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BOOK REVIEW


In a perfect world, women’s empowerment is achieved through simple institutional solutions that can be implemented anywhere; all we need is a bit of money for logistics, some supporters of women’s equality in the country or region, and a few international organizations to spread the word and ta-daaa: empowered women. While this might seem like a silly or outlandish statement, the idea that women’s empowerment can be achieved through simple, one-time institutional changes is a frequent implicit assumption in both scholarly work and the actions of international organizations. The reality, as Meg Rincker explains in her important and timely book, Empowered by Design: Decentralization and the Gender Policy Trifecta, is much more complex.

Rincker’s analysis focuses on one particular element of institutional design: decentralization. As opposed to centralizing power entirely at the national level, the process of decentralization refers to the transfer of power and resources from the national level to the regional and/or local levels of government. As Rincker points out, this process is widely assumed to be beneficial for women’s equality, though we have virtually no evidence that suggests that the simple process of decentralizing is enough to place power into the hands of women. It is feasible that it may—after all, subnational governments tend to be less competitive than the highly sought-after national level, and the policy areas typically addressed in subnational government tend to be those that are traditionally associated with women—but it is arguably more likely that decentralization ends up just handing power to a different set of men (i.e., local-level men rather than national-level).

Rincker engages this unsettled debate head-on and argues that the three sectors of decentralization—political, administrative, and fiscal—must be engineered so that they are inclusive of women for any empowerment to occur. Specifically, she explains that a “gender policy trifecta” at the subnational level is necessary for decentralization to engender empowerment. In the “gender policy trifecta” the political sector includes gender quotas that guarantee women’s presence in the subnational legislature, the administrative sector includes policy agencies that consider the implications of policy on both men and women, and finally, the fiscal sector prioritizes gender-responsive budgeting in which women’s organizations have access to government funding. In short, decentralization is not enough; changing the patterns of women’s marginalization requires further institutional change to increase women’s presence as well as a commitment to engaging and funding those policy issues that most concern and affect women in that context.

Rincker’s argument on the necessity of the gender policy trifecta is supported by detailed and well-researched case studies of three countries: Poland, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom. In each case study, she walks through the institutional process of decentralization and the resulting impact on women’s descriptive and substantive representation, noting the ways in which contextual factors (e.g., gender quotas or women’s policy agencies) contributed to empowerment as well as highlighting the impact of women’s absence in a sector of decentralization. Her data on the substantive
representation of women in these chapters is particularly impressive; Rincker presents the results of extensive surveys and interviews with leaders of women’s organizations and government ministers of gender equality in each of her cases and is thus able to provide detailed, regional-specific data on women’s policy preferences.

Beyond the presentation of evidence for the importance of the gender policy trifecta, Rincker also uses the case chapters to successfully advance a new and important rationale for decentralization that has yet to be fully recognized by the literature: women’s policy priorities vary substantially within countries and thus decentralization is necessary to best address their diverse preferences and needs. For example, in her analysis of the United Kingdom, Rincker offers evidence that 50 percent of the top policy priorities of women’s organizations in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and England are the same, but the other 50 percent of these priorities vary by region. This makes perfect sense; for example, England and Scotland are more urban, industrialized, and have higher levels of immigration, so the concerns and goals of women in those regions should be different from those in Wales and Northern Ireland. And yet, even though this may seem obvious, this contribution to our understanding of regional variation in substantive representation is innovative; previous research too often acknowledges the dangers of essentialism while simultaneously assuming that all women in the country (if not the world) prioritize the same sorts of policies. Through her extensive interview and survey data, Rincker sets a new standard for measuring substantive representation by demonstrating that women’s policy preferences vary within countries as much as they do across countries.

This book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the effects of decentralization on women’s equality and access to power, and furthermore, it contributes to our broader knowledge on the ability of institutions to change power dynamics among traditionally marginalized groups in society. Rincker’s results clearly echo the growing call for a conditional approach when anticipating the consequences of institutional reform; there is no institution that is guaranteed to engineer equality regardless of the other circumstances. This is a thoughtful, well-researched book that successfully challenges a commonly embraced yet deeply flawed assumption about the effects of decentralization on women’s empowerment and is thus an asset to students, scholars, and advocates of women’s equality.

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