

BOOK REVIEW

***Handbook of Feminist Governance*. Edited by Marian Sawer, Lee Ann Banaszak, Jacqui True, Johanna Kantola. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023. 490 pp. \$300.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 9781800374805.**

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*The Handbook of Feminist Governance*, edited by Sawer, Banaszak, True, and Kantola is an impressive initiative. It involves no less than 58 authors comprising a mix of senior and junior scholars. The structure is clear with five subsections, focusing on, respectively, *Theoretical Perspectives*, *Evolving Institutions*, *International Relations and Global Governance*, *The European Union and Feminist Governance* and, finally, *Other Regional Perspectives on Feminist Governance*. The handbook's 35 chapters are all comparatively short. Thus, the book's organization supports the stated ambition to be accessible to both researchers and practitioners. This is the kind of book you put in the hands of someone — a student, a street bureaucrat, an employee of an international organization — who wants a quick introduction to some aspect of feminist governance. It is not the kind of book you read from beginning to end in one go, as the text then becomes repetitive and too much to digest.

The handbook starts off with a comprehensive description of the field, emphasizing the origins of the feminist movement in the 1970s. Feminist governance, the book suggests, encompasses feminist institutions, norms, and ideas, as well as the work that feminists have done within broader political institutions and governance networks at national, subnational, and transnational levels. The term governance is said to cover all processes of government; from the formal to the informal, from laws, institutional norms, and policy framing to networks and relationships through which authority is both exercised and held to account.

In Part I of the book, the broad approach described above is followed by more specific definitions and delimitations, such as in Chapter 3 where Guido and coauthors state that: “Feminist institutionalism is defined as an analytical approach that prioritises gender as a significant factor in understanding the creation, evolution and change of institutions, and prioritises institutional analyses where institutions are defined as the gendered formal and informal

rules of the game.” We find this way of understanding the feminist endeavor useful: it opens doors to analyze gender structures in formal institutions in relation to gender structures in the wider society, whether these develop along similar lines or not. It opens doors to seeing states as something malleable where gender is one factor, but not the only one, that shapes the conditions for authoritative decision making and, by extension, people’s everyday lives.

The presentation of feminism as an analytical approach in Chapter 3 stands in contrast to a more activist approach advocated in other chapters in Part I, such as in Chapter 7 where Townsend-Bell states that “feminist governance’s concern is fomenting gender equality,” or Chapter 8 where Liu discusses that the aim of feminist methodology is “the production of data that serves feminist aims of social justice.” The interpretation we make is that in such a comprehensive handbook, it is difficult to gather authors around one common way of understanding feminism, and the tension between feminism as an analytical approach versus a social goal reflects tensions that are not only found in feminist scholarship, but in the social sciences more broadly.

Parts II and III of the book explore the practical aspects of feminist governance, focusing on national level institutions and civil movements (Part II), and global governance (Part III). In Chapter 10, Goetz writes that as early as 1995 almost all countries in the world had established some type of institutional national level mechanism to deal directly with gender and women’s issues. Over time, there has been significant progress in including a gender perspective in various practices. This is evident in the gendering of budgets (Chapter 11), the establishment of specialized parliamentary bodies (Chapter 12), and advancements in electing women in various offices, including parliaments (Chapter 13 and 14). Similarly, feminist governance has diffused to global spheres, including international politics (Chapter 16), peacebuilding (Chapter 18) and trade (Chapter 20), as well as in addressing concrete issues such as health (Chapter 17) or climate change (Chapter 21).

The chapters in Part II and III provide comprehensive summaries of the evolution and spread of gender sensitive ideology within their respective fields, offering valuable insights on both its expansion and the challenges it faces. Particularly intriguing are the insights from the revelations of why some initiatives have failed. For example, Goetz describes that the success in advancing women’s rights and equality is heavily contingent on the priorities of the ruling governing party. As an example, efforts to fight violence against women seem to gather consensus across the ideological spectrum. However, in the context of the third wave of autocratization and rising right-wing populist governments, institutions such as ministries for women have been redirected to reinforce traditional family values as a core of society rather than promoting progressive development and empowerment of women. Looking for ways forward, authors such as Tanyag (Chapter 21) and Hannah and coauthors (Chapter 20) advocate for addressing current issues through more deliberative decision making processes. They emphasize the importance of deeper citizen engagement, involving non-elite groups, to include a wider variety of voices and prevent the reproduction of existing inequalities.

Part IV and V of the book focus on the European Union ([EU]; Chapters 24–9) and other regional aspects of feminist governance in Africa (Chapter 30), East Asia (Chapter 31), Asia (Chapter 32), Latin America (Chapter 33), North America (Chapter 34), and the Pacific Islands (Chapter 35). From these subsections, it is clear that the EU in specific ways is, or at least has been, an important actor that backs up feminist initiatives and provides a breeding ground for “velvet triangles” between influential actors that contribute to strengthening gender equality. The handbook highlights that today, such initiatives may be threatened by neoliberalism and ongoing “economization” of gender equality. In other regions of the world, feminist initiatives seem to be less pervasive, but the impression we get is that the EU, compared to other regional organizations, is particularly well researched.

Finally, is there something that we think is missing in this rich handbook? Since it is a book published in 2023, it could have included a deeper discussion on recent threats to liberal democracy, gender equality, and LGBTQIA+ rights, such as those trending in Poland, Hungary, or the United States. We miss a discussion on other cross-cutting issues across different regions, such as the devastating effect that corruption — the abuse of public power for private gain — has on gender equality. Overall, however, this is a book that we recommend, especially to students and/or policy makers across broad political sectors.

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