Empowered by Design: Decentralization and the Gender Policy Trifecta, by Meg Rincker

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Sharp make an important call, echoed in Niner’s conclusion, for such data to promote sustainable and resilient budgetary policy.

On the issue of domestic violence, the link between gender and inequality is clearly demonstrated. Nina Hall, for example, adopts a constructivist approach to examining the movement against domestic violence. Strongest in her discussion of the post-independence period, Hall traces the emergence of the language of women’s rights and gender equality, and the dissemination of these ideals on the ground. The United Nations Development Programme explores domestic violence within Timor-Leste’s layered legal framework, maintaining that both the formal justice system and local, customary systems of conflict resolution fail to offer effective and desirable solutions for victims.

In one of the strongest chapters in the volume, Silva and Simião deconstruct some of the foundational concepts upon which discourses of gender are based. Their discussion of culture as a political and explanatory device, and its complex relationship with modernity, provides a critical layer to understandings of social action around the politics of gender. Niner’s concluding remarks take up these activist connotations, laying out a practical gender research agenda for Timor-Leste. In doing so, Niner articulates a diverse and broad-ranging platform that would be most provocative for researchers and practitioners engaged in gender-related research in Timor-Leste. This agenda suggests that, although much research has been conducted on gender issues, much is yet to be done. The volume certainly adds to literature on East Timorese women’s struggle for gender equality and, accordingly, makes a strong case for their contribution to a similar publication in the future.

Notes on Contributor


Empowered by Design: Decentralization and the Gender Policy Trifecta, by Meg Rincker, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017, 226 pp., $32.95 (paperback); $92.50 (cloth), ISBN 97814399913970

Empowered by Design is an authoritative multi-method, comparative study that represents the best of “feminist slow science” (Lovenduski 2015) and problem-driven research. For the first time, Meg Rincker tackles systematically the highly complex research question: does state decentralization alone promote more democracy through the enhanced representation of women? The resounding answer she provides is no; women’s empowerment in the context of decentralization can only occur if a “policy trifecta” (5) of
gender quotas, gender mainstreaming through women’s policy agencies, and gender-responsive budgeting is established and nurtured at the subnational and local levels; thus women can only be “empowered by design.” This finding echoes a plethora of feminist scholarship on the state, women’s movements, policy, political representation and institutionalism that engendering state institutions is a fundamental driver for democratic performance and that analysts who ignore gender in their studies have missed a crucial aspect of the democratic process in today’s world (see Waylen et al. 2013).

The design of the study, building on scholarship co-authored with Candice Otrbals in the early 2000s, is innovative and scholarly, based on cutting edge methodology from policy analysis and multi-methods. It responds to the complexity of the central objects of concern, decentralization – multi-sectoral, multi-institutional, multi-level and longitudinal – and women’s empowerment. Rincker presents three guiding questions to ground her analysis of whether decentralization matter to structure her sequential multi-methods study, returning to them in the book’s conclusion:

1. Are politicians better matching the diverse priorities of women across this country when decentralization reforms happen?
2. Is decentralization leading to sub-national gender quotas and more women elected in office than before?
3. Is decentralization leading women to work together across legislatures agencies and civil society to respond to female as well as male citizens? (19)

In Chapter Two, following her analysis of aggregate data on decentralization reform and women’s empowerment in terms of the numbers of women in elected office and the substance of feminist policy reforms, Rincker shows that, contrary to the conventional wisdom of a host of international experts, decentralization alone does not lead to lower gender inequality. The missing ingredient is the “policy trifecta,” a new concept she introduces. She then examines in three separate country cases of decentralization reform in Chapters Three to Five, the degree to which the presence of the three different nodes of that trifecta at the sub-national level are determinative in women’s empowerment. In Poland, when decentralization first began there was only one dimension, women’s policy agencies; in Pakistan there were women’s policy agencies and quotas and in the UK all three nodes were present. Rincker also selects the three countries to control for similarities in the timing of decentralization and to represent a wide range of national socio-cultural contexts across the globe.

The country case chapters present rich assessments of decentralization reform and women’s empowerment in each country that follow the same structure. The measure of empowerment Rincker develops incorporates both women’s descriptive representation – the number of women in elected subnational offices – and a sophisticated measure of substantive representation. She develops a pattern matching approach, a “Newlywed Game style” (23), to study whether the policy priorities of women’s groups matched those of women’s policy agencies at the sub national in all three countries through 112 elite survey interviews, conducted in 2007 for Pakistan and Poland and 2011 in the UK. Rincker presents the results of the pattern matching in each country chapter and closes with concrete policy recommendations. In her final chapter, she first compares the findings of the three country cases to show that decentralization can only enhance women’s empowerment and democracy through the design of the policy trifecta and then assesses the presence of the three nodes of the
policy trifecta in 193 countries. Rincker concludes the book with both a discussion of scholarly implications and of practical policy recommendations.

Rincker follows social scientific principles of transparency and replicability – the questionnaire used in the hybrid interviews can be found in an appendix – as well as validity and reliability. The surveys are carefully back-translated to reflect linguistic specificities, and there is a wealth of empirical data on decentralization reforms and major events affecting women for each country in the appendices. Rincker’s writing style is highly accessible to a wide audience: students, researchers, policy makers and practitioners, alike. At the same time there are methodological weaknesses. She analyzes only superficially the content of feminist legislation in each country to determine whether the policy demands of the women’s groups were substantively reflected with no mention of the stages after formal adoption where feminist policies can be completely subverted and changed. Also, the snapshot approach of the policy priority matching – taken at one moment in time – means that her analysis of substantive representation cannot determine whether policy priorities shifted through decentralization reform over the long haul. These, however, are relatively minor when compared to the solid and sound nature of this innovative study which shows that a slow scientific and problem-driven approach can make a difference in understanding how to make our democracies more democratic.

Notes on contributor

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References


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In this new monograph, Winter is grappling with the question of the significance of the impact of 9/11 and its aftermath on women: whether to stress the particular ways in