

# **Women and Politics in the Third World**

*Edited by*  
Haleh Afshar



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## Women and Politics in the Third World

*Women and Politics in the Third World* provides a feminist analytical perspective on the specific forms of resistance, organisation and negotiation by women in Third World states.

Using case studies the book focuses on difference as a theoretical basis for investigating feminine political activism. Arguing that Western analysts have attributed weakness to terms such as motherhood, marriage and domesticity as choices made by non-Western women, they show that such strategies are used by women to pursue particular goals such as seeking resources, welfare or freedom from oppression for their children. These strategies, the book suggests, should not be classified as unimportant or temporary; they can be highly effective even within such discourses as Islamic fundamentalism.

The contributors to this volume have embarked on an innovative path which highlights differing political approaches in regions as diverse as Latin America, South East Asia, China and the Middle East. It will provide a real insight for students wishing to understand the diversities and complexities of women's political participation in these areas.

**Haleh Afshar** teaches Politics and Women's Studies at the University of York and Islamic Law at the Faculté Internationale de Droit Compare at Strasbourg. She was born and raised in Iran where she worked as a journalist and a civil servant before the revolution. She remains active in feminist Iranian politics and has written extensively on the subject.

## Women and Politics

Edited by Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard

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Edited by Haleh Afshar



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## Series preface

Difference, equality, identity, politics, nationhood, sexuality and the state. As I write this preface, in the aftermath of the Conferences on Women held in and near Beijing, it is evident that it is these terms that set the boundaries of many of the enthusiastic and spirited debates. And it is also evident that it is precisely these terms that provide the frames for contemporary debates within academic Women's Studies. As new Women's Studies courses and writings continue to appear, placing these issues at their core, it is fast becoming apparent that there is still, however, a lack of books that address issues of women and politics *specifically*. It is that gap that this new series, *Women and Politics*, edited by Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard, seeks to redress.

The *Women and Politics* series focuses on activities and struggles that fuel the dynamic of change in the formal/public domains, as well as in the informal/personal domains. Thus, politics for this series is persuasively defined within a feminist context—to include the range of public and personal activities that women across the world engage with in order to obtain their public and domestic rights.

Women's relationship to formal, organised politics has often been one that highlights the tensions and contradictions in the workings of those politics. So, the lack of women in formal political structures demonstrates not only the institutional sexism generated by such politics, but also forces us to examine, and to decide when, and whether, those political structures are worth fighting, indeed dying, for. In a similar vein, women's involvement in domestic and community-based politics shows us that women's activities are often institutionally devalued. Or, if not devalued, then used to keep 'women in their place', as in the case of women's fertility and motherhood. Women's resistances, whether expressed as formal politics or as struggles within communities, have often not been seen for what they are—that is, as challenges to the state, or to nationhood, or to patriarchal formations, or, indeed, as challenges to all three. It is as challenges to all three—through formal politics, through political theory and through the informal and practical strategies built and used by women—that women's resistances are explored in this series.

Women's resistances in the Third World—to authoritarianism, to the hegemonic authority of First World writings and practices, plus their/our involvement in political struggles at both macro and micro levels—are sometimes not seen. However, in this stimulating and timely volume, these involvements and resistances are explicitly placed at centre stage. The analysts who have contributed their chapters to this collection represent a broad range of geographical locations, historical periods and methodologies. The emphasis in the book is to bring into focus the activities that women involve themselves with—in both the formal and informal spheres—in the Third World. The common thread running through all of the chapters is that presently accepted notions of key issues—such as the state, war, fertility, motherhood and religious practices—must all be revised in the light of this woman-centred approach. At the same time, this collection argues that women are not a universal category; but that it is necessary, as Haleh Afshar says in her Introduction, 'to disaggregate women's activities'. In other words, it is necessary to realise that not only do national boundaries create difference, but so also is difference manifest within nation-states, whether along the lines of gender, religion, class community or relationship to the state. This edited collection thus provides a map for current discussions on what could, and does, constitute women's political activities.

This collection of clearly argued chapters, all written specially for the book, thus creates an essential volume for all those graduate and undergraduate students, teachers and researchers whose interests lie within the field of women and politics—be it through Women's Studies courses, Political Theory and Political Science courses, Sociology and History courses, or indeed, through Third World and Development Studies.

All of the volumes in this series engage with theoretical debates and empirical analyses that impinge upon the study of women and politics. In so doing, they demonstrate that women's contributions cannot simply be added in to politics, rather, that politics is forced to transform itself through the contributions of women.

Kum-Kum Bhavnani  
 Santa Barbara, California  
 September 1995

# Acknowledgements

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In particular I would like to thank the contributors to this volume who have given much of their time generously to this book; they have come to meetings to present their papers, to discuss the drafts of the chapters and to comment on and contribute to one another's work. For me it has been a most enriching experience and I thank them all for so cheerfully putting up with the exacting editorial demands showered on them. Those who met their dead-lines patiently waited for the stragglers; the pervasive good humour and supportive and sisterly responses were invaluable.

Last but not least I'd like to thank Molly and Ali for giving me the time and even giving up their beds to accommodate contributors and Maurice Dodson for holding the fort.

Haleh Afshar

# Introduction

Since the early 1960s women's roles in the processes of development have been increasingly recognised and their contributions documented and analysed. But political scientists, particularly in the West, have been less willing to acknowledge women's extensive participation in political processes. This volume is a contribution to the growing body of feminist literature which is seeking to redress this imbalance.

Women's political activities have, for far too long, been seen as marginal or non-existent. This view is reinforced by the relatively small numbers of women in positions of power and leadership, particularly in the West. As a result, the Western-centred academic analysis of politics that has evolved ignores women and places them at the peripheries of the political processes. Third World women activists have been made invisible through a male-dominated discipline of political theory as well as an earlier phase of feminism which had serious misconceptions about femininity, motherhood and the family.<sup>1</sup> Western feminisms negated Third World women's choices of paths of political activism which used the local prevalent ideologies and were often located within religious or maternal discourses.

The contributors to this volume bring Third World women to the centre of the political analysis and highlight the different forms of feminine political activism that has been ignored and undervalued by orthodox academicians. They discard the undertones of weakness and subservience that have generally been attributed to terms such as motherhood, marriage and domesticity and respect the choices made by non-Western women. Their analyses demonstrate clearly that political theories of state, democratisation and activism must be revised to encompass women's activities, undertaken within such contexts as devotion to religion, even within discourses such as Islamic fundamentalism. Then it will be easy to see that women use concepts like 'motherhood', or 'complementarity' rather than 'equality', to pursue particular goals such as seeking resources, welfare and/or freedom from oppression for their children. Their forms of negotiation with the state must not be equated with weakness nor should their strategies be classified as either temporary or unimportant.

This collection of essays seeks to disaggregate women's activities in the framework of the political formation of post-colonial states. Though often seen as a single united bureaucratic formation, the contributors to this volume argue that it is essential to recognise that, where the nation-state is concerned, the parts often do not result in a coherent whole. Women are frequently at their most effective when they find a way of utilising the diverging interests of the bureaucracy and the administration or interpolating their demands in the contradictory intentions of different arms of the state and the nation's stated ideologies.

In [Chapter 1](#) Georgina Waylen maps out a framework with which to study women in Third World politics. She posits three basic premises: first, that women should be put back into the study of formal politics; second, that the fundamentally gendered nature of ostensibly neutral concepts such as nationalism, citizenship and the state be demonstrated; third that a conventional definition of 'the political' be widened so that many of the activities undertaken by women be incorporated. Waylen's chapter seeks to engender the analysis on these bases. The part played by different groups of women in the conventional political arena is examined, focusing for example on the role of women leaders. Women's political activity outside the conventional arena is also analysed, both oppositional activity and that in favour of the status quo.

Shirin Rai's chapter focuses on the debates on the state within the feminist literature. It makes a claim for bringing the state back in to the discussion of women's lives in the Third World. Rai argues that the current debate on the state is entirely West centred, and does not take into account the particular features of the post-colonial states that affect the lives of Third World women. It urges a fresh approach to this question which must have as its starting-point the lived realities of women's existence, negotiations and struggles.

Donna Pankhurst and Jenny Pearce continue the debate by looking at democratisation. They argue that an analysis of the subject that merely seeks to add women in is both inadequate and inappropriate. A feminist perspective on democratisation must engage in a serious analysis of the nature of political change taking place in many Third World countries. Such an analysis must include an understanding of political marginalisation and democratisation as well as the interactions between class, gender and ethnicity. Feminist analytical perspectives cannot view democratisation as an unproblematic concept and must take into account the variety of ways in which politics in the Third World works through, or in reaction against, the exclusion or marginalisation of socially diverse sections of the population, including, but not limited to, women.

Rohini Hensman's chapter shows that far from being marginal, particularly in the context of authoritarian governments, women's activities are amongst the most important components of political processes. Taking a wide perspective across four Latin American and four South Asian countries, Rohini Hensman illustrates the way in which women have organised outside formal political structures to resist authoritarianism. Although the situations are diverse, in each of these cases women have organised autonomously, in defence of what they perceive to be

their own interests and concerns, and this activity has brought them into direct conflict with authoritarian regimes or movements. Their goals, as well as their methods of organisation and struggle, have been distinct from that of more orthodox male-dominated movements, and in some cases they have continued to struggle when other forms of political opposition have been drastically weakened or silenced.

The role played by these women is traced to two main sources. First, where they are fighting for their own rights, they are opposing male authoritarianism, which both reinforces and is reinforced by state authoritarianism to varying degrees. Thus to the extent that any functional definition of democracy has to include the equal rights of women to control their own lives and participation in social decisions, their struggle forms an essential component of democracy. Since women in particular are put at a disadvantage by lack of this component, they have a special interest in fighting for it—except in the case of those strata of women whose privileges within an authoritarian system outweigh the disabilities they suffer.

Second, where women have organised themselves and fought to defend the lives and welfare of their children, this has involved a politicisation of the traditionally 'feminine' role of motherhood. These women have found themselves pitted against repressive, totalitarian movements and regimes, and have fought back with amazing courage and resourcefulness. Their ability to turn their maternal role (traditionally perceived as a source of weakness by most Western feminists) into a reservoir of immense strength makes it imperative to look more closely at the values being affirmed by these mothers, and to recognise them as universal human values which ought to have a central place in any progressive movement for social change.

A different perspective is provided by Jasbir K. Puar, a non-white US aid worker whose interactions with Nicaraguan women recipients were affected by the complex politics of race and gender. Her chapter outlines her experiences and highlights the interdependence of often helpless, and frequently hapless, young, enthusiastic, but not so well informed, aid workers and the more experienced, but needy, local women. Their opportunities and priorities are often entirely different from those of donors. For these women the politics of aid, like national politics, has had to be negotiated in terms of needs and possible scenarios of successful access to extremely scarce resources. They sought tangible goods rather than good advice.

In the chapters that follow, the strategies used by women to obtain what welfare, health care and opportunities they can from more or less powerful states is examined. Using specific case studies from post-revolutionary or embattled states, the authors discuss the problems faced by women who have been active in resistance movements or have had to come to terms with the contradictory demands made of them by ideological and practical needs. Women in China, Nicaragua, Iran and Palestine have sought to endorse much of the revolutionary ardour that led to the emergence of the state, or the resistance movement and its



politics, while seeking to extract policies that would enable them to meet their own economic and strategic needs.<sup>2</sup> These chapters consider the use made of the media and local literature; the prevalent discourses of femininity, motherhood, domesticity, and the demands made by women. Using the conservative prevalent political language, these women often pursue goals that bear remarkable similarities to feminist demands in the West.

The political participation of women both at the formal and informal levels and the articulation of the prevalent ideologies with policies that have often proved detrimental to women is discussed. These chapters illustrate the varied and complex ways that different women in different countries have engaged both with the content and the context of the laws that affect their lives. They have made effective use of creeds and stated government principles to curb, alter or reverse some political trends. All too often women are caught at the centre of the state's contradictory economic and political programmes. Chinese women are required to have only one child, while the economic changes make children valuable resources for peasant families; the state and the family make diametrically opposed demands on women. In Iran the stated policy of separation of the public and private spheres and the ideological wish to restrain women within the household clash with the economic needs of families to have at least two full-time breadwinners. Nevertheless, far from being helpless victims, women can and do negotiate a variety of more or less effective solutions to carve out a space for themselves in the political domain.

Delia Davin and Aiping Mu analyse some of the issues discussed by Rohini Hensman in terms of their articulation with state policy in China. Davin looks at the wider political questions and the way that they have been reflected in the Chinese literature on women's issues since 1980. She highlights the problems that have gained importance and the policies that have been pursued; demands for equality and the efforts to establish it, concerns about employment and education and attempts at integrating women into the formal political process, as well as writings concerned with population policy. Davin argues that both the recent economic reforms and the long-running population policy had some adverse effect for women. These in turn have encouraged more serious efforts, both academic and official, to investigate and analyse the position of women in China. The slightly greater freedom to write and publish has also promoted greater variety in writing about women. However, women's issues and population policy remain very sensitive topics in China, not least because of the potential impact on China's international prestige, very much in evidence with the UN Conference for Women held in Beijing in September 1995.

Aiping Mu's chapter concentrates on the implementation of social policies that have had controversial impacts on fertility behaviour among rural women in China. The government's requirement that each family should have only one child has entailed measures such as delaying marriage and practising contraception. At the same time the implementation of rural economic reform policies has resulted in more demand for family labour; the introduction

of a market economy created more employment opportunities and more mobility for rural women.

Mu argues that the rural industrialisation that followed the economic reforms transformed the occupational pattern of rural women from agriculture to non-agricultural. This in turn facilitated the implementation of the one-child policy which was more vigorously enforced in the collective economy based rural industrial units. Although the fertility rates declined, there was a gap between individual preferences and the goals of the national population policy. Rural families have found it difficult to accept the concept of a one-child policy. Thus conflict over fertility between rural couples and the state authorities is likely to continue for a long time.

The chapters on Iran include an analysis of the use of the Persian media and women's journals by Iranian elite women to highlight the tensions that exist between women and the state on the delineation of an appropriate place for women in the public domain as well as the implementation of appropriate population planning. Ziba Mir-Hosseini's chapter continues this theme by concentrating on similarities and differences of the 'modernist' and the 'Islamist' feminist discourses in Iran. Mir-Hosseini argues that a remarkable and unexpected result of the Islamic revolution has been to raise the nation's gender consciousness and place women at the centre stage of politics in Iran. Haleh Afshar's chapter analyses the use made by Iranian women of the Islamic discourse to demand practical solutions for child care, employment opportunities and political participation. In the bargain that they have struck, elite Iranian women have accepted the veil as the non-negotiable emblem of Islamification in the country.<sup>3</sup> Like some Latin American women, they have placed motherhood at the centre of political negotiations.<sup>4</sup> Using the Islamic terminology and defending their rights as mothers and providers of domestic havens, they have demanded that the state fulfils its obligations towards them. It must enable them to become good mothers, by providing them with easy admission to education; help them to become good citizens, by providing effective child care for working mothers. Iranian women have accepted a divided labour market, which denies them access to certain jobs. In return they have demanded more flexible working hours and specific periods set aside to enable them to fulfil their 'mothering duties'.

The chapters on Palestine by Maria Holt and Kathy Glavanis-Grantham demonstrate the problems faced by women involved in the resistance movement and caught in the rising tide of Islamism. Palestinian women, like their Iranian counterparts, have had to formulate demands that are compatible with the formal Islamic dictum. At the same time they have sought to alleviate the more draconian chauvinist measures and inject their interpretations into the political arena.

Holt's chapter explores the contradictions between Western perceptions of Palestinian women and the rather more complex reality of their lives. Holt reviews recent Palestinian history, including events such as the 'catastrophe' of 1948 when the majority of Palestinians were forcibly uprooted from their land,

the 1967 war which resulted in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Intifada and, most recently, the September 1993 Declaration of Principles which brought limited self-rule to parts of the occupied territories. Throughout, Palestinian women have remained active and have developed their involvement—both practical and political—in the national struggle. They have created a multiplicity of organisations and have participated in the conflicting currents of nationalism, Islamism and feminism in their society.

The contributors to this volume demonstrate that if the experiences of women the world over is to be understood and included in the study of politics, then the mainstream must be broadened to take on the range of political activities of women. It is not possible to add gender on to the orthodox political theories and expect them to make sense. Women are not an additional extra in the discipline of politics; they play an integral part in the processes that shape the destinies of nations. Women's demands and priorities are often different from those of male politicians who set the agendas. What is interesting is the different and effective ways that women living in different countries, and under different political systems, succeed in negotiating a way forwards towards their strategic goals. Political science would indeed be much the poorer if it did not develop to encompass the complex and significant role played by women in the political arenas.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### NOTES

- 1 See for example M.Barrett and M.McIntosh (1982) *The Anti-Social Family*, London: Verso and S.de Beauvoir (1959) *Memories of a Dutiful Daughter*, Harmondsworth: Penguin. For the reassessment see K.Grieve 'Rethinking Feminist Attitudes towards Motherhood', *Feminist Review* 25(March): 38–45.
- 2 For detailed discussions see M.Molyneux (1985) 'Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua', *Feminist Studies* 11(2) and S.A.Radcliffe and S.Westwood (eds) (1993) *'Viva': Women and Popular Protest in Latin America* (London: Routledge).
- 3 For detailed discussion see D.Kandiyoti (1988) 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender and Society* 2(3): 271–90.
- 4 See Rohini Hensman, [Chapter 4](#) in this volume, and S.Westwood and S.A. Radcliffe, 'Gender Racism and the Politics of Identities' and J.Schirmer, 'The Seeking of Truth and the Gendering of Consciousness: The Co Madres of El Salvador and the CONAVIGUA Widows of Guatemala', both in S.A.Radcliffe and

S. Westwood (eds) (1993) *'Viva': Women and Popular Protest in Latin America*, London: Routledge.

# Chapter 1

## Analysing women in the politics of the Third World

*Georgina Waylen*

This chapter aims to outline some of the issues involved in the analysis of women in Third World politics. It would be impossible for a piece of this type to be comprehensive in its coverage or to outline a definitive approach to the study of women in Third World politics but it does aim to provide some guidelines. Some of the themes covered will be specific to the study of women and politics in the Third World, while others will also be relevant to the study of women and politics more generally. This is based on three important assumptions. First, ‘politics’ does not have the same impact on women as it does on men as is often assumed and therefore this needs to be investigated. Second, the political process often alters gender relations, i.e. relations between men and women, and this needs to be explored. Third, women often participate as political subjects in political activity in different ways from men, which raises questions about the distinctiveness of ‘women’s political activity’—should it be classified and analysed as a separate entity? Addressing these questions has important implications for the study of politics as it has been conventionally constructed.<sup>1</sup>

When looking for guidance in this endeavour, problems emerge with the conventional literature. Compared to some other social sciences such as sociology and anthropology and the humanities such as literary studies and history, orthodox political science has been slow to incorporate a gendered perspective into its approach (Silverberg 1990). The discipline of politics finds this hard to do. The traditional subject matter of the discipline—‘high politics’—treaties, wars, power politics as it is played out in the top echelons of the public sphere, not to mention the institutional politics of parties, executives and legislatures, is typically male dominated.

In any discussion of gender relations and politics, the public/private split is a crucial notion which has both informed orthodox accounts and inspired feminist critiques. While much of this literature has been written in a Western context, and despite its often universal tone, about the First World, the influence that many of the ideas and concepts have had on political activity and its analysis in the Third World means that it is important to consider them here. Stretching back to contract theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and beyond, most of the political theory which underlies Western liberal democracy

and liberal democratic theory has at its roots the separation of the public and the private. Beginning with Locke, the private domestic sphere was seen as lying outside of the proper realms of investigation and interference by the state or others. The public sphere was seen as the arena where everyone was incorporated as an individual citizen in the political world. Few links were made between the two spheres and theoretical attention was focused on the public arena, as domestic life and the private sphere was assumed to be irrelevant to social and political theory. Of huge significance to the study of gender relations were the assumptions underlying this—implicitly individual citizens active in the public sphere were assumed to be male heads of household, and women were relegated analytically to the private sphere, subsumed within the household headed by the individual male. This ignores both the links between the two spheres, and varying role played by the state in constructing the boundary between them. While appearing gender neutral, maintaining a division between private and political life as central to liberal democracy is maintaining a division between men and women, where only men can be abstract individuals (Pateman 1983; 1989). The political is therefore defined as masculine in a very profound sense which makes it hard to incorporate women on the same terms as men and excludes many of those activities that women are involved in as not political. This is combined with an approach which sets up frameworks and theories which, while appearing gender neutral, work to exclude women. It is not enough then just to get a better understanding of the role of women in formal politics: a wider analysis, using broader definitions of the political, is needed.

Developments in feminist analyses in the 1980s have provided new theoretical insights relevant to this endeavour. Before this the notion of 'woman' as a unitary and a historical category had often been taken for granted. Some feminists had treated women as one homogeneous group, making the assumption that it was both possible and unproblematic to generalise about all women and their interests. This often meant that the experience of white, middle-class and Western women was generalised to black, working-class and Third World women. As part of a sea-change in theoretical debates, the different ways in which the category 'woman' has been constructed historically have been explored (Riley 1988). The notion of a 'women's interest' shared by all women regardless of race, class and sexuality has become highly contested.

Three major elements have contributed to the breakdown of this kind of universal theorising (Barrett and Phillips 1992). First, black women have provided a powerful challenge to much of the work of white feminists, arguing that their analyses were imbued with racist and ethnocentric assumptions, again generalising the experience of white feminists to black women (b hooks 1984; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983). Second, the re-emergence of the 'equality versus difference' debate broke down the confident distinctions between sex and gender, and in some quarters sexual difference came to be celebrated rather than denied (Scott 1988). Debates moved on to ask how to deal with embodiment, arguing that it is not difference that is the problem, but how it is constructed and dealt with (Bock

and James 1992). Third, the feminist challenge to mainstream theorising has been paralleled by the post-structuralist and post-modern critiques of the universal grand frameworks which characterised enlightenment thought and has heralded the end of the meta-narrative (Nicholson 1990). There has been a shift from 'things', i.e. an emphasis on structures so favoured by a social science approach, to 'words', an emphasis on language and discourse derived from literary and critical theory (Barrett 1992). Form and representation become important as language is no longer seen as transparently and directly reflecting 'reality'. This has been accompanied by the fracturing of the 'cartesian' unitary human subject and the self so beloved of rationalist enlightenment thought to be replaced by notions of difference, plurality and multiplicity.

Interest has increased in the construction of the subject and the notion of identity. Identity is seen as complex and a combination of different elements such as class, race, gender and sexuality, not simply one factor (Butler and Scott 1992). There exists therefore the plurality of identities in the single subject. At the same time, there is also a greater recognition of diversity and difference between women. It therefore becomes impossible to say, in any uncomplicated way, that all women are oppressed by all men. The need to forge commonality across difference through alliances and coalitions becomes a key issue within feminism.

The use of enlightenment categories and grand universal frameworks had particular implications for analyses of Third World women made by First World feminists and academics (Spivak 1987). First, many analyses were informed by notions, paralleling ideas about the common oppression of women, that 'sisterhood is global', i.e. that there was more uniting women of different races, classes and sexualities than dividing them. This was often expressed in various cross-cultural analyses of patriarchy. Second, when difference was actually acknowledged it was often done by turning all Third World women into a non-Western 'other'. The 'Women in Development' literature, in particular, is often marked out for displaying these characteristics—treating all Third World women as the same, whether they were, for example, upper-class urban educated professionals or lower-class rural peasant women and advocating general 'solutions' to various perceived problems which affected them from the framework of a universal homogenising feminism. This had the effect of removing agency from Third World women, often seeing them as passive victims of barbaric and primitive practices (Lazreg 1988; Mohanty 1988; 1991; Ong 1988).

Where does this leave the study of women in Third World politics? The inadequacy of the conventional politics literature indicates that several things have to be done. First, women have to be put back into the study of formal politics. But as Donna Pankhurst and Jenny Pearce point out in [Chapter 3](#) of this volume in the context of the debates about democratisation, women should not be 'added in' to the analysis of political processes at the expense of other forms of social relations such as class and ethnicity. Second, it is necessary to make clear how ostensibly neutral political processes and concepts, such as nationalism, citizenship