

# Research network on gender, politics and the state (RNGS-Europe)

## an ESF Scientific Network

This Network adds a much needed and long awaited European dimension to the growing understanding of how gender issues interact with policy making in democratic societies. Until now the analysis of how gender issues and women's movements affect state institutions and decision making processes has been confined largely to North America, where it has benefited from the sizeable and well-networked research community there. Europe has many unique experiences and perspectives to add to the debate, and the aim of this Network is to promote these through cooperation with existing programmes in the USA and Canada, using common research designs, data formats, and reporting procedures so that valid comparisons can be made. As such, it involves a collaboration between the European Science Foundation and the U S National Science Foundation.

The immediate scientific objective is to answer two specific questions:

- To what extent have women's movements, aided by relevant policy agencies, been successful in influencing policy making?
- What are the explanations for cross-national similarities and differences in this ability to infiltrate and affect policy making?

There are two dimensions to this representation, both of which are being examined within this Network. One is substantive representation, meaning the degree to which the concerns and preferences of women's groups are reflected in the policy making process. The second is descriptive representation, meaning the actual presence among policy makers of women as individuals and representing women's interests directly.

The study of gender in the democratic state is interdisciplinary, with several interlocking strands, namely democratic representation of women and gender issues; development of institutions; social movement; and feminism. This Network examines how these strands intersect, with the emphasis on the role of state institutions at the centre of the democratic process. A fundamental and challenging goal of the Network is to ensure that research in different countries is performed to consistent procedural and reporting standards, so that findings can be compared meaningfully. This will help identify the most effective strategies for developing and maintaining women's representation, so that they can be implemented throughout Europe.

Women's policy agencies, which are the focus of much of the comparative research, are defined as state institutions formally charged with improving the status of women and continuing progress towards sexual equality. The success of these agencies will be compared both qualitatively and quantitatively by both country and issue area. This is important

because there are significant inter-country differences within single areas of debate, and equally big differences within countries between different issue areas. These comparisons are being made on the basis of answers to four fundamental questions:

- Were gender differences explicitly considered in policy discussions within the country/issue?
- If so, what were the major factors and forces that led to gender being considered?
- What role, if any, did women's policy agencies play in this "gendering" process?
- What factors explain the patterns found?

The impact of women's policy agencies will be examined in policy debates on five key issues, namely job training, abortion, prostitution, political representation, and a top priority issue specific to each country concerned. Data based on between 100 and 150 observations is being gathered in at least 14 countries as well as at the EU policy making level. As the aim is to perform comparative research, the qualitative findings will also be summarised in numerical form, using standardised worksheets based on uniform measurements and units of analysis, and assembled into an overall electronic data set that can be used by researchers and policy makers. Each researcher is responsible for producing summary findings on all variables in the model in a standard form. Research results will be published in five edited volumes for each issue area and a capstone book that will bring together the qualitative and quantitative strands.

The complex process of establishing this comparative framework began with an initial ESF Network grant which funded a single meeting, held in Southampton, UK in 1999. The current Network, running for two years from January 2002 to December 2003 was set up to complete the cross national comparative activities started by the earlier project. The activities are being organised around two further meetings, as well as supplementary communications and data sharing.

The first meeting will bring members together to discuss the qualitative findings for the priority issue networks and to review the code book for the data set project. Then the second meeting will complete the priority issue network, and discuss qualitative and quantitative findings across all five issue areas. This meeting will also make final plans to produce a usable data set, and also a top quality monograph on the statistical and theoretical outcomes of the projects.

This Network was approved by the ESF Network Group in November 2001 for a two-year period



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The European Science Foundation acts as a catalyst for the development of science by bringing together leading scientists and funding agencies to debate, plan and implement pan-European initiatives.

The ESF Network scheme is coordinated from the Foundation's Strasbourg headquarters. For further information and application procedures contact:

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