

FOCUS ON:

Gender and Politics: research, practice and education. Moving beyond the obvious

Claudia Padovani

UNIVERSITY OF PADUA

Giovanna Vignelli

UNIVERSITÀ DELLA CALABRIA

GUEST EDITORS

The 2015 congress of the Italian Political Science Society (SISP) hosted a temporary section, titled *Gender, politics, and policies*.¹ This was organized to mark the 20th anniversary since the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995 and where the international community made commitments to gender equality objectives in a number of critical areas, including education, research, and knowledge. Panels in that temporary section provided a space to discuss the (dis)connects between European developments in gender-focused political science, Italian local experiences in teaching politics with a gender perspective, and the realities of our research practices.

As convenors of those panels, we felt it was important to keep that space open, and possibly to expand it, in order to share and discuss—in a comparative and trans-disciplinary perspective—a number of concerns about the role, relevance, and visibility of gender-sensitive approaches to the study of politics and international relations. Thus, in June 2016 the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Padua invited European political scientists and colleagues from different Italian institutions and disciplinary fields to a conversation that is now reproduced in this themed issue of Italian Political Science. On that occasion, decades of work to “en-gender” political science as a discipline, through research approaches, objects, and methods, were acknowledged.

It is worth mentioning that within the American Political Science Association (APSA), where a Women’s caucus² has existed since 1969, a 2004 report titled “Women’s advancement in Political Science” solicited a debate on under-representation of women in the profession and its consequences; as well as on the possible means to overcome inequalities

¹ The section programme is accessible at: <http://www.sisp.it/convegno2015/?pagename=cms&name=sessiontracks&trackname=genere-politica-politiche>.

² Online at: <https://womenscaucusforpoliticalscience.org>.

in the discipline, through measures such as monitoring, mentoring, and creating networks for collaboration. This debate that was revived in 2013, when Maliniak, Powers and Walter published in *International Organization* an article titled “The Gender Citation Gap in International Relations” showing that women are systematically cited less than men.

The International Political Science Association (IPSA) witnessed the constitution of a study group on sex roles and politics as early as 1976, which later became Research Committee n.19 on Gender Politics and Policy.³ In that context, a collection called *Gender and Politics: the State of the Discipline*, has recently been edited by Jane H. Bayes (2012),⁴ providing a review of a field that is emerging globally. It highlights the major themes that characterize scholarly works carried out across the world: **the nexus between the creation of knowledge about gender and global hierarchies of political, economic and linguistic power; the exclusion of women from democratic political institutions; the diffused and productive critique to mainstream concepts, theories and discourses, as gender biased; and the political significance of social relationship and hierarchies that are not considered to be “public”** or related to the state by mainstream political scientists.

The European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) also established the Standing Group on Women and Politics back in 1985. The group then evolved into a Gender and Politics section⁵ which since 2009 has organized well-attended biannual *European Conferences on Politics and Gender*⁶ (ECPG). In this context, scientific symposia have recently addressed different aspects of the nexus between gender and political science; contributions that are now available in two themed issues of the journal *European Political Science*. In 2015, a special issue of *EPS* titled “Women in European Political Science”, edited by Stephen Bates and Heather Savigny, explored how women and men are represented in the discipline, and positioned institutionally, in Spain, Finland, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The cases show the ways in which institutional structures and recruitment mechanisms may serve to disadvantage women; while issues of under-representation emerge (women at senior level in the discipline stands at 7% in Spain, 8% in Finland, and 28% in Germany), alongside unofficial gendered division of labor (through small circles and informal networks), gendered symbols and interactions, and the well-known “leaky pipeline” effect throughout (female scholars’) carrier paths.

A 2016 second themed issue of *EPS* focused on “Gender in European Political Science Education”. There, scholars from Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom offer an overview of gender in political science education, addressing questions related to how the consolidation of gender studies as an interdisciplinary field may affect political science curricula. Editors Mugge, Evans, and Engeli state that “gender is virtually absent from much of the political science curricula”; in their view, **gender and political science courses suffer from issues of supply (rather than demand), such as the persistent under-representation of women academics within political science, as well as tight budget constraints**. At the same time, they indicate why a gender-sensitive

³ Online at: <https://www.ipsa.org/research-committees/rclist/RC19>.

⁴ The volume is published within the IPSA series “The world of political science” edited by Michael Stein and John Trent, Barbara Budrich Publishers.

⁵ Online at: <https://ecpr.eu/standinggroups/standinggrouphome.aspx?ID=8>.

⁶ Online at: <http://www.ecpg.eu>.

approach to teaching politics is necessary: on the one side politics is about power and power is always gendered; on the other, embedding gender in the core of political science education may positively affect gender equality in the profession and politics.

As we can see, the reflection is ongoing across Europe and beyond. Yet the Italian political science community has not been attentive to these debates; and, we argue, most of the above issues have seldom been addressed in our professional circles. As our community is increasingly inhabited by a diverse constituency of emerging female and male scholars, we suggest it is time for an open discussion on the potential of promoting and supporting gender-aware approaches to political science research and education in the country.

As a starting point, it can be pointed out that in Italy a gender perspective is increasingly present in the social sciences—in sociology, economics, linguistics, psychology, and literature—and there is a growing debate also within the “hard sciences”. Among scholars and academics there has been a long-standing discussion concerning both the need to mainstream a gender perspective across different disciplines and curricula, and the challenges accompanying attempts to institutionalize women’s and gender studies in academia, given the specific constraints of Italian universities’ institutional frameworks (Saraceno, 2010; Pravadelli, 2010; Magaraggia and Leone, 2010). In the last few decades, many individual scholars have successfully introduced a focus on women and/or gender in their teaching subjects and research, while a growing number of seminars have contributed to increasing the visibility to, and recognition of, gender approaches and methods.

It has thus been recognized that putting gender into the research agenda offers new ways of understanding social, cultural, political processes, and structures through which societies are organized. **It has also become clear that gender studies demand an understanding of power relations, and thus of politics, within and beyond government.** In other words, gender has emerged as a fundamental aspect of the organization of power: an aspect that is unambiguously *political*.

A deeper engagement of Italian political science with gender studies seems urgent first of all on the grounds of an evident delay in acknowledging and taking advantage of the innovation brought by national and international scholarship in this area of research and knowledge.

Notwithstanding the problems in dealing with the structure and organization of academic power (Saraceno 1995), there have been developments in theoretical and practice-oriented bodies of knowledge that critically question the accepted paradigms and categories of particular disciplines and promote the affirmation of gender issues in society at large; while new theoretical models and interpretive tools have often emerged from productive dialogs across disciplines. Gender perspectives, in fact, have always aimed at crossing disciplinary boundaries and challenging subject compartmentalization.

Disciplinary intersections, although potentially productive in terms of generating alternative ways of explaining and acting upon social relations and inequalities, are not simple nor without tensions. This is partly the case also with the present collection, where diverse voices have been invited to contribute to a better understanding of the nexus between gender and politics, by “moving beyond the obvious.” **The obvious conceived as the persistence of gender inequalities, in society and in the discipline; as well as the obvious of a (still prevailing) narrow understandings based on the conviction that “counting women”—in politics, and in political science—would be an adequate**

measure to redress such inequalities. Finally, “the obvious” of too easy identification of “gender” with “women”, and of thinking of “gender and politics” as a research object of concern to a specific category of scholars, that of female political scientists.

In their foreword to this collection, Kantola and Lombardo outline the contributions that gender lenses to the study of politics and power relations have made to political science over the past 20 years, in relation to concepts, research questions, and analytical approaches; in redefining “the political” as well as the nexus between theory and praxis, while indicating persisting challenges towards mainstreaming gender in the discipline. Sara de Jong provides an overview of recently published literature in the U.S., U.K. and Australia on the state of gender in political science; while self-reflectively and critically articulating the tension between the progress made, through building networks of academic collaboration and designing courses, and persisting gender biases and blindness.

Adopting a national perspective, Catherine Achin contributes a storytelling of French political science in relation to (the institutionalization of) gender studies as summarized in the introduction of the *Dictionnaire Genre & Science Politique. Concepts, objets, problèmes*, which she edited with Laurence Bereni (2013), where 40 entries unleash the contribution of a gender perspective to the discipline, in terms of knowledge, findings, innovative research and new tools.

It has also been argued that “the fact of being excluded from the mainstream has made gender studies of politics particularly open to inclusion and diversity” (Kantola and Lombardo, this issue), both in building bridges between political science approaches, and in opening spaces of dialog across disciplines. This is reflected in the present collection where inter-disciplinarity is widely referred to as a necessary condition to support change; and where, alongside contributions from political scientists, other disciplinary perspectives show “the potential strength of methodological pluralism” (Siim 2004: 98).

In that vein, Barbara Poggio, building on the experience of the Center for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Trento, recalls the steps toward institutionalizing gender studies in the Italian academic context; and focuses on networking and partnerships as strategic practices to that end. Lorenza Perini composes a lively storytelling of her teaching experience in the course titled *Gender Policies* at the University of Padova; while, from a sociological perspective, Carmen Leccardi speaks directly of/to the younger generation, addressing issues of young women expression, reflexivity, and subjectivity in their connection to “the political” and to an (increasingly adverse) social world in contemporary fragmented and “nomadic” experiences.

The conversation continues with a contribution by Isabelle Chabot, former president of the Società Italiana delle Storie (SIS). By sharing fragments of the history and experience of the SIS, Chabot provides a concrete review on what it has taken to “engender” a discipline like the study of history over the past three decades, including through an interdisciplinary approach to issues such as leadership and power. Finally, a challenging contribution by political philosopher Flavia Monceri invites readers to reconsider the very assumptions of gender studies, starting from a direct question of “Who is entitled to perform that kind of research and for whom?” and forcing us to move beyond stereotypical “obvious” that affect research as much as the social world.

Differences in languages and styles among these contributions are evident, and yet a number of common concerns emerge from these writings: a strong focus on the “how to”

of gender studies, with emphasis on the methods and approaches adopted in research and educational practices; a shared understanding of the centrality of education and training (including formal and informal) as tools for transformation; and a recurrent reference to networking and fostering interdisciplinary and multi-vocal exchanges. In particular, the building of alliances and networking practices among scholars, academic centers, and research groups is seen as an effective strategy to sustain ongoing efforts in fostering gender in the study of politics, thanks to reciprocal support and legitimation.

In this sense, professional associations are seen by all contributors as a strong element for women’s further advancements in political science; in creating opportunities, combat sexism, and address masculine assumptions of the discipline. We would like to see this “strong element” activated across our scholarly community. We hope this issue of IPS may contribute to bringing closer, and making visible, the variety of gender-aware contributions that have enriched the discipline over the past years and the potential for new knowledge and intellectual exchanges in the future. This, adhering to the idea that gender-aware and feminist analyses, conceived as “an approach that challenges some of the concepts, models, and methods developed within political science, (are) of importance for the whole discipline, and not just for feminists” (Allwood 2005).

References

- Akhtar, P., P. Fawcett, T. Legrand, D. Marsh and C. Taylor (2005). ‘Women in the Political Science Profession’, *PSA News* 16, 1(1), p. 28.
- APSA (2004). ‘A Report on the APSA Workshop on the Advancement of Women in Academic Political Science in the United States’. Accessible at: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED495970.pdf>.
- Bates, S. and Savigny, H. (eds) (2015). Themed issues of *European Political Science* “Women in European Political Science”, Volume 14, Issue 2.
- Bayes, J. (ed) (2012). *Gender and Politics. The State of the Discipline*. Opladen, Berlin, Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- Carroll S. and Zerilli L.M.G. (1993). “Feminist Challenges to Political Science.” In *Women and Politics and Gender and Politics*, ed. Ada W. Finifter. Washington DC: APSA.
- Cassese, Erin C., Angela L. Bos, Lauren E. Duncan (2012). “Integrating Gender into the Political Science Core Curriculum,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 45: 238-243.
- Krook M.L. and F. Mackay (Ed.) (2011). *Gender, Politics and Institutions*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lovenduski, J. (1981). ‘Toward the Emasculation of Political Science: The Impact of Feminism’ in D. Spender (ed.), *Men’s Studies Modified*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, pp. 83–97.
- Lovenduski, J. (1998). ‘Gendering Research in Political Science’, *Annual Review of Political Science* 1, pp. 333–356.
- Maliniak, D., Powers, R. and Walter, B.F. (2013). ‘The Gender Citation Gap in International Relations’, *International Organization*, 67(4), pp. 889–922. Accessible at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/the-gender-citation-gap-in-international-relations/3A769C5CFA7E24C32641CDB2FD03126A>.
- Mugge, Liza, Elisabeth Evans and Isabelle Engeli (eds) (2016). Themed issue of *European Political Science* “Gender in European Political Science Education”, Volume 15, Issue 3.

- Randall, V. (1991). 'Feminism and Political Analysis', *Political Studies* 39(3), pp. 513–532.
- Randall, V. (1994). 'Feminism and Political Analysis' in M. Githens, P. Norris and J. Lovenduski. (eds.), *Different Roles, Different Voices*. New York: Harper Collins, pp. 4–16.
- Randall, V. (2002), 'Feminism' in D. Marsh and G. Stoker (eds.), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Sapiro, V. (1998). "Feminist studies and Political Science – and Vice Versa" in A. Phillips (ed.), *Feminism and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shames, Shauna Lani (2010). "Women's Leadership in Political Science." In Karen O'Connor, ed., *Gender and Women's Leadership: A Reference Handbook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 669-678.
- Siim, Birte (2004). 'Towards a contextual and gender sensitive European political science?' *European Political Science* 3(2) Spring 2004, 97-101.
- Squires, J. (1999). *Gender in Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Vickers, J. (1997). *Reinventing Political Science: A Feminist Approach*. Halifax: Fernwood.
- Waylen, G., Celis, K., Kantola, J. and S. L Weldon (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.