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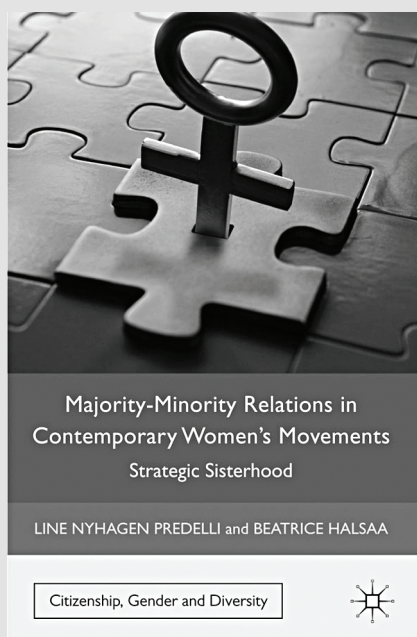
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**B O K A N M E L D E L S E**



**BIRTE SIIM**

Line Nyhagen-Predelli  
and Beatrice Halsaa:  
Majority-Minority Relations in Contemporary  
Women's Movements –  
Strategic Sisterhood

**Citizenship, Gender and Diversity,  
Palgrave Series, 2012.**

**Introduction**

The book is based on results from the European Research project: FEMCIT-project (2006–2012). It analyses «lived citizenship» within the women's movements by exploring relations between majority and minority women's movements in three selected European countries, Norway, Spain and the UK. The focus is on two main issues:

- 1 The interactions, conflicts and cooperation between majority and minority women's movement activists focusing on the recognition struggles and claims by minority

women activists and the responses from majority women activists.

- 2 The interaction between women's movement actors and the governments. To what extent do the activists perceive that they have been able to influence gender equality policies, especially violence against women (VAW)?

The aim is thus to fill a gap in current research literature about cooperation and conflict, unity and dispute between majority and minority women's movements. The starting point is here the division between majority and minority

women's movement activists. The main questions are: What do minority women's activist say about majority women's activists, how is the criticism justified and how do majority women's activists respond?

*The research design* is inspired by Frankenberg's call for white women to consider their racial privileges and by Roth's claim that feminism «is done in different spaces», which means that there is a tendency for women to organize along separate paths «to organize ones' own». The research design is thus «majority inclusive» in the sense of including the voices of majority women and listening to activists on both sides organized as majority and minorities along ethnic lines about race and ethnicity.

*The methodology* is qualitative based mainly on interviews about perceptions of a) conflicts and cooperation among minority and majority organizations, and about b) movement impact on policies. However analysis of government responsiveness is also based upon mapping of selected policy documents in the three countries. The authors acknowledge that the qualitative methodology does represent a limitation since it is based on a limited number of around 21 interviews in each country.

The book contains many valuable theoretical and methodological reflections about the challenges for contemporary women's movement and state feminism in Europe. The reflections are supported by original empirical material and thought-provoking results about majority-minority relations in contem-

porary women's movements in the three selected countries. This essay cannot do justice to all the theoretical reflections and complex empirical analyses. I want to highlight how the authors position themselves in two scholarly debates, which inspire reflections about the future of the women's movement and state feminism in Europe. *One is the contested question who the woman's movements in contemporary Europe are, and who has the legitimacy to represent whom on what issues across Europe? Another contested question is how to define state feminism?*

### **The theoretical and normative foundations - understanding intersecting inequalities**

The first chapter gives an overview of the main issues, key concepts and main results. It is somewhat surprising that it does not explain *strategic sisterhood*, which is part of the title of the book. Strategic sisterhood is briefly explored later as part of chapter 6 titled: *Strategic sisterhood on Balanced Terms: Recognition, Participation, Inclusion and Solidarity*. The second descriptive chapter gives a brief overview of the development of the women's movement in Norway, Spain and the UK, which are said to represent different migration histories and gender regimes. The selection of the three countries seems to be a pragmatic choice.

*Chapter 3* gives a well-argued presentation of the major theoretical approaches and concepts, citizenship, recognition and justice and presents the authors

theoretical and normative positions. It first develops the authors understanding of the book's key concepts gendered citizenship, multicultural citizenship and intersectionality. Here they argue in favour of a gendered multicultural and multilayered citizenship approach emphasising citizenship «as lived practice» (pp 62–72). The empirical focus is on citizenship in two different contexts a) within the women's movement where the concern is with recognition struggles, interests and claims-making articulated by ethnic minority actors and how majority actors respond (or not) to these, and b) the participation of women's movement in the policy processes and the resonance/non-resonance with government policies of the claims forwarded by majority and minority women's movement actors.

The chapter further explores issues related to intersecting inequalities discussing the tensions between multicultural citizenship focusing on the rights of minority groups and gender equal citizenship. It argues for complex approaches to structural and subjective inequalities and concludes «that intersectional approaches emphasis the need to examine both differences and similarities between women and how they produce advantage, disadvantage, privilege and marginalization». Although in principle all intersecting inequalities should be examined, the book's practical focus is on intersections between gender, race and ethnicity.

These theoretical reflections are followed by a presentation of the book's

normative framework inspired by Nancy Fraser's approach to justice. The authors find Fraser's concepts of recognition and misrecognition useful for the analysis of ethnic majority-minority relations within the women's movement as well as Fraser's normative strategies of democratic deliberation and participatory parity as paths to recognition, redistribution and justice.

Fraser's work also serves as the inspiration for reflections about recognition struggles and transversal politics. Here the authors argue for «a reflexive engagement in struggles of recognition and redistribution both by those who forward political claims and to those to whom the claims are directed» (p. 78). Transversal politics and memory work is presented as strategies and tools aimed at creating more reflexive dialogues between differently located feminists.

The chapter ends by a detailed overview of the scholarly (feminist) debates about state feminism. Here the authors clearly position themselves as advocates of one version of state feminism originally developed by Helga M. Hernes in 1987, inspired by the Nordic context. It refers to a combination of an alliance between the women's movement «from below» and feminism «from above» in terms of gender equality and social policies. Since then the concept travelled and today feminist scholarship often define state feminism «as actions of women's policy agencies within the state». The literature differentiates between «strong» and «weak» state feminism. The authors quote Mazur and

McBride's definition of strong state feminism as «activities that explicitly challenge dominant gendered power relations and confront the current unequal gender order, but side with Kantola and Outshoorn's the «weak» understanding of state feminism defined as «institutional mechanism for the advancement of women».

The authors accept the recent (Nordic) criticism of the term state feminism from a minority perspective and propose that state feminism was developed in a society that does not take diversity into account. The main question is thus, whether the normative ambition of state feminism can still be valid in a multicultural society? They find that from a normative understanding of feminist mobilization and voices the notion of state feminism may have the potential to include the mobilization and participation of ethnic minority women. I agree with the main argument that it is necessary to analyze the empirical world and decide on a «case-by-case basis», whether ethnic minority women have contributed to state feminism (p. 85).

#### **The analytical approach**

Chapter 4 presents the book's analytical approach to political opportunities and violence against women. This approach aims for a context sensitive refinement of the concept political opportunity looking for field-specific opportunities, especially in relation to gender equality and VAW. This approach is inspired by Koopman's understanding of institutional and discursive opportunity structu-

res (POS) combined with McBride and Mazur's emphasis on the combination of resources, political arenas, and political sectors (p. 88–90). The authors convincingly argue for a *dual approach* able to combine two theoretical traditions: the conscious act of framing in the women's movement, and Bacchi's discursive approach, which aims to understand the discourses within which we operate. The objective is to examine how the actors try to maneuver within discursive limits to conceptualize their aims strategically (p. 95). Inspired by Bacchi this approach looks at which actors are considered reasonable and «what» is considered sensible and legitimate problem representation but also include «framing» processes, i.e. a conscious strategy to understand the world, which motivate collective actions. This approach differentiates between frames that resonate and frames that are non-resonant with hegemonic ideas and values. The aim of the dual approach is to develop a dynamic understanding of discourse as an interactive process which enables agents to change institutions.

The research focuses on «feminism from below» focusing particularly on majoritised and minoritised women's movements. The presented data is primarily interviews with activists and to a lesser extent mapping of policy documents. The focus is thus on the perceived effects of institutional elements for the mobilization of protest. The discussion of movement impact is based on «indirect evidence, i. e. the activists» assessment. The research has looked at

both path dependency and «policy window» in ways the movement activists talk about stable or dynamic changes in election systems, in the government, about the presence of allies in the political elite etc. One main argument is that innovation and learning are crucial aspects of the dynamic of social movements (p. 93)

Violence against Women (VAW) is the specific policy areas and lens to analyze cooperation and conflict between majority and minority women's movements. Why is VAW selected as the main issue? The answer is that «violence against women» has always been a top issue for the women's movement second only to «equality at work». It can thus be interpreted as «the best case», which all parts of the women's movement agree upon, although it has been framed in many different ways as a personal, cultural and structural problem. The question is what difference the selection of another issue, like abortion, would have made for cooperation and conflict between women activists, or not?

Violence against women (VAW) also brings in the transnational context and the crucial role for strategies and policies towards the VAW that transnational links, international organizations and supranational entities as the UN, the Council of Europe and the European Union have played since the UN conference in Mexico in 1975. The chapter briefly highlights the international history of VAW at the UN conferences from 1975 to 1995 when the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women at

the Beijing World Conference on Women finally passed a resolution recognizing marital rape as a violation of women's rights, and the UN designated November 25 as *the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women*. It also acknowledges that EU' has since 1997 played a major role in combating VAW since through a number of initiatives to provide information about the protection of violence against women and children through the various Daphne initiatives and programs.

The CEDAW convention adopted in 1979 with its Optional Protocol (1999) is used to illustrate how the struggles of the women's movement have established new opportunities. Norway, Spain and the UK have all ratified the CEDAW Optional Protocol and although the CEDAW convention does not explicitly mention violence against women, the CEDAW Committee has issued general recommendations concerning the issue and has made specific comments in national reports. This is thus interpreted as new discursive and institutional opportunities providing feminist activists with a new language and new tools. The questions about relations between the international and domestic arena, are not explored further.

### **Researching women's movement**

Chapter five is a methodological chapter discussing ways to research the women's movement. The research explores the links, cooperation and conflicts between activists as well as the links between women's movement activists and the

state. In order to answer these questions the original empirical data have been collected in the form of qualitative interviews with ethnic majority and minority activists in the three countries as well as mapping of select policy documents.

The chapter contains an overview of important scholarly debates about understandings of the women's movement and feminism. It is contested who represent the women's movement today and what the main issues are. The authors argue for a context sensitive approach to the women's movement which acknowledges the existence of multiple trajectories within various geopolitical contexts, and «the interactive», adaptable and adapting qualities of the women's movement. They claim that the women's movement is alive and kicking into the twenty-first century based upon their broad definition of the women's movement and feminism.

The interpretation of the status of the contemporary women's movement clearly depends on the definition. Feminism is here defined «as the broad goal of challenging and changing gender relations that subordinate women to men and thereby also differently advantage some women and men relative to each other» (p. 114). The authors' main claim is that the dominant definitional strategy is exclusionary arguing that a too restrictive use of women's movement risks excluding some types of women and thereby also subordinating some women's interest. In contrast to this exclusive understanding of the women's and feminist movement as «as women

representing women in public life», the authors insist that all the different organizations belong to the women's movement (p. 112). They claim that the organizational landscape of ethnic minority is complex and contextual influenced by the different histories of migration and the gender equality regimes and that the extent to which a movement or an organization pursues feminist goals is an empirical question. They argue that the emphasis on contributions and claim-making from ethnic minority women necessitates *a broad approach to the women's movement and feminism*, which has also included non-feminist women's organizations and some gender-mixed organizations

#### **The main empirical results**

The empirical results are presented in chapter 6 and 7. In chapter 6 the main result is that there is a representation of difference regarding political interests among majority and minority activists. Here the concept of claims for universal sisterhood and «gender universal ideology» is criticized and strategic sisterhood is presented as a non-essentialising alternative. The term strategic sisterhood is used «to describe instances of issue-based joint, mobilization of ethnic majority and majority women's organizations aiming to influence a specific policy area, as well as to suggest, on a normative level, that women's movement actors should engage in developing inclusive forms of solidarity, and in establishing issue-based cooperation and alliances across majoritised and

minoritised positions and locations» (p. 128).

The analysis thus explores the tensions, which exist between different types of representation of minoritized women's problems. The findings show a contradictory picture: On the one hand, majority women activists formulate resistance to the notion of racism and ethnic discrimination. On the other hand, they also find an emergent interest in considering the relevance of racism and ethnic discrimination (p. 262).

The difficult question is how to interpret and conceptualize this tension? The authors propose that there are two ideal type representations: a) one finds that minoritized women's problems are mainly rooted in «culture»; b) another that minoritized women's problems are mainly rooted in racist and discriminatory practice. The two ideal-types is an interesting solution, which begs the question about what the actual distribution among respondents of the two positions is? Whether there has been a democratic learning process going on for some majority women activists, and if so, how did it come about, for example via cooperation with minority women activists; or via cooperation with researchers?

This chapter raises many troubling questions about power relations and about real and symbolic representations of different women's interests. *Who speaks for whom and who can legitimately voice the interests of women in general and the interests of minority women in parti-*

*cular?* On the one hand the authors emphasise that there is limited evidence of cooperation about contested issues between majority and minority woman's activists (p. 262). On the other hand, they also point towards a few examples of successful cooperation, for example around VAW, i.e. in Norway against insecure residency rights for immigrant women and against the three year rule before immigrant women can obtain the independent right to residency. The general picture is, however, a lack of cooperation, and here it would be useful to explore external and internal barriers to cooperation in greater detail.

Chapter 7 explores the women's influence on politics through the perceptions of women activists. The authors acknowledge that influence on public policies – as well as perceptions of influence – is a tricky business to evaluate and make a useful analytical distinction between five dimensions of influence: a) access responsiveness; agenda responsiveness; policy responsiveness; output responsiveness; and outcome responsiveness. It also includes selected policy documents and interviews with a few civil servants and politicians in the three countries. The criteria for evaluating influence seem doable, but since the methodological is based on a combination of the activists' perceptions of influence and the authors' perceptions of public policies, it is difficult to assess the soundness of the interpretations. One limitation is that the study is concerned mainly with internal barriers to cooperation and that external barriers related to



contested political factors and public policies like immigration politics are not explored in greater detail.

In the conclusion the authors give a summary of their general interpretation of the long-term political developments in the three countries. The first trend is a positive evaluation of the influence of the women's movements, which during the last 40 years have gained access to politics on gender equality in all the three countries, especially regarding VAW. The women's movements have managed to put gender equality and VAW on the public agenda and influence public policies, and in a few cases also influence the output of policies, for example in Spain, but they have not basically been able to influence outcomes.

At the same time they also point towards recent trends and characteristics of the influence of gender equality: One political trend is labeled *«the disintegration of state feminism»*. This political process is defined as reduced sites for stable encounters between movement activists and policy makers. As evidence they point towards the removal of the most powerful policy maker in Spain and Norway. They also acknowledge that an alternative interpretation could be to perceive this removal as a step towards more intersectional approaches to equality, which may benefit some -minority and migrant – women and harm other - majority – women?

The second trend is *«the uploading process of gender equality»* to CEDAW and the EU, which has improved the opportunity structures for women's organiza-

tions at the transnational level and opened new political possibilities. This interpretation is less contested but it raises new questions about the interactions between transnational and domestic politics, which need to be explored in greater detail from comparative and transnational perspectives.

The third characteristic is the trend towards «organizing ones' own» across ethnic and racial boundaries mirrored in the distinct institutionalization of national legislation and transnational conventions in the area of gender equality, race and ethnicity. This has resulted in divided and unequal opportunity structures for majority and minority women activists: The privileged access enjoyed by some – majority -women's organizations point towards «selective inclusions» of gender equality and VAW issues divided in «ordinary» gender equality issues and «extraordinary» issues of violence against minority women.

The book's main conclusion is thus that violence against women (VAW) is a contested issue, which has been the basis for both cooperation and conflict between majority and minority women activists. It shows that although violence against women is presented as a major problem by both majority and minority women's activists, and by governments, violence against women can be understood and framed as either as a personal, a cultural or as a structural problem. It is emphasized that governments tend to apply a fragmented approach – a «silo» approach rather than an integrated approach. It is, however, not yet clear

whether an intersectional approach is the way forward. This could possibly depend on how it is employed by national and transnational women's movement activists, by national gender equality politics, by gender equality politics in the EU and the UN?

### Critical comments and reflections

The selected research strategy is well-argued and doable but also inspires critical questions and comments: One crucial question concerns the definition of the main concepts, for example *strategic sisterhood*. The notion seems to be used both as an analytical description and normative vision, and I find that there are tensions between the analytical and normative design. Strategic sisterhood is part of the book's title and is explored empirically in chapter 6 titled: *Towards Strategic Sisterhood on Balanced Terms: Participation, Inclusion and Solidarity*. However, it is not clear to me what the status of the concept is. Whether any of the respondents/activists from the majority or minority women's movements actually use the term strategic sisterhood, or even refers to the notion of sisterhood to describe relations between the two movements. One proposal to overcome the lack of cooperation is for majority women activists to engage in transversal politics and memory work «to be able to develop self-reflective and dialogical methods», which could be a promising strategy which seems to transcend the somewhat fluffy notion of strategic sisterhood.

The majority inclusive strategy pro-

ves to be a fruitful research strategy, but it also has some limitations. Majority and minorities are broad categories, which raise questions about the danger of homogenizing the majoritized as well as the minoritized perspective. This concern is linked to the silences about notions for example of class, which play out differently in different European contexts. Organizing ones' own also applies for other groups like the working class. The interviews were conducted in 2007 which means that the snapshots of minority-majority relations in contemporary women's movement were taken before the financial crisis in 2008. The concern may be exacerbated during the economic, financial and political crisis, which since 2008 again has placed class inequalities at the political and research agenda and also has strengthened existing inequalities and divisions between women in Northern and Southern – between women in Eastern and Western Europe.

The multidimensional theoretical apparatus which include both discursive and institutional opportunities are suitable to address the questions raised. The international and transnational level is briefly addressed in the empirical description, but could have been more systematically integrated in the research design. Arguably further research about gender equality and VAW should transcend methodological nationalism and explore more systematically the role of the EU, as well as the international arena, for the development of the women's movement in different Euro-

pean countries, focusing on the intersections between domestic and international actors as well as on the potential sand barriers for transnational activism.

### **Concluding remarks**

I find that the book has made an important contribution to feminist theory and research by filling a gap in current research about interactions between majority and minority women's movements. The double comparative research strategy across racial and ethnic boundaries is innovative and has resulted in original research results. These results can stimulate further reflections about the future of the women's movement and state feminism. One major contribution is to provide knowledge about representation/non-representation, recognition

and misrecognition within the women's movement. This raises critical questions about the understanding and viability of the women's movement and feminism in Europe in the 21. century. Is it still alive and kicking, or is the women's movement fragmented not only organizationally but also ideologically? Is it still possible to talk about strategic sisterhood, or do we need new concepts and strategies? Another contribution is to provide knowledge of women's activists' perceptions about possibilities and barriers for political influence. This raises questions about feminist strategies and the future of state feminism. Has state feminism really been a great success and to what extent can it accommodate diversity, or do we need new strategies and concepts?