Contribution to Dialogue on ‘The Systematic Study of Women’s Movements’

Response to Mazur, McBride and Hoard (2015) “Comparative strength of women’s movements over time: conceptual, empirical and theoretical innovations”

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The comparison and change of social movement strength is of great interest not only to social movement scholars, but also to comparative sociologists and political scientists. Mazur et al. (2015) present a rigorous strategy to compare the strength of women’s movement mobilisation and institutionalisation across 13 Western democracies (Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, USA) and over time (1970s to early 2000s). Their definition of women’s movements -- ‘women act[ing] collectively to present public claims based on their gendered identities as women’ – has two dimensions: first, the discourse or claims of women and second, efforts of women to insert these claims in public life. The strength of women’s movements also has two dimensions: *mobilisation* or formal and informal structures of women’s activism and *institutionalisation* or the inclusion of women’s movement actors in government and quasi-government institutions. Women’s movement actors are distinguished from other women in government by their connections to formal or informal women’s organisations.[[1]](#footnote-1) The data revealed that mobilisation tended to be higher in the 1970s and that institutionalisation became stronger over time. Variations for both dimensions were found but no clear regional pattern for either mobilization or institutionalisation nor the relationship between both. Mazur et al. (2015) provide an impressive set of conceptual tools and data which is useful not just for scholars of women’s movements, but also for social movement scholars more generally. The question how mobilisation and institutionalisation are related is important for all social movements and it would be helpful to have a framework that allows to compare different movements with each other. The following comments are aimed at pushing this research agenda and to elaborate on some of the caveats that Mazur et al. (2015) have already identified.

1. Women’s movements

Mazur et al. (2015) rightly distinguish between women’s movements and feminist movements and are aware of the enormous diversity and heterogeneity of women’s experiences and claims. Their inclusive definition of women’s movements also avoids problematic distinctions between ‘pragmatic’ and ‘strategic’ gender interests (Molyneux 1985). However, combining the great range of women’s interests – across class, ethnicity, religion, age, marital status, sexual orientation to name but a few – in one broad category presents difficulties for a comparative perspective on women’s movements. Such a comprehensive category obscures conflicts among women’s movements, for example, liberal, radical and socialist feminists and different positions on prostitution and pornography. Moreover, such a broad definition not only includes women’s movements advocating gender equality and equal rights for women and men, but also conservative and traditional counter-movements promoting gender differences and restrictive roles for women.[[2]](#footnote-2) For example, as Agustin (2012) shows, women’s organisations might support the ‘choice of women to stay home to take care of their families’ (p. 26) sharing the concerns of conservative and right-wing groups. In addition, it is not quite clear who is included in the category ‘women’ – is it restricted to cis-women[[3]](#footnote-3) or does it include transgender and transsexual women? So what are the advantages and disadvantages of employing a very broad, but somewhat vague definition of women’s movements? The advantage of speaking of women’s movements rather than feminist movements is that it includes those who mobilize on behalf of women, but who distance themselves from the label feminist. However, Martin (1990) considers an organisation as feminist if it meets certain criteria, including feminist goals and outcomes, regardless whether the organisation considers itself feminist or not. An organisation might not adopt the label ‘feminist’ for strategic reasons, because members feel that they might alienate supporters or they resent that women’s interests are primarily defined by gender rather than by other forms of privilege and disadvantage. While the concept feminist movements encompasses a vast variety of claims and interests, it explicitly excludes those promoting unequal gender relations and anti-feminist agendas. Speaking of ‘gender equality movements’ (rather than women’s movements) would distinguish progressive from conservative ‘women’s movements’ while capturing a variety of claims without invoking the label ‘feminist’. Moreover the notion of ‘gender equality movements’ allows to include men and exclude women with anti-egalitarian agendas.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is important to clarify, whether Mazur et al. (2015) understand women’s movements as gender equality movements, regardless of whether they identify as feminist or not or if they include anti-egalitarian movements in this definition. This definition has significant consequences for measuring movement strength. Including movements and counter-movements, for example the pro-choice choice and the anti-abortion movements, would result in high movement strength. In order to explain regional patterns in women’s movement strength, it is necessary to distinguish between gender equality movements and other women’s movements rather than to implicitly equate women’s movements with gender equality movements and assume that all women’s movements support gender equality. Also, I think it is worth considering to what extent men provide support for women’s equality claims.

1. Gender regimes

Resource mobilisation and cycles of protest are extremely valuable concepts and approaches for analysing the change of women’s movement strength. In order to explain regional variation of mobilisation and institutionalisation, it might be helpful to employ also another crucial concept for the comparison of social movements: political opportunity structures (POS). This brings me to my second point: to what extent is the success of women’s movements related to different gender and welfare regimes?[[5]](#footnote-5) And to what extent do does it depend on allies in political parties and other actors, in particular trade unions? Political opportunity structures influence the choice of strategies of social movements and their likely success (Kriesi 2007). Thus, political opportunities should have a significant impact on the mobilization and institutionalisation of women’s movements (Ferree 2012). MAZUR ET. AL. (2015) explain that their measure of institutionalisation does not assess women’s political representation. However, women’s political representation – the inclusion of women in parliaments and governments – correlates to some extent with the adoption of gender equality policies and might influence the mobilisation of gender equality movements. For example, the Nordic countries have long been characterised by a high proportion of women in public sphere (both in political structures and paid employment) and strong equality policies. Sweden is characterised by a strong emphasis on equality and an official discourse on gender equality that – perhaps ironically – makes it difficult to address issues of gendered power relations and has impeded the development of an autonomous women’s movement (Hobson 2003, Sandberg and Rönnblom 2013). On the other hand, a lower representation of women in political parties, parliaments and governments and the marginalisation of women’s issues in the political agenda can result in strong, autonomous women’s movements. Furthermore, variations in the institutional-level constructions of gender can be distinguished which include gender egalitarian, gender polarised and male dominated forms (Bolzendahl 2014). A comparative study of women’s groups in the UK, France and Germany (Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals 2011) found that POS are gendered and that women’s groups react differently to changes in POS than other social groups, in particular environmental groups (p. 74). Thus, while the participation of women in the public sphere must be distinguished from the institutionalisation of women’s equality movements, Mazur et al. (2015) might elaborate on their model by considering political opportunity structures. Such an approach might include drawing on Walby’s (2004) notion of gender regime. Walby (2004) distinguishes different forms of gender regimes and degrees of gender (in)equality and identifies three main types: market-led (US), welfare state-led (Nordic countries) and regulatory polity-led (European Union) (p. 10-11). These gender regimes represent different political opportunity structures for women’s (equality) movements. In order to explain regional patterns in movement strength with respect to mobilisation and institutionalisation it is necessary to consider the inclusion of women’s political representation. The exclusion or underrepresentation of women in conventional politics might result in a higher degree of autonomous mobilisation while high proportions of women in government organisation might boost institutionalisation. This would require to carefully distinguish women’s movement actors from other women in governmental and non-governmental organisations. Furthermore, institutionalisation is narrowly defined if it only refers to government and quasi-government organisations.[[6]](#footnote-6) Social movements in general and women’s movements in particular have created a wide range of organisational forms and networks (Ferree 1995) which also include consciousness-raising groups, music festivals, cooperatives and other forms of social movement culture which sustain social movements in times of social movement abeyance (Taylor 1989).

1. The West and the Rest

Considering political opportunity structures in addition to resource mobilisation and cycles of protest is also useful when the conceptual framework is extended beyond Western democracies.[[7]](#footnote-7) Encounters of women from the Global North and the Global South at the World women’s conferences demonstrated that women’s interests and identities are far from universal. Women in Africa, Asia and Latin America were concerned with the consequences of colonialism, poverty and development policies that affected gender relations. For example, women participating in the World Women’s Conference in Nairobi in 1985, sought to convince Western delegations that apartheid and Palestinian rights were women’s issues (Berger 2014). Thus, a definition of women’s movements is needed which is useful as it is elastic enough to include women involved in peace and national liberation movements as well as women involved in religious movements or concerned with health issues (Tripp 2015). However a typology of women’s movements might be more fruitful in order to understand regional patterns in mobilization and institutionalisation. After the end of the Cold War, the interaction and relationships between women’s activists in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and women from Western Europe and North America to some extent resembled the contentious relations between North and South (Roth 2007). Western foundations and governments supported the emergence of civil society organisations in post-socialist societies. Ghodsee (2004) strongly criticised the activities of Western feminists in Eastern Europe warning that Western funders that focus on body politics undermine post-socialist women’s emphasis on mobilizing around economic issues and consequently promoting neo-liberalism. Donor support resulted in NGO-ization and undermined grassroots organisations (Lang 1997). Funk (2006) critically reviews non-feminist and feminist imperialist criticisms of Western NGOs engagement in Central and Eastern Europe. Women’s movements in East and South differed from Western women’s movements by emphasizing differences between women and commonalities and solidarity with men. However, this is also true for Western working class women and women of colour. In their measure of institutionalisation, Mazur et al. (2015) include the presence of women’s movement actors in ‘well-established lobby coalitions, unions’. These women might identify first and foremost as trade unionists (Roth 2000, Roth 2003) or their ethnic identity might be as much or more important than their gender identity (Roth 2004). Regardless of whether the comparison is restricted to Western women’s movements or whether it is extended to women’s movements in post-socialist and post-colonial societies, an intersectional perspective on mobilization and institutionalisation might help to further develop and differentiate what is meant by women’s movements.

1. Conclusions

Mazur et al. (2015) provide a solid and well-conceptualised framework for the comparison of women’s movements. Expanding the comparison to non-Western movements promises to test the robustness of the conceptualisation and enhance the analytic acuity of the concepts. A broad definition of women’s movements has the advantage of including (cis? trans?) women with a very wide range of interests and experiences. However, the disadvantage of such an elastic approach is that it does not allow to identify these different interests and experiences which conceptualise ‘women’s interest’ differently relative to their situation which might be shaped by a lack of political rights in repressive regimes, the lack of resources in regions affected by poverty, by experiences of racial, ethnic or sexual discrimination or by experiences of privilege of being sheltered from conflicts, disaster and poverty. Thus, I would encourage Mazur et al. (2015) to use the framework in order to develop a typology of women’s movements which might have more potential to explain regional variations in women’s movement strength. As noted above, gender intersects with class, ethnicity and other aspects of privilege and disadvantage and thus impact on solidarities and boundary-making.

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1. The data documenting institutionalisation was based on the assumption of the 13 country directors of the research network that women in these institutions had connections with women’s movement organisations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Throughout the article, Mazur et al. (2015) refer to women’s movements without explicitly stating that they understand women’s movements as gender equality movements. Gender equality movements are not necessarily women’s movements, but might include men supporting gender equality whereas women’s movements do not necessarily support gender equality, they might also advocate gender differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cisgender refers to gender identity that aligns with assigned gender at birth, that is woman who based on biological criteria has been categorised as female at birth and who identifies as female in contrast to transgender people who do not identify with the sex categorization and gender assignment at birth. Since the end of the 20th century, taking cis-gender women as the unquestioned norm is increasingly criticized in addition to earlier criticism of heteronormative assumptions and the marginalisation of lesbian women in women’s and feminist movements (see for example Rich 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gender equality movements include movements that emphasise gender equality as well as gender difference (Tripp 2015). Of course, I am not suggesting that gender equality movements are primarily composed of men or male actors. But it needs to be stressed that not all feminists are women and not all women are feminists. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Political opportunity structures and gender regimes need to be analytically distinguished although occasionally, they might overlap empirically. Political opportunity structure can be defined as “dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure” (Tarrow 1998, p. 85). Walby (2004, p. 10) – see also below – develops a complex model of gender regime which encompasses four levels of abstraction including the overall social system, a continuum from domestic to public, degrees of gender inequality, series of domains (economic, polity and civil society) and series of social practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Restricting institutionalisation to parliaments, political parties and other mainstream organisations and focusing primarily on the state results in a very narrow vision of politics and activism. Women’s and gender equality movement formed because women were excluded from (narrowly defined) institutionalized politics and formed new organizational forms (see Clemens 1993) to enter the mainstream as well as built alternative institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mazur et al. (2015) explicitly restrict their framework to western democracies and make no claim that it applies to gender equality movements in other regions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)