



*Interdisciplinary Political Studies*

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/idps>

ISSN: 2039-8573 (electronic version)

*IdPS*, Issue 4(2) 2018: 161-165

DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v4n2p161

Published on December 15, 2018

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Gender and Informal Institutions, by Georgina Waylen (Ed.). London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, pp. 238.**

**Laura Berlingozzi**

*Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies*

Within the theoretical framework of feminist institutionalism (FI), *Gender and Informal Institutions* is a collective work encompassing contributions from leading scholars in the field, which examines how formal and informal institutions interact, to what extent informal institutions are gendered and the roles they play in promoting gender equality. Georgina Waylen's edited collection aims at deepening our knowledge of informal institutions and further develop FI, a novel approach to the study of politics, which combines gendered analysis with institutional theory. From an analytical standpoint, it moves past traditional gender-blindness of existing institutionalism, and delves into gendered dynamics of institutions, showing the idiosyncratic aversion to change of masculinized political institutions. This excellent volume highlights that removing formal barriers is not sufficient to reach gender equality, but it is also necessary to address those informal norms, rules and processes that influence politics and reiterate gender biases.

The three research questions at the core of the book are: How should informal institutions be identified, defined, and classified? What are the best

---

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike  
3.0 Italian License

IdPS, ISSN: 2039-8573 - Copyright © 2018 - University of Salento, SIBA: <http://siba-ese.unisalento.it>

methodologies to analyse them? What are the implications for policies aimed at achieving gender equality? These research questions not only are extremely relevant and timely, but the arguments put forward represent valid contributions in the development of political science, from ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives. While there are some differences among authors' standpoints, the volume crucially contributes to the efforts in developing greater clarity about key concepts and their operationalization and how they relate to gender politics, thus enhancing the understanding of informal institutions in a range of different contexts and developing FI. The variety of methods employed range from in-depth qualitative case-study analysis, 'rapid' ethnography, large N quantitative data research and qualitative meta-analysis, suggesting that a broad approach to the selection of methods is necessary to offer different insights and perspectives to the multi-layered and often unpredictable processes and outcomes that institutions produce. Therefore, methodological pluralism is a potential benefit to the broader field of feminist political research.

The book, which explores various informal institutions in different areas of the political spectrum, is inevitably going to spark debates about gender and institutions. In a definitional effort, Chappell and Mackay trace the contours of informal institutions as "enduring rules, norms and practices that shape collective behaviour [...] that have a collective effect; are usually not codified; are enforced through sanctions and rewards from within and outwith an institutional arena" (p.27). A number of chapters (Waylen, Chappell and Mackay) examine the relationship between formal and informal institutions. Hijonosa, for instance, highlights how in reaction to a new gender-friendly formal rule on gender quota, an endogenous informal rule based on the manipulation of recruitment and selection

procedure has emerged in Uruguay. Leah Culhane discusses how localism, understood as a cross-party institution informing decisions at the local and central levels, shapes political recruitment and how this translated into male parliamentary over-representation in Ireland. As the stereotypical political broker is masculinized in itself and favours candidates with strong networks and long-established history, localism side-lines merit and prevents institutional change. Taking the Australian construction industry as a case study, Louise Chappell and Natalie Galea, through 'rapid' ethnography, analyse homosocial loyalty (social and political bond between people of the same sex), presenteeism (expectation of physical presence at work rewarding long working hours) and total availability (prioritizing work above anything else). They show how these three informal institutions have a collective effect and a sanctioning enforcement mechanism attached. A couple of chapters (Verge and Claveria, and Franceschet) focus on how informal rules operate in the political arena, focusing on party patronage and men's over-representation among cabinet ministers. Other authors (Piscopo and Nazneen) look at the role of female networks in promoting gender equality policies, in Mexico and in Bangladesh. Elin Bjarnegård and Meryl Kenny review the existing research on gendered dynamics in political recruitment and argue for the adoption a holistic problem-driven approach to get a better understanding of the critical pathways prior to political enlistment.

The different contributions make up an extremely well-crafted picture of the invisible sets of norms, rules, and patterns that ensure the preservation of gender unbalances in political institutions. Overall, it can be safely assumed that it's a book about power. About how vicious rules, stealth but well-established practices, self-serving norms reproduce self-surviving mechanisms of framing otherness, subjugation, oppression and exclusion. By analysing different cross-country

informal institutions, the book takes up the challenge of looking inside the black box of institutions. First, it sets the ground by theoretically underpinning the concept of formal and informal institutions, their interactions, and the role of networks within the broad category of informal institutions. Even though the authors employ different methodologies, from qualitative analysis to a mixed-method approach, the *fil rouge* lies in understanding how this kind of research can inform gender equality strategies. The normative aspect of feminist institutionalism is evidenced by the claim that unveiling informal gendered norms, structures and practices means also that they can be reshaped, or better ‘regendered’ to disrupt current patterns of power unbalance and inequality (p.32). In this sense, the book sets the way for transformative processes and outcomes in political institutions.

The scope of the highlighted dynamics of gendered power inequalities and their gendered effects is quite telling, as they are entrenched in many aspects of political life (candidate selection and recruitment, party office, representation in the executive branch, equality laws implementation). Also, the spread of the empirical cases, which cover nearly all continents, suggests that the patterns through which gendered norms operate are not solely confined to certain kind of political systems, but they are cross-cutting in different societies, demonstrating the relevance of the issues at stake.

The overarching assumption of the book is that knowledge construction and research development are explicitly linked to emancipatory political practice from a normative perspective, thus enriching feminist institutionalist theory, providing key insights on power, institutions, and advocating for gender equality norms. Translating research findings into practice is potentially the area where most work still needs to be done, because identifying deviant dynamics is essential but

converting prescriptions into societal change is somewhat harder, and possibly further research should delve deeper into practical strategies that might be adopted. Moreover, while it is important to focus on defining concepts in an effort to divide “what is” from “what is not” (i.e. political institutions, formal vs. informal institutions, informal institutions *per se*), it would be useful to find a more unitary cohesion and agreement within the discipline, as it is new and it runs the risk of fragmentation into “one head, one definition”, weakening the effort of finding common ground and developing a common research agenda. Nonetheless, it is clear there is consensus on informal institutions being tenacious to be modified because of their embedded and non-explicit nature and their interacting effects, which shape political and policy outcomes. Therefore, even though the task is daunting, as the different authors are faced with the challenge of seeing the invisible, revealing hidden practices, exposing the social mechanisms of alienation, and disentangling intangible webs of power, *Gender and Informal Institutions* represents an extremely valid beacon for developing further research.

*Laura Berlingozzi*