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Dahlerup, Drude. Has Democracy Failed Women?

Genna Duplisea

Salve Regina University, genna.duplisea@salve.edu

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Reviewed by Genna Duplisea, archivist and special collections librarian, Salve Regina University.

In questioning whether democracy has failed women, any analysis must ask how to define democracy and how to measure what success looks like. In her first chapter, Drude Dahlerup, a Swedish political science professor and internationally-recognized expert on gender quotas in government, examines who is excluded from democracy, asking, “Can one honestly speak of democracy if women and minorities are excluded, even if the procedures followed among the privileged men in the polity fulfill the noble criteria of fair elections, deliberation and rotation of positions?” (2). Her writing is clear and meticulous, structured with signposts laying out her arguments. She deconstructs multiple ways of measuring women’s political engagement and uses both statistics and storytelling to allow possible conclusions to play out. She demonstrates that democracy working for women requires more than suffrage, more than token political participation. Furthermore, participation by women does not guarantee furthering political change that will benefit women.

Dahlerup provides evidence of the slowness of change from exclusion to inclusion in her first chapter. Her gives a brief but thorough history of liberal democracies and women’s suffrage movements, and she covers historical arguments for and against women’s suffrage and political engagement. She explains, “Male suffrage was for long considered sufficient for fulfilling the criteria of popular participation embedded in most definitions of democracy. This may explain why there were no boycotts of Switzerland, which did not grant women the right to vote at the federal level until 1971” (21). Global suffrage is only one measure of success, and only one step

along the way toward equality. The rest of the book examines other measures and methods of participation and their effectiveness.

In the second chapter, Dahlerup examines male dominance in politics as a political culture, not merely a numerical majority. Giving women the vote is an entirely differently societal change to allowing them to enter what Dahlerup calls “the secret garden of politics,” and she argues that resistance to women being elected to government has been much greater than resistance to franchise (29). Participating in civil society, uprisings, protests, revolutions, whether in western Europe a century ago, Russia at the end of the Cold War, or in the Arab Spring in 2011, does not guarantee women a place in government. The first female elected representatives were viewed as intruders by male politicians, including, as stated in an historical anecdote, Winston Churchill (30). Women's presence in political assemblies often overstated, so 55-59 percent women in any body is framed as female dominance rather than parity (32). Notably, the Global South has been moving toward gender parity at a faster rate than more established, wealthier democracies, which have had much more time to increase women’s engagement in politics (50). In a table showing the gulf between voting rights and political representation, Dahlerup gives the year of women’s franchise for several countries, then the years in which the representation of women in elected assemblies surpassed 10%, 25%, and 40% (36). Since the printing of this book, the United States has just passed 25% representation of women in the Senate for the first time in the 2018 election, but the House of Representatives is only 24% women.¹

Gender quotas, Dahlerup’s area of expertise, is the subject of her third chapter. More than 80 countries have adopted gender quotas for their elected assemblies; some parties also use them to develop electoral lists (59). Quotas are controversial in that opponents believe they violate

¹ Drew DeSilver, “A record number of women will be serving in the new Congress,” Pew Research Center, December 18, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/18/record-number-women-in-congress/>.

principles of merit and competition, and women politicians are sometimes concerned about not being taken seriously. Another perspective is that quotas encourage discussion of exclusions and inequalities, and perform justice; they would be unnecessary or unfair *if* there were no barriers to one gender or another (69). One current barrier is that women's qualifications are questioned more than men's (74). Dahlerup relates the 1997 British election in which a landmark number of women were elected to House of Commons, but this achievement of democracy was minimized by the press referring to the women as “[Prime Minister Tony] Blair’s Babes” and questioning their qualifications (94). The 2018 election in the United States demonstrated the same diminishment and criticism of women, especially young women and women of color, running for public office.

The number of women in political assemblies is not the only measure to consider. Dahlerup frames her chapter on the gendering of public policy with critical mass theory, discussing the relationship between descriptive representation (numbers) and substantive representation (policies); having a higher number women in politics is different from, but related to, the policy accomplishments of a government. For example, Margaret Thatcher’s second government neared gender parity but did not work for gender equality. Defining feminism as a political rather than an identity movement, Dahlerup argues that the development of public policy cannot be gender-neutral. State intervention is necessary to counteract the patriarchal forces in society and the market that work against women (93). Women’s representation in political assemblies, grassroots organizations, and other bodies or organizations is vital, but both they and male politicians must also be committed to gender equality.

As large multinational organizations gain power in the 21st century, Dahlerup analyzes in her final chapter how these organizations engage women. She brings up the feminist argument against “the neoliberal discourse used by these economic organizations around the new inclusion

of women – the utility of women argument” (122). It is dangerous to thus reduce women’s participation in governance, or business, to their productive potential; this women reduced to use-value and risks the argument that if women are not good for business, then their participation is not valuable. Dahlerup asks, “If the inclusion of women is not seen as a right, what happens if the inclusion of women does not produce improved economic results?” (123). Even international accords or resolutions that explicitly state the value of women’s input, like the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, do not necessarily establish quotas or regulations to guarantee the involvement of women. Women’s experiences and competencies are different from men’s, Dahlerup argues, not because of biology but because of their social contexts, and therefore their participation is vital to the pursuit of justice.

A lingering question at the book’s end is whether democracy can address inequality. In the concluding pages, a seed of something almost like hope emerges. “Politics is still failing women,” Dahlerup claims, “yet there is a lot to learn from the last two decades’ obvious progress” (142). Democracy has not totally failed yet. Dahlerup takes the position that “inclusive democracies and transparent and accountable public institutions” are still the best tools for creating equality (146). At the same time, Audre Lorde’s maxim “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” comes to mind.² Can a political system built on patriarchal structures erase those very structures in pursuit of equality – and if so, can it erase oppression for everyone? Here arises a weakness of Dahlerup’s analysis: it is not intersectional, and so does not consider how democratic exclusion differently affects women of color, LGBTQ women, women with disabilities, non-binary individuals. Lorde’s criticism of such academic exclusion applies here – Dahlerup argues for a greater inclusion of a diverse population of women in politics in public life, but does not

² Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 110- 113.

attend to them in her analysis. Her methodology could be applied to studying political rights of specific sections of the population, and further research could be a fruitful area of writing. Securing women's rights and gender equality through democracy will not look the same for all populations or all women. *Has Democracy Failed Women?* does more than address the title's question; it interrogates whether it is the right question to be asking at all.