

The Red Herring of Liberal Representational Feminism

Category: Gender & Gender Politics, Left Politics
written by Dan Fischer | November 1, 2020



From the appointment of Justice Barrett, to the silencing of Malala Yousafzai's socialism, and women's leadership in the military industrial complex, individualistic, representational feminism proves both inaccurate and dangerous.

The Appointment of Amy Coney Barrett

Since Amy Coney Barrett was sworn in as Supreme Court Justice, another wave of disagreement over the goalposts of feminism has emerged. Some recognize her appointment as a victory for women, some view it as an assault on women. This debate has focused largely on Justice Barrett herself, and whether she can or should be considered a feminist. It is worth examining, however, the general celebration of representational feminism because it so often obfuscates the true material and relational issues at hand.

One of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's most poignant and memorable quotes addresses the lack of women in governance: "Women belong in all places where decisions are being made." She's right, of course, women do indeed belong where decisions are being made, not least in part because political decisions that impact women or women's bodies are all too often made by men. This quote should always come with the context of Justice Ginsburg's record of defending women's rights. On its own, it suggests a representational feminism that would recognize any woman in leadership as an inherent victory. It should perhaps come as no surprise that following the appointment of Justice Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, conservatives hailed the moment as a win for women, and decried those who did not. Liberals have displayed a similar perspective, as seen in the individualistic feminism of Hillary Clinton.

Additionally, many responses to the first presidential debate suggested that the debate demonstrated a need for women in politics. Among these takes were jokes that two female candidates would spend time complimenting each other's clothes and hair or would incessantly apologize back and forth if there were confusion over who was meant to speak first. It's clearly condescending to say two women presidential candidates would use debate time to discuss their outfits, but those sorts of lines were at least intended to be humorous. The problem really goes beyond sexist jokes; it seems like some people really believe two women would inherently have a friendlier, smoother debate.

To treat an entire gender as monolithically humble and nurturing is both patronizing and inaccurate,

and we should not conflate the need for women in power with the idea that women in power would be an inherent improvement. We certainly do see some female politicians, like New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, successfully empowering values that are traditionally associated with femininity - compassion, patience, emotion - but she is also assertive, strong, and bold. Additionally, there's no reason why men couldn't be compassionate, patient, and emotional; these traits are certainly societally stigmatized for men, but one way to counter that would be to encourage our male elected leaders to demonstrate values like empathy and generosity. So, the problem here isn't that typically feminine traits are demeaning - masculine traits such as aggression, competitiveness, and toughness are clearly given too much credence in our politics. The problem is the underlying assumption that 'women' is a homogeneous category from which any candidate would be sensitive and kind. The reality is that some women would, and some wouldn't. The same holds true for men. It is worth noting, however, that given their hierarchical status, white men certainly have greater latitude in terms of acceptable demeanors. Women, particularly women of color, face oppressive and demeaning criticism when they display almost any kind of personality. The recent racist commentary on Senator Kamala Harris by Peggy Noonan is only one example of the litany of assaults Senator Harris faces as a woman of color. Certainly, more diverse representation is needed to help break down these barriers - but pure representation cannot do it alone. It is simultaneously true that women in leadership positions should not be subject to criticism on the basis of their gender or skin color *and* that representational feminism is insufficient as a metric of success.

The distinction between 'we need more women in politics' and 'we need more traits traditionally associated with femininity in politics,' may seem trivial, but the implications here are neither innocuous nor pedantic. It's a dangerous mistake to assume that American politics would inherently improve if we had two female presidential candidates; likewise, it's a dangerous mistake to assume Justice Barrett's appointment will improve the Supreme Court. These assumptions play into a broader pattern of uncritically celebrating women's achievements in male-dominated circles, when the better approach would be a nuanced recognition that it's good to have more diverse leadership in all sectors, but it's equally if not more important to implement systemic improvements for marginalized groups, including women.

Promoting Liberal Feminism

In October 2012, Malala Yousafzai was shot by the Taliban because she vocalized support for the right for girls to be educated. Since then, she has, rightfully, become a global inspiration. Through her synthesis of intelligence, compassion, and bravery, she has become perhaps the most recognized advocate for girls' education, and the youngest ever Nobel Prize laureate. What is less recognized in America is her advocacy for socialism in Pakistan; in a message sent to Pakistan's International Marxist Tendency, she wrote "I am convinced socialism is the only answer, and I urge all comrades to struggle to a victorious conclusion. Only this will free us from the chains of bigotry and exploitation." Yet the selective publicity about Malala in both the U.S. and the U.K. would have her appear as a beacon for liberal feminism and foreign intervention. Malala also powerfully advised then-President Obama to end drone strikes: "I also expressed my concerns that drone strikes are fueling terrorism. Innocent victims are killed in these acts, and they lead to resentment among the Pakistani people." Perhaps unsurprisingly, this part of the meeting was omitted in the corresponding White House statement.

If our government were thoroughly committed to helping other women and girls like Malala, it certainly would not launch destabilizing and lethal military interventions to the very obvious detriment of the safety of women, who suffer disproportionately in destabilized, violent circumstances. This would not mean ignoring global gender issues; Malala has said herself that the driving cause of inequalities and violation of human rights is poverty. If the U.S. government wanted to, it could take substantial steps to decrease global poverty through, for example, foreign debt

cancellation, investigating illicit trade, and more ambitiously capping carbon emissions that have directly harmful payoff elsewhere in the world. But it is far more convenient instead to select individual examples of successful women in America as signs that we're achieving gender equality, and to associate the struggle for the rights of women on the global scale with the political system of American liberalism. While Malala's socialism has thus far not been a driving focus of her activism or writing, ending global poverty certainly has been, and the selective coverage of her ideas has silenced this component of her voice.

Liberal, individualistic feminism is often employed as an excuse for U.S. imperialist aggression. This brand of feminism is cast as a value of democracy, apparently free from the procedures of democracy, as unbridled executive war powers allow our government to launch military campaigns without consulting the people whom it represents. Of course, war zones, and their concomitant instability and impoverishment, do not implement systemic improvements for women.

Women in the Military Industrial Complex

The military industrial complex presents another example of uncritically celebrating representational feminism. Raytheon Technologies Corp., the third largest U.S. defense contractor by revenue, has partnered with Girl Scouts of the USA to encourage girls "to explore computer science careers and realize their potential to help make the world a better, safer place." Earlier this year, Raytheon proposed to expand its manufacturing of weapons in Saudi Arabia as part of a \$500 million sale of precision-guided munitions. The weapons would foreseeably be used by the Saudi-led coalition in the world's worst humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

Currently, four of America's five biggest defense contractors, which include weapons manufacturers, are led by women. A *Politico* article celebrating women in this a win for women in leadership and women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). In the article, Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson attributes the growing number of women in military leadership to their status as mothers, saying "If I ask everyone in this room to think about the most protective person you know in your life, someone who would do anything to keep you safe, half the people in this room would think about their moms. We are the protectors; that's what the military does. We serve to protect the rest of you, and that's a very natural place for a woman to be." Of course, according to Francis Fukuyama, motherhood is also a reason why women would be more peaceful and cooperative. Women should be able to succeed without being associated with motherhood. That association is a needless promulgation of restrictive gender roles: we can applaud women as mothers, and people of any gender as parents, without assuming that all women everywhere embody motherly traits at all times. Yet it is seemingly all too easy to collapse women into stereotypical categories. The fact that 'motherhood' is a malleable enough rhetorical tool that it has been used as an explanation for women being tough and women being soft speaks for itself.

Moreover, the US military continues to use and sell weapons that devastate communities, disproportionately destabilizing the lives of women in foreign countries, including Yemen; in other words, there has been neither normative nor empirical changes in our defense industry now that more women are in power. It's a painful and tragic irony that Raytheon encourages girls in America to explore computer science while enabling a conflict that has killed tens of thousands of children in Yemen.

Feminism under Capitalism

The values of capitalism implicitly promulgate this reductive, representational feminism through treating people as atomistic individuals in competition with one another. Instead of viewing rights of women as a purely procedural concern, wherein a woman's ability to be a Supreme Court Justice is

inherently empowering to all women, we ought to employ a relational and substantive lens. We must recognize that our relations with one another are constitutive of our personal rights, and that our rights and freedoms therefore require substantive equality. In that sense, socialism does not run counter to liberty, but rather in tandem with it.

Crucially, the takeaways from this complicated issue should not include the idea that women and non-binary people ought to be subject to more scrutiny than their male counterparts. We can expect and demand better representation from men in leadership positions. In the weeks since the passing of Justice Ginsburg, Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey has been a vocal advocate for reproductive rights and women's health, standing in stark juxtaposition to Justice Barrett. While he is not the only man with a feminist platform, this kind of advocacy should be far more commonplace.

What do the framing of Malala and women in the military industrial complex have to do with the appointment of Justice Barrett? The fact that the appointment of Justice Barrett is not a win for women should be seen as part of a wider constellation of unduly narrow, capitalist, representative feminism. Likewise, the 2018 appointment Gina Haspel, former chief of a torture black site in Thailand, as Director of the CIA was not a win for women. It was a win for Gina Haspel. And we should not limit our understanding of women, or of feminism, to blindly applauding individualistic triumphs of individual women. To do so not only reduces a vastly diverse range of personalities to one trope but also paves the way for an oversimplified vision of feminism.

If we want leaders and decision makers who embody stereotypically feminine traits, we should elect people based on their values and irrespective of their gender. If we want to tackle women's rights on both the domestic and global scale, we should consider a radical overhaul of patriarchal capitalism.

To quote Cynthia Enloe, "feminism is the pursuit of deep, deep justice for women in ways that change the behaviors of both women and men, and really change our notions of what justice looks like."