

State Autonomy and Political Rebuilding After Conflict: Positioning Gender

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State Autonomy and Political Agency in an Age of Globalisation

Processes of globalisation have spurred new academic interest in the state and its destiny. A dominant theme in the discourses on the relationship between globalisation processes and the state is the impact that globalisation supposedly has on the relative autonomy of the state. And with few exceptions globalisation in its different disguises is perceived as a serious challenge to the state. Although there is also broad agreement that the state is likely to persist and to continue exerting some degree of defining and controlling power over its citizens and to be a core agent in international relations.

Current literature on the intersection between globalisation and state formation processes generally adopts one of two perspectives: it either concentrates on the relationship between global, international forces and the state, or on the relationship between the state and internal political or social forces.

The external forces include transnational corporations and international organisations that have contributed to the integration of the global economy in such a way that labour, goods and capital are no longer firmly linked to national territories or regulated by national policy-makers and businesses alone (UNRISD 1995). The ideological foundation of such changes is a strong commitment to liberal economy and democracy as dominant principles of post-Cold War world organisation that is imagined to

eventually substitute previous alternative political and economic national projects.

Globalisation is also associated with a revolution within information technology which has contributed to linking together localities that are situated in what used to be centres and remote or peripheral areas, and which has made the world imaginable to everyone through a global diffusion and consumption of images. As Robertson and Sachs argue, the most important effect of the globalisation process may indeed be the change in consciousness that it has generated (Robertson 1992: 183; Sachs 1992). A change that allows for at least a partial separation of the link between nation and identity and contributes to the construction of de-territorialised identities anchored in multiple face-to-face and/or imagined communities.

This change in the spatial and mental extension of people's worlds was widely celebrated by early post-modern writers who were keen to abolish the previous big narratives and substitute them with a new individual freedom to construct reality. In the real world, however, the globalisation process has been as much a cause for deploration. Even though the configuration of rich and poor, dominant and dominated altered, the global integration has proved to generate or reinforce vast and increasing inequalities in both political and economic terms. And in response hereto the imagined post-modern, global citizen has resorted to essentialised, communal identities that express ethnic and/or religious values and loyalties. And in the worst of cases, he has waged a war against the nation-state that is typically held responsible for the inequalities and growing uncertainty. Thus, whether argued as a case of unequal access to resources and opportunities or as a crisis of identity, globalisation has also generated an unexpected political and cultural fragmentation of the national space. And when expressed in political mobilisation or militant action for autonomy this has come to constitute a serious internal challenge to the nation-state.

In this context it is important to note that civil wars have themselves contributed to the growth of a particular sector of the global community which continues to challenge the principle of sovereignty and to encroach upon the autonomy of states. I am here thinking of the humanitarian organisations and development organisations with reconstruction as an area of concern.

If we take the latter first, the transition from war to peace is typically accompanied by implicit or explicit demands for transformation. Examples include donors' demand for economic reform programs that imply or require a transition to market economy. Another is the transition to multi-party democracy and proofs of good governance that have become common

conditionalities for aid. Or the earmarking of large amount of resources for particularly appreciated activities such as human rights activities or capacity building to strengthen civil society. These are programs that more often than not contribute to reducing the capacity of national authorities to develop and implement native visions and strategies for the nation, as they set up autonomous, parallel administrative structures and pre-determine the possible paths to stability and progress. And for the same reasons they are exposed to much criticism.

The impact of humanitarian interventions on state building processes has so far received little attention. This may be because they are commonly conceptualised as belonging to a pre-reconstruction phase (the relief phase), and also widely assumed to rest on a premise of political neutrality and respect of national sovereignty. However, as experiences have shown, relief organisations frequently violate the principles of state sovereignty in the name of humanity and even use military support to do so. And as some scholars have suggested, their relief activities in fact influence the agendas for later national and local reconstruction in a very significant way (Duffield 1994, de Waal 1997).

In summary, one may thus conclude that both external and internal forces continue to exert different forms of pressure on the state, which renders questions of autonomy pertinent. But maybe the question asked in the title of the seminar for which this paper was written, "How autonomous is the state?" needs to be reformulated. The brief outline of common points in discussions on globalisation suggests at least three important things in this respect. First, there is a strong tendency toward state-centeredness in the analyses; and second, despite the demonstrated external and internal attacks on the state, the state as an analytical category largely evades critical reflection as the diagnostics of changes concentrate on degrees rather than kind. And finally, it seems that a silent consensus has developed regarding who qualifies as internal economic and political actors in our investigations whereby especially large private companies, ethnic groups and other political movements attract considerable scholarly attention, while others easily escape our gaze and academic texts.

Based on empirical documentation of women's contributions to post-war reconstruction on the one hand, and theoretical explorations of the state in recent feminist and post-colonial studies, on the other, I wish to challenge these assumptions and positions here. The overall aim is to contribute to the development of an alternative analytical approach to political rebuilding processes and politics more generally. One which problematizes the dominant perceptions of the political field (the political arenas, actors and agendas),

Political rebuilding after conflict and gender

and which gives emphasis to its situated construction and contestation. This also implies acknowledging the political interests and strategies of women, who have often been left out of analyses of politics. And here I agree with the view of Afshar that "it is not possible to add gender on to orthodox political theories and expect them to make sense. Women are not an additional extra in the discipline of politics; they play an integral part in the processes that shape the destinies of nations" (Afshar 1996: 6). By looking at what different groups of women actually do in the wake of war, how they interpret their own actions and how other people respond to these initiatives we may thus be able to develop a new and more dynamic understanding of post-war political fields. And make a modest contribution toward a more experience-near and inclusive conceptualisation of politics.

Gender and the Post-war Situation

The analysis of armed conflict and the transition to peace has until very recently suffered from a predominantly gender-neutral, or gender-blind, approach (Enloe 1993, Sørensen 1999). The nation-state, ethnic groups and nationalist ideologies that are seen as constituting the substance of many conflicts are all perceived as representative of whole communities rather than expressions of gendered hierarchies and values (see also Moghadam 1994).

Likewise the impact of war has only recently been analysed according to gender, and it has been demonstrated that while modern civil wars effect everybody, it effects men and women differently.⁷⁶ One of the outcomes of the increased gender awareness has been a growing body of literature that aims to identify the gender specific sufferings of men and women. As women are in many cases regarded as the embodiment of collective cultural identity and their behaviour seen as a reflection of male power and dominance, women in particular have been subject to mass rape and sexual violence as a political act (Hernandez Castillo 1997, War Report 1995). Displacement is another war-related phenomenon with a gendered face. Women suffer not only from their own relocations that separate them from their means of production and social networks, but also from the temporary or permanent absence of male family members on whose protection and resources they are partly dependent. Altogether such observations have been used to argue for an acknowledgement

⁷⁶ Apart from gender, factors like class, ethnicity, locality also influence the impact of war. For discussions of gender and conflict analysis, see Byrne (1996); El-Bushra & Piza-Lopez (1994); Lentin, Ronit (ed.) (1997), Pankhurst and Pearce (1998), Turshen and Twagiramariya (eds.) (1998).

of the increasing responsibilities that women assume during and after war when state and society disintegrate and reorganise (Byrne 1996, El-Bushra & Piza-Lopez 1994, Tripp 1994). Responsibilities that often force them to engage in activities and move in social spaces that were previously beyond the culturally defined female domain. And responsibilities that are rarely matched by improved access to relevant resources and decision-making processes.

A separate, but related point that has emerged from such discussions concerns the implications such changes in everyday practices have for women and their construction of a female consciousness or identity. And female identity should here be seen as reflecting both a sense of self, a sense of otherness vis-à-vis men, a sense of social being within a society, and finally, a sense of social position within a state, or citizenship. Moving beyond conceptualisations of an essentialised, natural female identity that embodies and expresses nurturance and care taking, this kind of analysis points to the social construction of gendered identities and positions at particular historical moments (Mohanty 1995).

Apart from the negative or subjugating identification that for instance war-related mass rape generates, war has been argued also to generate more positive identities and to establish new spaces of opportunity, not least for women (Tripp 1994). One should not exaggerate the emancipatory and empowering effects of war, but numerous cases from different war-affected scenes in the world suggest that many women have developed a new and usually more positive self awareness, partly as a result of their prominent roles in the war economy (Chingono 1996). A frequently recurring theme in testimonies by women in war is indeed the experience of war revealing and supporting a new side of womanhood. With a blend of surprise and pride, women account how they have developed a new belief in themselves as persons capable of making decisions, and as organisers and managers of activities outside the domestic sphere (Bennet et.al. 1995).

But it is not only a question of changing one's self-impression. As I shall show below, the changes in self-identity have severe relational implications, first, in the sense that new societal attitudes towards women develop, and second, because women define new expectations and demands on state and society. Finally, it is important to note that the changes in consciousness take place simultaneously with an increasing mobilisation and organisation of women. Typical forms of organisation include local or regional trading networks, local self-help groups, and nation-wide political organisations working for justice, peace and social development (Sørensen

1998). Here women's individual lived experiences are transformed into a social, collective form.

Now what will the impact of such changes be for post-conflict state building, and for women's positions within these states? As I have argued elsewhere (Sørensen 1999), there has been a tendency to analytically and conceptually de-link state building and women's attempts to re-establish their livelihoods and identities within post-conflict societies. Among the reasons for this, I argue, are the combined forces of the international humanitarian community, the politics and policies of nation-states, and finally sectors of contemporary political science (see Afshar 1996). Together they - though on slightly different grounds - contribute to a relegation of women to "those areas of social life which are centrally associated with, and also defining of female gender - areas such as family, the domestic sphere, biological reproduction, sexuality and certain areas of production culturally constructed as 'women's work'" (Manicom 1992: 443). Or to put it differently, the discussion of post-conflict reconstruction is typically based on a distinction between private and public spheres where women are associated with the private sphere and denied any access to or influence on the public sphere (for a further elaboration of this point, see Sørensen 1999, Waylen 1996). The analytical gaze, as Manicom concludes, is confined to a limited range of social life (Manicom 1992: 443), whereby women's lives are also fundamentally depoliticised (Escobar 1995). Women are silenced and instead of actors, they become victims in the master narrative of post-war reconstruction.

Now, to illustrate how women's experiences become circumscribed by prevailing cultural norms and political ideologies, on the one hand, and how women have attempted to articulate and legitimise their concerns in different post-conflict localities, on the other, let me move on to a few brief examples. (For further, more detailed examples, see Sørensen 1998, 1999).

The Politics of Everyday Life

As I have argued above, women's experiences and initiatives are often neglected or appropriated by other actors in an effort to produce analyses and social narratives that reinforce dominant gender images. However, as I shall seek to illustrate in this section, women are capable and persevering socio-economic and political actors. And more than that, their engagement in the rebuilding process has profound implications for societies emerging from war as well as for the study of these societies.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe used to be part of a regional economy characterised by large-scale male migration, female farming and domestic support. But when a crisis occurred in the state-monitored economies in the region, and political instability became order of the day, the socio-economic positions of men and women underwent drastic transformations. To illustrate this, Cheater and Gaidzanwa describe how women in the region captured the opportunities opened up by the states' economic retreat and growing male unemployment (Cheater and Gaidzanwa 1996: 190). More concretely, what women did was to build up their own informal trade networks that included local communities and markets as well as neighbouring countries, thus exploiting the regional differences in supply and demand (op.cit. 192). And as the two authors show, these women did not constitute a small group of marginalised women. On the contrary, "these women probably constitute the largest single category of cross-border travellers in the region" (op.cit. 193).

From the perspective of a state with a weakened economy and a physical and social infrastructure disrupted by conflict, one would have thought that these women's initiatives that contributed to the restoration of livelihoods and local economies would have been a welcome measure. But that appears not to have been the case. In the national media, women engaged in cross-border trade were constructed as "problem citizens", denounced as unpatriotic and accused of involvement in illegal and immoral actions (ibid, see also Mikell 1997). As women challenged the culturally sanctioned history of male labour migration they became what Bauman has termed the new "strangers" of the nation, "who concealed borderlines deemed crucial to its order and/or meaningful life" (Bauman 1997: 17).

And the cultural and social order of the nation-state was defended on several fronts and with multiple means. Apart from bureaucratic harassment that made the obtainment of passports and other official documents difficult, the state also encouraged and supported a parallel import of goods that was supposed to render women's businesses unprofitable and exclude them from the market. Moreover, new laws that seriously reduced the civil rights of women were gradually passed. Among them laws that served to marginalise female citizens married to foreigners who did not want to assume their husband's citizenship or to relocate homes (Cheater and Gaidzanwa 1996: 196). According to these laws, women who married and settled in other countries could not return to their natal communities later, nor would their children obtain Zimbabwean citizenship. In brief, the authors' argument is that the

Political rebuilding after conflict and gender

newly independent states in Southern Africa, including Zimbabwe, stress patrilineality and its inherent values of descent and sedentary identity as the basis of their new citizenship in order to protect a male population that is being pushed out of the economy. Another factor may have been a growing concern over the country's position in the international world of nation-states and a wish to establish a strong national identity, national integration and a strong state by control over its citizens.

But mobility and cross-border networks have become essential for women's economic survival and their sense of identity. What emerged as economic survival strategies in a context of a weakened state gradually turned into a more conscious and organised struggle over competing definitions of citizenship and identity. While the state expressed a "xenophobic reaction to citizens with a taste for mobility and multiple identities" (op.cit. 197), women defended this position of identity partly with reference to the international human rights discourse and its explicit acknowledgement of individual freedom and mobility.

Chiapas

The second example is from conflict-ridden Chiapas where the indigenous women have also experienced increasing economic hardships and growing social inequalities. In addition to impoverishment, women here have also had to cope with a deeply militarised state and society. Whenever women have been perceived as transgressing gender boundaries or the even more politicised and subtle boundary between nationalistic and subversive spaces, they have thus met with violence and severe social sanctions.⁷⁷

In her paper, Hernandez Castillo highlights the diversity of demands that have evolved from the indigenous women's experiences of conflict and rebuilding, and these target the state as well as women's own communities and families. Women, according to these claims, do not simply aim for a more just share of benefits or for representation in existing relevant institutions. They request a reconsideration and reorganisation of the social structures that define women's position in society. In negotiations with the state, women speak from the position of marginalised indigenous peoples and demand equal rights and access to development resources without which they will be increasingly impoverished and marginalised. Within the indigenous community, however, the same indigenous identity is being ardently challenged. First, women identify the indigenous culture as one of the main

⁷⁷ Violence as an aspect of women's everyday lives also dominates accounts from other Latin American countries, see Puar (1996); Stephen (1997), Zur (1998).

causes of women's marginalisation and suppression and as a hindrance for democracy. And they demand an immediate revision of the community's cultural heritage and the abolition of oppressive practices, thus challenging the legitimising power of tradition. Second, the indigenous women refuse to fully and uncritically ascribe to the essentialised indigenous identity that is being mobilised in response to the homogenising nationalism of the state. Instead they assert themselves to be simultaneously Mexican and indigenous which of course runs counter to both Mexican nationalism and the indigenous discourse for autonomy, but which reflects the fact that women's lives are framed and defined by both (Hernandez Castillo 1997: 110).

Similar strategies of contesting homogenising identity formations have been documented in numerous other war-affected countries including Sri Lanka, Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. Here women mobilise across ethnic boundaries in a politics of survival and peace, where shared experiences and everyday concerns are at least temporarily prioritised over identification with a cultural group. However, as their experiences also show this is a strategy with ambiguous outcomes. In some cases it may lead to stigmatisation or even attacks by defenders of a politics based on communal identities. Or it may result in support based on an identification of women as natural caretakers whose social support to the weak and wounded is expected and appreciated, but where political agency is still denied them.

Iran

Another country where women have fought the homogenising attempts by a state is post-revolutionary Iran. At one extreme, some women have adopted a secularist confrontational strategy where they publicly oppose a unified catchall Islamic identity, because it threatens to undermine their established civil rights and contribute to women's growing marginalisation. One way of articulating their position has been by ignoring Islamic dress codes and norms regarding female behaviour whereby they have sought to wrench off "the burden of representing the public face of the revolution" and insisted on their individuality (Afshar 1998: 118).

But as Afshar points out, far from all women wish to dissociate from the Islamic project even though they are disappointed about the missing rewards for participating in the revolution. Instead these women have adopted the Islamic discourse and made it the basis of their strategy to negotiate and improve their socio-economic position. The basis for doing so, Afshar argues, is acceptance of women's dependency on male relatives and a subscription to the norm of "obedience" governing gender relations (op.cit. 127). And once a woman can demonstrate compliance with this cultural model,

Political rebuilding after conflict and gender

she is in a relative strong bargaining position, because Islam grants women considerable rights and freedom within the family as long as she is obedient. In a family context, women thus use the categories of "wifeness" and "motherhood" to make strong claims for more resources to sustain and reinforce the status and honour of the family.⁷⁸

Moreover, women use these female categories to make increasing demands on the state which they claim fail to "achieve the high Islamic goals" (op.cit. 120). Women have thus confronted the state, arguing that its current policies prevent them from fulfilling their roles as "obedient wives and mothers", as it marginalises them in the economic field. One point of contestation here has been women's inability to have the automatic custody over their children. Another point has been the differentiation between men and women in banking laws which prohibits women from opening interest-paying bank accounts (op.cit. 129).

But as Afshar shows, the Islamic discourse is also being used to improve women's roles in the public domain. For instance women have used the Islamic norms of gender segregation and the political importance attached to education strategically to obtain government funds to build more schools and institutions of higher education for girls and women (op.cit. 124).

In conclusion, the Iranian case contributes to our understanding of women's political actions notably by pointing out how the domestic and national is combined in a single, but complex framework, which locates political discussions in alternate and alternative sites and allows for very different discourses. This point is also brought out by several other authors and will be discussed further in the following examination of conceptualisations of the political field (see Goetz 1998, Macaulay 1998, Mikell 1997, Waylen 1996).

The Political Field in Post-war States

The focus on how the political field with its different actors, arenas, agendas is constituted appears particularly relevant to the study of conflict to peace transitions. First, because civil wars and conflicts challenge or erode existing political institutions and power relations, and demand some measure of political rebuilding and transformation. Second, because such wars that are

⁷⁸ The concept of "motherhood" assumes a central position in current discussions of feminism in the South. While Western feminists have tended to make claims for gender equality on the basis of identity, feminists from the South insist on the importance of motherhood as a dimension of women's lives and uses it as a political position (Mikell 1997).

being fought with, among and against civil populations generate a vast range of new and competing interests and expectations in society. And in order to give public voice to particular concerns and to exercise some control over the post-war prioritisation of needs and tasks, influence over and access to political processes are crucial. Or to put it differently, political agency may be a precondition for access to socio-economic resources and inclusion in the evolving project of the nation-state.

Within conflict and peace studies, political rebuilding processes are generally being discussed as a matter involving primarily the national government and the former antagonists who have now turned into a political opposition and with whom an agreement on power sharing has to be reached. Occasionally, reference is made to the demobilised soldiers who due to their embodied culture of violence and continued easy access to weapons are recognised as political actors, although their political impact relies more on bullets than ballots. More recently, different forms of traditional political leadership such as big men, chiefs and village councils have also found their way into discussions of political transformation (Alexander 1997, Comaroff & Comaroff 1997). But even so, the discussion remains firmly located within the conventional conceptualisation of the political field with its focus on parliaments, political parties and democratic elections, or what Comaroff and Comaroff term "procedural democracy" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, see also Spencer 1997). A perspective that also maintains a strong gender bias. However, as I argue in this paper this narrow view of politics is unfortunate, since it simplifies the dynamics of post-war politics by excluding emerging and contesting actors and disregarding the ways in which new issues are being politicised and new sites of struggle are created.

A promising source of inspiration for a reconsideration of the political field in post-war states can be found within what is commonly referred to as post-colonial studies. It is a fact, that a majority of states that have recently experienced civil war are also post-colonial in the sense that subordination to a colonial power is part of their historical legacy. But the analytical construction of the post-war state and the post-colony respectively has for various reasons been remarkably different.⁷⁹

The post-colony, according to Werbner (1996) and Frankenberg and Mani (1996), is first of all characterised by its heritage of pre-colonial and colonial

⁷⁹ One reason for this could be that whereas the post-war state as an analytical category is largely a product of the international relief and development organisations and their efforts to develop general tools for intervention, the category of the post-colony reflects academic endeavours to enhance our understanding of particular historical processes and political formations on the basis of field research.

traits that continue to co-exist and influence the post-colonial society which assumes a hybrid character. But more important in the present context, the post-colony is in many cases marked by a retreat of the state that opens up for or even demands increased involvement of civil society in different areas. And according to the authors, the engagement of civil society is not to be understood simply in terms of a struggle for physical survival, even though deteriorating living conditions in some cases threaten the fulfilment of even the most basic needs. Instead it is argued, survival strategies are expressed as "cultural assertion of social identities" and "the recuperation of moral and political agency" (Werbner 1996: 8), or in what is also termed a "politics of identities" (op.cit. 2).⁸⁰

In his analysis of political processes within the post-colony, Werbner not only alerts us to the "multiple shifting identities" that are mobilised to assert new subjectivities and to access pools of resources. Building on the work of Achille Mbembe he moreover argues that in the post-colony there is not one coherent privileged public space where politics is practised. Instead the political negotiations of reality are decentralised to a "plurality of spheres and arenas," each with its own logic, and each defined by its separate organising principle (Werbner 1997: 1). In order to understand ongoing political processes in these locations it is therefore necessary to substitute prevailing definitions and models with ones that focus on "the *different* ways in which people have identified, created or reacted to an area of life and a set of practices they themselves refer to as 'the political'" (Spencer 1997: 4, italics original).

Although Werbner rightly asserts that post-colonial studies owe much to recent advancements in feminist theory, he himself does not explicate the gender dimensions of politics in post-colonial states.⁸¹ But his points regarding the politics of identity do not exclude gender as a mobilising and determining factor either. However, feminist literature has been more explicit on the intricate state-gender relationship.

In analyses of contemporary relationships between gender and politics, several feminist authors agree that despite the retreat of the state and the growing mobilisation of grassroots, the state remains a critical factor in most women's lives. As Rai argues, it may be that the post-colonial state figures only marginally in women's everyday lives, but it nevertheless continues to

⁸⁰ Different labels for similar phenomenon are "politics of survival" (Mikell 1997), "politics of everyday life" (Nelson & Chowdury in Goetz 1998), "politics of experience" (Mohanty 1995), and "politics of location" (Frankenberg & Mani 1996; Gupta & Ferguson 1997).

⁸¹ The same could be said for Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) and Spencer (1997).

possess and exerts its "regulating, structuring, constraining power" (Rai 1996: 36). Through so different means as violence, policies, laws and administrative categories, it contributes to the construction of women's identities and livelihoods as well as to the creation of gendered spaces.⁸² The solution to the previously stated problem of analytical state-centeredness is thus not simply a shift of focus from the state to civil society. Rather as some feminists suggest we need instead to rethink the relationship between state and gender and to look at how they constitute each other (Manicom 1992). And as for the conceptualisation of the state, earlier ideas of the state as a single, monolithic entity are replaced with a perception that highlights the multiplicity of state actors, the state as providing a space for struggles and negotiations of gender relations and finally, the state as a contested project in itself (Gupta 1995, Manicom 1992, Macaulay 1998, Rai 1996, Waylen 1996, Frankenberg & Mani 1996).

In order to come closer to an understanding of the dynamics of the state-gender connection and the ways in which women seek to influence the political field, I suggest that attention is paid to how political actors, political agendas and political arenas are constructed and negotiated in a particular case. I treat each of them separately here, but in reality they are related and interdependent.

Actors

If we first take a look at the political actors, it has been argued that women are rarely considered to be political actors by others, be they political scientists, political leaders or other social groups within post-war societies. The main reason for this is a rigid separation between the "social" and the "political" and the association of women with the social field (Connell 1998, Sørensen 1999). But as the country cases also demonstrated this view contrasts with how women perceive themselves. In their minds they are (also) political actors with legitimate experiences, expectations and claims.

According to Norman Long agency exists when "particular actions make a difference to pre-existing state of affairs or course of events" (Long 1992: 23). And accordingly an actor is a person with the capacity and ability to infer such changes. And if we look at the broad range of initiatives that women have taken in response to conflict and post-conflict instability and the effects of these actions, it is indeed hard to deny them political agency. In various places, they have succeeded in accessing existing political bodies, but perhaps

⁸² For different empirical examples and theoretical interpretations of this, see Das (1995), Hernandez Castillo (1997), Manicom (1992), Mikell (1997), Moore (1988), Ramphela (1997), Waylen (1996).

more important, they have influenced the ways in which politics is practised (the arenas) and the content or focus of political debates (the agendas) as well as their outcome. As Hernandez Castillo suggests "the efficacy of their [the indigenous women's] strategies cannot simply be measured by their ability to influence constitutional changes or state policies. The changes in family roles, education and their own identities as women, are also important parts of this struggle" (Hernandez Castillo 1997: 116). In other words, political agency is not restricted to representation or participation in the formal political structures. It may also be located elsewhere and premised on other rationalities and realities.

Agendas

Turning now to the content of political debates, it is clear that women have added a number of new items to the existing list of political topics. It is generally due to women's mobilisation that issues like sexual abuse, domestic violence, circumcision, marriage practices have found their way into the political agendas (Goetz 1998: 258). But women have also demonstrated their agency by providing new and gendered perspectives on existing political questions such as citizenship, employment and land ownership.

In general one could say that women's main impact on the political agenda has been the contestation and dissolution of the previous separation of the social and the political, and their success in bringing to political and public attention, the concerns that stem from their everyday experiences as women. This means that whole new areas have become politicised (see also Connell 1998, Goetz 1998, Mikell 1997).

Arenas

Finally, women's engagement in the rebuilding of their countries has contributed to the creation of alternative political arenas outside parliament building and party offices to which they have traditionally had restricted access. "The physical space in which politics is enacted, or performed," Macaulay argues, "is fundamental to the constitution of its meanings, and offers differential access to the subjects, or actors" (Macaulay 1998: 91). And therefore the relocation of part of the political process to other territories such as the street, public places or the home to which women have equal or even privileged access is an important change. As Macaulay concludes regarding the experiences of Brazilian women, it has enabled them to influence political decisions and even what is being conceived of as political (Macaulay 1998, see also Stephen 1997: 36, Tripp 1994: 152). The point here is

not simply that women have found a way to have a voice themselves, but that as a result of changing agendas and arenas they may also influence the ways in which other political actors participate in the political process more broadly.

In this respect it is interesting to note that both contemporary democratisation and decentralisation processes and the general fragmentation of politics assumed to happen in post-colonial states also contribute to a multiplication of political arenas and a relocation of the political field. While this can be seen as an opportunity for women, it does not in itself improve women's position as political actors however.

Women and Political Agency

As one of the objectives of the present paper has been to argue for a revision of current exclusive understandings of political agency to give room for women's inclusion within this category, emphasis has been given to women's political activities. This should not be taken to mean that all what women do is political, but it should not mean either, that only that which is categorised as political by women themselves is political.⁸³

But what really concerns me here, is that one possible side effect of the way in which the cases have been presented and discussed is that it has contributed to a false impression of women as a homogenous group, united in a struggle against patriarchy in its different social forms. But as Mohanty points out, "the experience of being woman can create an illusory unity, for it is not the experience of being woman, but the meanings attached to gender, race, class, and age at various historical moments that is of strategic significance" (Mohanty 1995: 79). Another way of saying this is that women do not always see themselves primarily or only as gendered subjects. Their particular positions are often also constructed along lines of race, ethnicity, class or age.

Therefore the analysis of women's participation in the development of particular post-conflict political fields, needs to look critically at how and on what grounds women as a heterogeneous social group mobilise. One way of doing this could be by looking at *aims, association and articulation*.

⁸³ Here I obviously disagree with Spencer in his redefinition of the political as he stresses people's own explicit understanding of an act as political (Spencer 1997: 4), whereas I focus more on the intended and real effects on prevailing structures, practices and norms as a criteria for political action.

Aims

As the three brief examples discussed in this paper have indicated, women's concerns and objectives do not constitute a coherent project. Their actions may be oriented toward so different horizons as the overthrow of systems, structural reforms, emancipation, better representation within existing structures, improved access to essential resources, etc. As Mikell stresses women's current projects in post-colonial Africa are ambiguous ones that include aspects of nationalism, state-building, female emancipation and economic survival which may be difficult to reconcile (Mikell 1997). And such different objectives obviously demand a vast range of different strategies. Grassroots political mobilisation has often been considered in terms of "resistance", but this in my view is a too simplistic label, as it does not pay considerate attention to the different aims that women (and others) may have as a result of their different positions. And as Goetz demonstrates in her discussion of the women's movements in Uganda and South Africa such disagreements regarding objectives and strategies almost inevitably contribute to the creation of cleavages among women and to different forms of organisation and mobilisation (Goetz 1998, see also Mikell 1997).

Association

As pointed out above women do not constitute a homogenous group. Moreover, they do not necessarily think of themselves primarily in gender terms. As Mohanty and others have emphasised, the gender category is crosscut by race, ethnicity, class, and age each of which shapes women's positions and interests (Mohanty 1995). For the analysis of women's political mobilisation this means that even when women as a social group do experience discrimination and marginalisation, the analytical separation and enclosure of women and women's groups may be a fallacious strategy. It is important to keep in mind, not only how distinct issues create different female constituencies and women's groups, but also how, under what conditions and with whom women establish alliances and coalitions. In fact, one of the current changes in political fields is the appearance of very odd alliances.

And these alliances and coalitions need not be localised and based exclusively on internal social stratification. As we have seen over the past years, marginalised groups with an identified set of shared interests may form quite powerful regional or even global networks and assist each other in their individual projects. As Macaulay suggests the political field and processes of policy-making are today being increasingly encroached upon by

what she terms "hybrid agencies and social actors" who often have a global or international outlook (Macaulay 1998: 92).

Articulation

The final issue which I find important to look at in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of women's involvement and experiences with politics, is the way in which they articulate and legitimise their different projects. As was seen in the three different cases, there does not exist a shared feminist discourse, nor one single way of legitimising political claims and agency. On the contrary, women seek to buy into the political field employing a whole range of discourses. In some cases women adopt the existing political discourse in order to make claims for representation, participation and resources, while in others they seek to give authority to their voices and improve their situations by referring to cultural or religious rationalities and norms.

Again, it is important to point to the global-local connection that frame many of these projects, as global discourses on human rights, sustainable development and social security may be used to put weight behind the articulation of local concerns.

Concluding Remarks

In the present paper I have tried to shed some new light on the question of state autonomy, using local and gendered experiences as an entry point. As suggested earlier, many arguments have treated the state as a coherent and primary entity and focused on the processes through which its authority has been eroded by external and internal forces. The perspective here has been slightly different, as I have tried to show how in the context of post-conflict reconstruction, the state and its autonomy itself become a contested, negotiated space, as emerging groups of actors, including women, mobilise around urgent issues of identity and access to power and resources. The notion of autonomy has here been replaced with the term political field in order to capture the particular and constantly changing constellations of actors, agendas and arenas that are invigorated in the renegotiations of autonomy. As suggested by Martin Doornbos at the seminar, we should not only consider shrinking, but shifting autonomy.

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Birgitte Refslund Sørensen

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Birgitte Refslund Sørensen

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