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Book Review

## Feminist Institutionalism in South Africa

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**Published:** September 1, 2023

**Book's Editor:** Amanda Gouws

**Publication Date:** 2022

**Publisher:** London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield

**Price:** \$45,00

**Number of Pages:** 346 pp.

**ISBN:** 978-1-538-16008-4

The book is based on the papers presented by the authors of the Feminist Institutionalism Project in the 2019 Feminist Institutionalism Conference held at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS) in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The Feminist Institutionalism Project is an attempt by the editor, as well as the authors of the book, to better understand the experiences of feminist activists/feminist scholars in the National Gender Machine (NGM) in South Africa to answer the basic question: Can equality be designed? In addition to an Introduction, 'Feminist Institutionalism: Views from the South', the topics of the book are divided into four parts. Part I, chapters 1 to 4, provides a history of the Commission for Gender Equality and its problems and challenges over the past 25 years since its establishment. Part II, chapters 5 and 6, delineates the successes of the feminist efforts of the Commission in the courts. Part III, chapters 7 to 10, details the internal problems of the Commission and its perceived failures in battling against the state for the feminist projects of gender equality. Part IV, chapter 11, as the conclusion for the book, calls for African feminist direct action and protest in order to forge a National Strategic Plan on gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa, in abeyance of the state.

This is an informative as well as important book for feminist scholars and practitioners who are interested in and concerned with theories of feminist institutionalism and the debates around state feminism. The book asks the basic question to institutional feminists: can equality be designed? Specifically, it addresses the question of: can (the state) institutions be designed in such a way that they can ensure innovative measures for and institutionalise feminist vision of gender equality? South Africa, due to its late democratic transition in 1996, provides a unique setting for examining the effect of feminist institutionalism in action. Through the involvement of feminist scholars and working together with women's organisations, feminist academics played an important role in the design of the Constitution and, thus, were able to extract concessions such as a gender pact, which resulted in the NGM, from out of the negotiation process. By examining the 25-year of lifespan of one key institution of the South African NGM, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), this book provides empirical data to answer some of the questions regarding feminist institutionalism. It asks such questions as how the feminist institutions were designed, how these designs enhanced or constrained feminist initiatives, and how the logics of design may become detrimental to attaining feminist goals.

By examining the various aspects of initial design of the CGE, and comparing its different organisational forms under the auspices of different Presidential reigns in the South African democratisation process, different chapters of the book are able to shed light on some fundamental concerns regarding feminist institutionalism. Such concerns examine how the original intent and aspirations of the feminist design of gender equality can become undermined

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over time and what factors are contributing to this turn of events. From the South African's CGE history, it is found that patronage politics, the co-optation of 'femocrats' in the state, ideologies of nationalism, party politics and the shrinking space in which women's organisations can engage the state under the unchanging patriarchal regime, are all major factors contributing to the perceived failure of CGE in fulfilling its mission of gender equality, especially in its fight against gender-based violence.

This research also makes a contribution to the existing literature on state feminism which is mainly based on the experiences of the so-called global north, especially that of the European states. Since the creation of supranational bodies such as the European Union (EU), and its implementation of gender quota systems, the European states have demonstrated progress in gender equality in both the legislative bodies and the executive offices, as well as in the economic organisation. Moreover, this reconfiguration of the global north states provided the state feminists there with a different set of contextual factors to encounter which include multi-level governance, diversity in political economy and the intersectionality of racial/national compositions.

For the South African case, as the book delineates, the biggest hurdles that the state feminists experienced includes an arguably dysfunctional nationalist state, the corruption of 'femocrats', the co-optation of feminists by political parties, and the incorporation of CGE as a department within a multi-mission ministry such as the South African Ministry of Poverty, Youth and Women. All of these factors have contributed to the invincibility of the traditional patriarchal gender regimes in South African politics, including even in the democratic movement and party. These findings not only contribute to the advance of feminist institutionalism theory, but they will also shed light on the debates among political feminists regarding the advantages and shortcomings between a single, independent Department for Women versus an integrated multi-departmental Gender Equality Commission. The latter will be of special relevance to the feminist organisations and movement of many developing countries in its institutional efforts to advance political gender equality.

For the readers unfamiliar with the history of the democratic transition of South Africa and its political organisations, this book, with many chapters of detailed and sometime different accounts (of personal experiences and stories) can cause some confusion to the reader not well informed about the South African context. Authors with different experiences inevitably give differing views thus painting different pictures of events, this can be confusing to the non-South African reader. It may have been helpful if the book had provided readers with a succinct chart of the history of main political events and related personnel of the NGM and CGE in its introductory chapter. This could have facilitated readers (particularly, those outside the African continent) to better comprehend the whole picture of the history of the NGM and CGE. Also, in addition to the List of Acronyms provided in the book, many more acronyms were used by various authors throughout the book, which provided additional reading obstacles. Future editions of the book may like to take this problem into consideration. Finally, for international readers the book would benefit from a summative conclusion in response to the basic question posted by the book (can equality be designed?) and then to give readers a short version at the end as to the arguments as to why and how. However, this book is a great resource for those feminists in South Africa who wish to have a cogent history of institutionalised feminism and gender reform within that country.

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**Citation:** Chou, B.-E. (2022). [Review of the book *Feminist Institutionalism in South Africa*, edited by Amanda Gouws]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 7(2), 37. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/13565>

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