Gender, globalisation, and democracy

Sylvia Walby

Women’s presence in democratically elected assemblies around the world has increased, and women have been participating in the wave of democratisation during the 1990s. While the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women is not in itself a sufficient indicator of women’s representation in politics, it is an important factor in reflections on gender equity and development.

Globalisation has often been represented as a process which is hostile to democracy, yet globalisation and democratisation have been taking place at the same time. Despite the rise of global financial markets and corporations — which are widely believed to reduce the political capacity of nation-states (Held 1995) — there has been not only a third wave of democratisation (Huntington 1991) and immediate suffrage for women in the new democracies, but also an increase of women in existing parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU] 1995).

While it can be important to grasp the detail of the particularity of women’s lives, we must not lose sight of the larger picture of global and regional linkages and changes, especially in an era of globalisation. Much contemporary feminist scholarship has argued for a focus on the particular, on the specific, rather than the large scale of global; it has focused on difference and diversity rather than commonality. This argument is often positioned as a rejection of essentialism and of a false universalism based on the experiences of dominant white Western women. However, while the attention to diversity has been an important dimension of feminist analysis, it has led to a relative neglect of the larger scale of social change, especially globalisation. Feminist analysis needs to address global change, and the global future needs to be gendered.

The political dimensions of globalisation

While much attention has been focused on the economic dimensions of globalisation, some of the political dimensions are as important. Globalising processes may be undermining the capacity of nation-states to act autonomously, but some aspects of these processes are facilitating the development of certain democratic procedures.

Globalisation is not a uniform process with a single direction, and one can identify many paradoxes: increased numbers of highly educated skilled workers, even though global capital appears to seek cheap labour; more democratic governments alongside the greater power of multinational companies and financial markets; increased calls for the state’s protection of human rights at the same time as its role in...
providing welfare is eroding; and increases in the spread of education and literacy, simultaneous with the growing power of global financial markets (Walby 2001).

Analysis of globalisation has sometimes been polarised between those who think that globalisation produces uniformity or homogenisation (Fukuyama 1992; Ohmae 1995) and those who think that particularity or heterogeneity is maintained by different cultural responses to ostensibly similar global pressures (Robertson 1992). Rather than catalysing convergence or divergence in social relations, globalisation catalyses transformation.

But how is globalisation gendered? What are the changes in women’s participation in formal parliamentary politics on a global scale? To what extent are these related to a country’s internal economic and political situation rather than external pressures? What are the implications of increased global flows at a political level for achieving women’s democratic political expression and power? Is there a connection between economic development and political democracy for women?

This article uses recent data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (1995, 1999a, 1999b), the UNDP (1995, 1997, 1999), and the ILO (1996). Since these data are relatively easily accessible, the raw data will not be reproduced here. This global level of analysis is intended as an addition, rather than an alternative, to case-study analysis.

**Gender and development approaches and democracy**

The analysis of gender relations within processes of development planning has been authoritatively described by Moser (1993) in her influential distinction between five approaches: welfare; three Women in Development approaches: equity, anti-poverty, and efficiency; and empowerment. The earliest approach, welfare, was seen merely as trying to develop women as better mothers. The second approach sought to gain equity for women, but was seen as based on Western concepts rather than endogenous feminism. The anti-poverty approach focused on poor women in order to improve their productivity, but tended to isolate poor women as a separate category. The efficiency approach focused on improving the efficiency of the local economy by drawing on the contributions of women, but was problematic in its tendency merely to extend women’s working time. The fifth approach, empowerment, was seen as seeking to empower women through greater self-reliance, and to have a ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ orientation, but because of its focus on women’s self-reliance tended to be unsupported by governments, leading to slow growth of under-financed voluntary organisations.

**A new approach**

A sixth approach which combines efficiency and empowerment needs to be added, one which sees democratisation and efficiency going hand-in-hand, and for women as well as for men. This would highlight the problematic nature of the direction of causality assumed in the traditional ‘modernisation’ theory of development, by suggesting not that liberal democracy is the outcome of economic modernisation, but that economic modernisation requires a free and democratic society (Leftwich 1996). Such an approach is facilitated by the end of the cold war, and, indeed, some see the fall of communism as proof of such an approach (Huntington 1991), because it is associated with the increased interest in the role of a ‘free’ civil society in underpinning a democratic state (Cohen and Arato 1995; Potter et al. 1997). The new approach is based on the understanding that a modern economy needs people to be educated and to be able to associate freely and to exchange information; further, that democracy is an efficient way to control the vested interests which might otherwise dominate and
corrupt the state, harming its potential for ensuring development (Castells 1996).

It is unnecessary to set up a false dichotomy between the efficiency and empowerment approaches to gender-sensitive development interventions. Rather, they are interdependent, and should be synthesised in the sixth approach described above. This approach, captured in the shorthand ‘productive engagement’, has the potential to become well-known and of widespread use.

While most work within this emergent perspective pays little attention to gender, it is incomplete without a gender dimension. There can be no democracy if women are not full political participants. Not only must women’s empowerment be a focus for grassroots organisations (as was typical in the early empowerment approach), it must also be a focus for the state and the institutions of global governance. In order for an economy and a society to be productive, women as well as men need to be engaged fully, which can only effectively happen if the state, as well civil society, is democratic.

In the rest of this article, I shall examine the evidence which has emerged in support of a ‘productive engagement’ approach, examining the rise of women’s participation in parliaments around the world, and its association both with economic and human development and with regional and global political alliances.

The rise in women’s representation in national parliaments

Since 1945, there has been a major increase in the extent to which women are elected as representatives in national parliaments around the world (Table 1). This started from a very low base indeed, and everywhere, women’s representation in parliaments is still lower than men’s. Nevertheless, there have been major changes.

During the course of the twentieth century, women have won the right to vote in most countries of the world, with three major waves in 1918-20, 1945-46, and during decolonisation. But the right to vote did not immediately mean that women were elected to parliaments; this has been a very slow development.

This increase in women in parliaments has overlapped with a general ‘third wave’ of democratisation (Huntington 1991), although the rise in women’s representation is of longer duration. A higher proportion of countries have democratically elected assemblies today than 20 years ago. This in itself increases the number of women in parliaments. The third wave has involved important changes for women as well as for men, although this is barely noted in otherwise wide-ranging texts on democratisation (Huntington 1991; Potter et al. 1997).

Table 1: Percentage of women MPs in national parliaments around the world

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of women MPs</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of parliaments</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB These include all national assemblies, whether or not they meet conventional definitions of membership through democratic elections.

Variations

The pattern of women’s representation in parliaments is very variable between different countries; a few of the reasons will be mentioned here.

There is a regional pattern, although there are significant variations within each region. The Nordic countries have the highest representation of women, with female parliament membership at 38.9 per cent, while that of Europe is 15.5 per cent, Asia 14.9 per cent, the Americas 14.7 per cent, sub-Saharan Africa 10.9 per cent, the Pacific region 8.7 per cent, and Arab states 3.8 per cent (IPU 1999a).

Some types of electoral system are associated with higher proportions of women elected. In particular, these include multi-member constituencies, where electors get to choose several candidates from a list, and proportional representation rather than the first-past-the-post system, so second-choice candidates get a chance to be elected. Countries with these electoral systems tend to have higher proportions of women MPs than those who do not, probably by removing the pressure to vote for just one candidate who is more likely to be a man, and replacing this with incentives to get a ‘balanced’ set of representatives (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; IPU 1997).

Unsurprisingly, countries in which women have had suffrage for longer tend to have higher proportions of elected women in parliament.

Non-democratic parliaments and women’s representation

Not everyone agrees that there has been a steady increase in women’s parliamentary representation. Petersen and Runyan (1999) suggest that the proportion has ‘stagnated’. They report that the peak of women’s parliamentary representation was reached in 1988 when women made up 14.8 per cent of elected members of parliament worldwide. However, this pessimistic conclusion depends on an equation of parliamentary with democratic representation.

To be fair to Petersen and Runyan, they do not say that all the parliaments they consider are democratic. They use IPU data, which includes all parliaments, whether or not the membership is through democratic elections. In particular, the IPU data includes the parliaments of Eastern Europe during the communist period. It is very unusual to consider these parliaments as democratic, because of the limitations on the number of parties allowed to contest elections and on free debate. During the period from 1945 to 1989, women constituted about one-third of the membership of these assemblies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The transition to a market economy and more open democracy was accompanied by a dramatic drop in the number of women in the national assemblies. Very recently, this has been growing again. It appears, therefore, that it is the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe which account for the apparent stagnation and fall in women’s presence in national assemblies between 1988 (14.8 per cent) and 1994 (11 per cent). However, if these assemblies are removed from the world averages, then the proportion of women in national parliaments shows a continuing upward trajectory, with no stagnation or fall.

Explaining the increase in women elected to national parliaments

There are two main factors behind the rise in women’s election to parliaments: the increase of women’s economic power; and women’s political struggles.

Women’s employment

There is a correlation between the proportion of women in employment and parliament in many countries. The countries which have the highest proportion of women elected to the
national parliament have high rates of paid employment among women. For instance, the Nordic countries have the highest rates of female membership of parliaments in the world, and among the highest rates of female employment. Sweden (42.7 per cent of MPs), Denmark (37.4 per cent of MPs), Finland (37.0 per cent of MPs) and Norway (36.4 per cent of MPs) have more women in parliament than anywhere else (IPU 1999b), and women’s employment as a percentage of men’s is high in Sweden (90 per cent), Denmark (84.7 per cent), Finland (87.3 per cent) and Norway (83.8 per cent), compared with a world average of 69.8 per cent (UNDP 1999, 233). In comparison, countries with low levels of representation of women in parliament also have low rates of female paid employment. For instance, among the Arab states, women make up 3.8 per cent of members of parliament, and women’s employment as a percentage of men’s is 38.6 per cent — the lowest on both indicators for any region of the world (UNDP 1999).

More interesting for those considering what will occur in the twenty-first century is the change in political representation and employment levels over time. In many countries, the proportion of women in parliament has grown significantly in the same period during which women’s paid employment has grown. Thirty years ago, the Nordic countries had quite modest levels of women in parliament, at a time when their female employment was comparatively low. The pattern of strong parliamentary representation and high levels of female employment is not an unchanging essential feature of Nordic societies, but a phenomenon of the last quarter of the twentieth century. For instance, in Norway in 1970, women’s economic activity rate intended was only 40 per cent of that of men — considerably less than the 1977 average for the developing world of 68 per cent. In 1970, 9 per cent of MPs in Norway were female, similar to the rate of 10 per cent among developing countries in 1999 (UNDP 1995, 1999; IPU 1995). This means that an increase of women’s employment, under particular circumstances, can make an increase in women’s parliamentary representation likely. Table 2 provides examples of countries where there has been an increase both in women’s employment and their parliamentary representation between 1970 and 1995. (Data for all countries can be found in the UNDP annual reports, by combining tables. The table is selective rather than representative.)

The correlation between the increase in women’s parliamentary representation and women’s proportion of paid employment is stronger in industrialised countries than in non-industrialised countries. This is partly because the category ‘paid employment’ better fits contexts where work outside the household is likely to be paid and that within the household unpaid; it has a less certain meaning in societies with a large agricultural sector, where the boundaries between paid and unpaid work, and between the public and domestic sphere, are less likely to coincide.

Of course, industrialisation does not necessarily lead to an increase in women’s employment, as Boserup (1970) noted long ago. Indeed, Pampel and Tanaka (1986) show that the relationship between industrialisation and women’s employment is described by a U-shaped curve: women’s employment declines in the early stages of industrialisation and rises later on. Thus it is important not to conflate industrialisation with women’s waged employment, but to keep them separate in any analysis (Walby 1990), which traditional modernisation theory did not. The focus here is specifically on the correlation between a rise in women’s employment and a rise in their representation in parliament.

The failure of traditional modernisation theory (Lipset 1960) to make the distinction between industrialisation and the increase in women’s paid employment is one of the reasons why it does not recognise the link
between economic development and women’s access to political democracy. In order to understand the nature of the connection between modernisation and changes in gender relations, it is necessary to undertake a gender analysis of both the nature of the economic changes and the nature of the political changes.

Table 2: Women’s economic activity rates as a percentage of men’s in 1970 and 1994; female percentage of parliamentary seats in 1970 and 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Women’s economic activity as a percentage of men’s</th>
<th>Female percentage of parliament (lower or single house)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guyana</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Women’s political struggles

Women’s political struggles have been a significant factor in gaining the vote and representation for women in most places. However, the rise in women’s parliamentary representation is linked, not only to specific national struggles, but to regional and global
political alliances. Democratisation is a political movement which is not confined to nation-states, but one which draws strength from regional and global political linkages. Four illustrations of this are given here: the first female suffrage wave, when women demanded the vote; decolonisation and suffrage (voting rights for all new citizens); the role of women’s voices in the regulation of male violence; and women and development.

The first female suffrage movement was international, based in several northern European countries and North American countries. The vote might have been a tool within nation-state politics, but women’s suffrage was advanced by an internationally connected movement. The timing of the vote for women around the North Atlantic rim in about 1918 cannot be attributed to a particular level of economic development, since the timing both of industrialisation and of women’s entry into employment was very varied, ranging from the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth century. For instance, while women in the UK and Sweden won the suffrage at nearly the same time — 1918 and 1928 in the UK, 1919 in Sweden — both industrialisation and women’s entry into waged work took place a lot earlier in the UK than in Sweden. This means that in Sweden political citizenship was won for women before industrialisation, while, in the UK, entry to the waged labour market preceded entry to parliament. The suffrage movement crossed national boundaries because of the links between activists in countries in the same region of the world.

Decolonisation was a global political movement, although it involved specific foci on the dominant colonial powers. In the vast majority of countries freed from colonial rule during the twentieth century, suffrage was granted to men and women at the same time. Even where feminism was seen as a Western invention, women’s suffrage was seen as a human right (Jayawardena 1986; Ramirez, et al. 1997).

There are many examples of feminist global alliances since the 1970s. These have successfully utilised institutions of emerging global governance such as the UN and the World Bank, as spaces within which feminist politics can be built. An example of this has been the campaign to put the regulation of men’s violence against women on the global political agenda, and thereby on the domestic agenda of specific nation-states. A feminist advocacy network (Keck and Sikkink 1998) successfully established that women’s rights should be equated with human rights, and that this included the right not to be beaten or raped. An international feminist campaign won agreement at the 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna that women’s rights were human rights (Peters and Wolper 1995). This established a context in which it could be successfully argued that violence against women constituted a violation of women’s human rights, as was achieved in the Declaration and Platform for Action at the 1995 UN Conference in Beijing. This movement was decentralised, and not led from any one country, yet it created a powerful international feminist alliance. It was successful in building a campaign that draws on the notion of universal human rights, while at the same time respecting the cultural differences between women, holding in creative tension both ‘universalism’ and sensitivity to particular contexts. While not succeeding in instigating a strong legal response to violence against women, nevertheless, the issue has been placed on national agendas through the concerted efforts both of feminist activists around the world and of women members of national parliaments.

The Women in Development movement is a further example of a global feminist advocacy network (Waylen 1996; Moser 1993) which engages with both international bodies and national parliaments. This is crucial in a context where states are still significant political actors, despite globalisation.
While women’s struggles are varied in their specific goals and organisational formats, and uneven in the extent of their mobilisation, they share the goal of improving women’s position in society. They are also variously successful in their struggles. While the lack of success may be attributed to organisational failure, it is sometimes better explained by the hostility of the particular context (Walby 1997). Thus, in addition to asking whether and how women organise to achieve particular goals, we must inquire about the particular conditions under which they struggle. This focus on the context of women’s political struggles returns us to the significance of their economic context.

Conclusion

Feminists have often been sceptical of the claims of modernisation theory, because of its overly simplistic assertions that development will be good for women (Boserup 1970; Waylen 1996; Petersen and Runyan 1999). Yet sometimes this pessimism can go too far. Often, globalisation has been seen in terms of its capacity to undermine democratic forms of politics (Held 1995) and criticised accordingly; yet feminist politics is an example of globalisation assisting democratic politics in certain contexts. This assistance is patchy, of course, and, indeed, unequal access to new global forms of communication such as the internet is likely to result in unequal access to political decision-making. But globalisation does produce new opportunities for feminist politics as well as new difficulties.

First, there is the emergent position of ‘productive engagement’, in which an efficient economy and a democratic society are seen as interdependent. There is a steady increase in the proportion of women in parliaments around the world; women are increasing their participation in paid employment; and some women, in some places, are gaining some kinds of empowerment. While there are many caveats — that the work is badly paid; that the proportion of women in parliament is too low — nonetheless these developments provide a basis on which some women can enhance their capacities and capabilities.

The increase in parliamentary representation does correlate to some extent with an increase in women’s paid employment, especially in the more industrialised countries. This gives an indication that women are able to transfer power from one arena to another, under certain circumstances; but the connection is far from complete. One of the reasons for the relative lack of fit between increase in parliamentary representation and paid employment is that feminist politics are less constrained by the borders of nation-states than are women’s opportunities for employment. Women’s suffrage politics in particular have always been regional at the very least, and are now global. Women in one place derive support from others elsewhere; international feminist linkages have made a difference.

While it will always be important to consider the differences between cultures and between women, we should not omit to consider both commonalities and the scope for alliances between women from diverse contexts. Globalisation is a gendered process which is restructuring social relations on a large scale. As well as challenges, it presents opportunities for women in development.

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Note

1 Economic activity refers to people in paid employment as well as to those seeking it.
References