. McBride Stetson notes, briefly, that UK women’s movements were not successful in achieving their long-term goal of reforming abortion law to reduce medical power over abortions (2001b: 154). Yet the implications of this for research on state feminism are not considered. Feminist actors within the state have in fact made several attempts to amend abortion law. In the early 1980s pro-choice MP Jo Richardson (Labour) asked leave to introduce a Bill to improve the availability of NHS terminations, but the motion was defeated by 215 votes to 139. Moreover, a couple of MPs attempted to amend the 1990 HFE Act to improve access to abortion. Emma Nicholson (Conservative) tabled an
amendment allowing self-referral for abortions up to 12 weeks\(^1\), but this was not put to the vote. Harriet Harman (Labour) also tabled an amendment to allow abortion up to 12 weeks with the consent of only one doctor, but this was defeated by 228 votes to 200 (Sheldon, 1997: 114).

The plight of these attempts at reform gives a somewhat different picture of the success of state feminism. According to the RNGS’s typology of outcomes, the state response to these motions is more along the lines of a *co-optation* – women were involved in the policy process but did not achieve the policy outcome desired by the women’s movements. Indeed, if women’s movements and state feminists have been successful in establishing the framing of abortion as primarily ‘about’ women’s rights, it is hard to say why there was not more Parliamentary support for further reform. In order to construct an explanation, it is necessary to look more closely at the *content* of feminist framing in abortion debates. The next section will develop a framework for doing so.

**Assessing the content of feminist frames**

If the insertion of feminist ideas into the policy process results in a mixed policy outcome, where actively anti-feminist policy has been avoided, but a more resolutely pro-feminist policy has not been achieved, this suggests that the uptake of feminism into the policy process has been somewhat uneven. Researchers therefore need to ask what *kind* of state feminism it is that has been achieved. The distinction between MSF and TSF is a useful starting-point, but does not fully allow for the complexity of state feminist projects. This section suggests that post-structuralist writings on feminist and radical politics may be of help in developing the concept of ‘transformative’ feminism.

As previously noted, the distinction between ‘movement’ and ‘transformative’ feminisms builds upon a common theme in definitions of feminism, which demarcate feminism as that which somehow *contests* patriarchy as well as seeking to advance women’s status. However, the extent to which transformative feminist projects contest patriarchy – and the strategies they use for doing so – may vary. Ferree observes that the issue frames used by feminist movements are heavily dependent upon context. Some frames are structurally disadvantaged while others are more culturally resonant and more likely to achieve prominence in public debate on an issue (2003: 305). Ferree *et al.* demonstrate this principle through a comparative analysis of public debate on abortion in Germany and the United States. Different frames became more prominent in each country due to the cultural backdrop of political debate: the US tendency to distrust the state as opposed to Germans’ more positive view of the state as a caring and protective ‘father’ (2002: 66).

Movement actors, therefore, often alter their framing of an issue in order to achieve broad cultural resonance, which is invaluable in achieving short-term goals. However, Ferree

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\(^1\)Under this amendment, women seeking abortions would still have had to obtain the consent of their doctor. However, for pregnancies of up to 12 weeks' gestation it would have removed the two-doctor rule and the requirement that continuance of the pregnancy would endanger the woman’s health.
stresses that the strategies employed by the pro-choice movement should not be reduced to attempts to achieve resonance. The most resonant frames are also those which are most easily co-opted into the dominant discourse, and many movement actors seek long-term change to this discourse rather than short-term political gain such as the defeat of a particular anti-abortion bill (Ferree, 2003: 305). Hence, radical ways of framing an issue are often highly attractive to movement actors.

Ferree states that ‘radical’ frames are those which are ‘less defensible in [a particular] discursive context, but whose success implies more fundamental change’ (Ferree, 2003: 306). This conception of radicalism has an obvious affinity with the notion of ‘transformative’ feminism. Helpfully, it places an additional emphasis on the context in which frames are constructed, implying that the researcher should ask not only whether something is being contested, but what it is exactly that is being contested. However, it is still a little vague concerning how radical frames are constructed, and what it is about them which makes them ‘less defensible’. Following Laclau and Mouffe, authors have characterised radical political demands as those which contest a fundamental norm of a regime or practice (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 115), or draw attention to its contingency (Dean, 2008; 2010). Again, this resonates with the notion of transformative feminism, although it also draws attention to the specificity of the regime or practice which is being contested (as opposed to an unspecific contestation of ‘patriarchy’ or ‘gender hierarchy’).

Radicalism, Dean argues, has two aspects. Firstly, a political demand may become radical ‘if it is inscribed within a (pluralistic) counter-hegemonic chain of equivalence’ (Dean, 2010: 43). ‘Chains of equivalence’, according to Laclau and Mouffe, link together political demands which have no necessary relation to one another (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 128). Therefore, a woman who experiences sexual harassment at work may become radicalised when she establishes linkages between her grievance and other grievances against the company, thereby contesting the fundamentals of the company’s practices (Dean, 2010: 43).

Secondly, Dean stresses the imagination and creativity involved in radical politics. To augment the Laclauian definition of radicalism, Dean draws upon the work of Zerilli. Zerilli advances a feminist reinterpretation of the work of Hannah Arendt – a theorist sometimes regarded as hostile to feminism (Benhabib, 1993) – which emphasises the importance of imagination to political action. Zerilli, like Arendt, stresses the importance of imagination in countering instrumentalist mentalities, whereby things are judged solely according to their function or utility:

> this philistinism threatens … the political realm … because it will judge action by the same standards of utility which are valid for fabrication, demand that action obtain a predetermined end and that it be permitted to seize on all means likely to further this end. (Arendt cited in Zerilli, 2005: 174)

Thus, pure instrumentalism devoid of imagination threatens freedom and spontaneity, as actions which do not further utility cannot be judged as valuable. The ‘world-building’ power of imagination is subsequently central to a freedom-centred politics in which ‘political actors act together in ways which bring into existence things and ideas which did not exist before’
Dean sees an imaginative world-building politics at work in the activities of the Fawcett Society, a British organisation which campaigns on women’s issues. On questions of childcare and work-life balance, the specific proposals put forward by the Fawcett Society are relatively moderate. Nonetheless, these proposals are frequently made alongside an invocation of the image of a Scandinavian-style welfare-state model, suggesting that while Fawcett may be gradualist, its politics are underpinned by a vision of more radical change:

although on the issue of paternity leave Fawcett does not propose at this stage bringing UK policy in line with Swedish policy, the latter nonetheless acts as a discursive horizon into which Fawcett’s demands are inscribed. (Dean, 2010: 79)

Dean’s reformulated understanding of radicalism is valuable, as it draws out some criteria for evaluating the content of state feminisms: whether they contest the fundamental norms of a regime or practice; whether they link together a chain of counter-hegemonic demands; and whether they envision alternatives to current regimes. This conception of radicalism also points to the need to ask which practices are actually being contested. Therefore, it incorporates Squires’ concern that state feminist projects might not challenge problematic policy paradigms, as well as Yeatman’s observation that feminists might be complicit in the creation of a ‘paternalistic-patriarchal’ state.

**Applying this approach**

This section applies these criteria in an analysis of the same debates explored by McBride Stetson – the White, Corrie and Alton Bills and the 1990 HFE Act. Specifically, it looks at the contributions of self-declared feminist MPs to Parliamentary debates, and their claims to be acting on behalf of women. Like McBride Stetson, I find a definite gendering of the debates in the language of these MPs. Throughout, they framed abortion as fundamentally a women’s issue:

It is, above all, a subject that concerns women. Practically all the women on this side of the House support the original 1967 Act and oppose this proposed amendment. I am sorry that there are not women on the other side of the House who are apparently anxious to take part in this debate, for this is a matter that concerns women very much indeed. (Short in Hansard, 1975: 1813)

The hon. Member for Bute and North Ayrshire (Mr. Corrie) has done a great disservice to women by introducing the Bill. (Richardson in Hansard, 1979: 919)

Moreover, there was an explicit and prevalent linking-together of abortion along with a series of other feminist demands. Primarily, MPs linked the issue of abortion to problems with women’s political representation:

We have heard a lot of statistics today. I sometimes wonder whether we are talking about women at all. Perhaps if there had been more women Members of Parliament present today
on the Opposition benches, we might have heard a wider variety of contribution. I must remind the House that this is International Women’s Year. (Jeger in Hansard, 1975: 1830)

However, feminist demands concerning abortion were also linked to women’s poverty, the need to fight against widespread cultural backlash against feminism, and campaigns for women’s health and welfare:

We are very concerned that the Government shall have regard for the clearly expressed view of women who are working class women, who are by and large the main beneficiaries of the 1967 Act. This is tremendously important, because it means that since that Act was introduced working-class women are able to get what better-off women have always been able to get. Better-off women have never been inhibited when they have wanted to remove an unwanted pregnancy for frivolous reasons. I do not believe that our women are concerned with ending unwanted pregnancies for frivolous reasons, but better-off women have always been able to do this. (Short in Hansard, 1975: 1814)

The underlying reason is that the new Right in America goes around bombing abortion clinics, photographing women who go there for abortions and sending the photographs to their neighbours. That is the kind of crude behaviour that comes from the new Right. The growing new Right in Britain is saying that women should stay at home and bear children and care for elderly and disabled people. They are not in favour of public expenditure; they want to push women back into a traditional role and deprive them of the freedom to control their lives – [Interruption.] Hon. Members may laugh. They always laugh and sneer when we talk about the status of women and their freedom. (Short in Hansard, 1988: 1262)

The whole question of abortion is closely linked to other campaigns that women have been fighting for many years … [W]e need improved sex education. We need contraceptives of all kinds, freely available and free. We need better housing and employment and training opportunities. We need safer childbirth – our record is not among the best in the advanced world. We must do away with some of the more recent "conveyor belt practices" connected with childbirth in hospitals, which have a traumatic effect on the baby during birth. We want nursery provision for young children. We want money for medical research into foetal abnormalities to discover them at an earlier stage. We need money for disabled people and money to provide facilities for them. We need money from the Government, as of right, for women who are carers of children, the disabled, the sick and the old. (Gordon in Hansard, 1988: 1284)

These counter-hegemonic chains of demands were clearly accompanied by an imaginative politics. Women’s contributions to the debates were underpinned by the image of a future in which there are more women in Parliament and the Cabinet, and women politicians are better able to organize collectively and safeguard women’s rights. Hence, there was a clear transformative agenda underlying feminist activity in abortion debates. In many ways McBride Stetson is right to be positive: women’s movements found advocates in Parliament, and these advocates were actively linking together series of demands.

However, the previous section asserted the need to pay attention to the specific practices being contested by state feminists. As noted, feminists in the UK have a long-term goal of ending the medicalised regime of abortion care brought into being by the 1967 Abortion Act,
which is underpinned by the assumption that women cannot or should not make decisions about abortion without the intervention of a doctor. It seems that this transformative agenda was not taken up by Parliamentary feminists. Rather, women participating in the 1970s debates tended to centre doctors’ narratives over women’s, asking their audience to consider, for example, ‘the awful decision which faced doctors in the days before the law was changed’ (Jeger in Hansard, 1975: 1828). Women MPs tended to assume that the interests of women and doctors would necessarily be aligned when it came to abortion, despite feminist campaigners outside Parliament arguing otherwise (Underwood, 1974; McGrane and Nicholls, 1977).

This situation persisted into the late 80s and 90s. While MPs stressed the validity of women’s choices, this was generally done alongside emphasis on the importance of medical control over the process: ‘the medical decision and the woman's decision are what is relevant’ (Primarolo in Hansard, 1990: 247). Frequently, women’s rights were transmuted into patients’ rights, and the demands women could legitimately make were seen as akin to the demands a patient might make of the health services:

> The British Pregnancy Advisory Service, the Pregnancy Advisory Service and other organisations in the charitable sector are not permitted to do terminations after 24 weeks. Both those advisory services have compiled an interesting and moving dossier of cases that illustrate the problems that women face through delays or obstruction in the NHS, through doctors failing to diagnose pregnancy, through failure by patients to recognise pregnancy, through failure of methods of contraception or failed pregnancy tests, as the result of menopausal problems or because the females concerned are very young. I have cited some cases, but there are many more. (Richardson in Hansard, 1990: 187)

Critique of the Abortion Act was notable by its absence – even in the 1990 debate, when one of the amendments under discussion aimed to slightly loosen medical control over abortion provision. Hence, while a transformative feminist agenda was definitely evident in the debates, the overall transformative-ness of state feminist discourse was uneven. This may help explain the failure of feminist attempts to reform British abortion law. Arguments for further reform – namely, the feminist critique of medicalisation – have not really been established in policy debates.

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued for a more nuanced understanding of ‘transformative’ state feminism. The above section demonstrated that even when state feminist agendas are transformative overall, their ‘transformative-ness’ may be uneven. In the case of British abortion policy, women within the state articulated their demands as part of a sweeping, and often radical, feminist agenda, contesting the gender regimes operating in both Parliament and civil society. However, at the same time there seems to have been a tacit desire not to rock the boat when it came to the 1967 Abortion Act itself, in spite of widespread criticism from feminists outside
Parliament. This chimes with Squires’ observation that state feminists tend to choose tactics ‘that resonate most closely with dominant policy paradigms’ (Squires, 2008: 195).

Why this might be the case requires further research, although Ferree’s observation that feminist frames need to by resonant in order to be successful may be a starting point. Attempts to restrict access to legal abortion put self-identified feminist MPs in some difficulty, as defending legal abortion currently means defending an Act which is itself antifeminist. Presumably, women MPs feared that being critical of the medical establishment could alienate more moderate supporters. If this is the case, it is difficult to reproach women MPs for not being ‘feminist enough’. However, it does suggest a need to take concerns over feminist deradicalisation seriously, even when there is evidence that state feminists are sometimes able to push a more radical agenda.

This is not to argue against all feminist engagement with the state. Deradicalisation is not a unilinear process; state feminists are able to articulate a transformative agenda even when specific demands are lost. The output of the RNGS project attests to the significant achievements of women’s movements engaging with the state. However, the fact that some demands may be lost in translation gives cause for concern, and it is these losses which are at risk of being overlooked in large-scale comparative studies of state feminism.

References


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