A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In her 1990 essay “Toward a Feminist Perspective in Public Administration Theory,” the author Camilla Stivers invites us to take on a feminist lens on public administration. Stating that “feminist theory is critical of existing realities” (Classics #47, p. 470), Stivers encourages us to view gender as a significant analytical tool, allowing us to improve and reshape our understanding of the field of public administration. Although twenty years have passed in the writing of this essay, the need and desire to improve public service is still relevant, and, consequently, Stivers’ argumentation for a feminist perspective is still vital. Moreover, in times of economic crisis and global unrest, invoking fears that are most often unleashed against society’s most vulnerable members, a feminist lens provides a new perspective to view taken-for-granted concepts and realities critically.

One concept, which stood out to me in Stivers’ essay was the question of governance and leadership. To this day, leadership is commonly associated with the qualities of toughness, assertiveness, and aggressiveness (particularly in times of crisis) - all of which are undisputedly regarded as masculine virtues. Moreover, giving orders, making use of power in an authoritarian way, is often described as the right way “to get things done” (e.g. reflecting the virtue of efficiency in bureaucracies). However, this approach is characterized by many downfalls, with one of the most important being resistance. As Michel Foucault put it so nicely,
“where there is power, there is resistance,” - and this is certainly true for the receiving end (being forced upon a decision), as well as the executing arm (being forced to comply without questioning the order).

In contrast, feminist ideas seem important to an appreciation of administrative governance that is “less hierarchical and more interactive” (p. 475). Instead of viewing power as a “mode of domination,” the feminist perspective emphasizes the “enabling capacity” of power (p. 475). Stivers argues that engaging in collaboration with others, instead of following a tight chain of command in a centralized controlled system, is a more appropriate way to address the more and more complex challenges in our world. In her opinion, cooperation, teamwork and participation, allowing a diverse perspective on complex subject matters “becomes protection against bureaucratic pathology rather than [being] a source of inefficiency” (p. 475).

In many ways, the feminist perspective on leadership in public administration reflects certain values of the New Public Management approach (NPM). NPM, which became popular during the early 1990s, also emphasizes key concepts, such as “employee empowerment,” “decentralization in decision making,” and “networking and collaboration.” However, to describe the feminist theory approach to public administration as the antecedent to NPM might be overstated; still, it seems that NPM borrowed some ideas from feminist theory yet failed to give credit. An even earlier application of feminist ideas to leadership in public administration is the example of Governor Alexander Lamar’s leadership in Tennessee from 1979-1987. As described in Agendas and Decisions, he too believed in devolution and transferring power and responsibility to his appointees. However, throughout the book, there is no mentioning of feminist influences in regard to his style of government (which in hindsight has been deemed as
particularly successful) - and this despite the fact that Lamar’s governing years followed immediately the heydays of the feminist movement.

The cause of omitting the acknowledgement of feminist ideas and perspectives might be twofold: 1) Male theorists and practitioners of public administration might not be aware that a feminist perspective exists; and 2) they might be aware but decide not to mention it due to the negative connotation that are still associated with feminism (e.g. radicalism, irrationality, emotionality). To change the negative or non-existing perception of feminist theories in public administration it is essential to encourage and publish more feminist research, make it more widely known, and use it in current debates of the field. Including a feminist approach to the question of leadership would open up a new perspective, which would be certainly helpful in encouraging discussions as to how we are able to improve public service at any level of government.

Besides viewing leadership and governance through a feminist lens, the second concept that caught my attention in Stivers’ essay was the question of the public/private dichotomy. Historically, women have been delegated to the private sphere, while men were allowed to roam the public. Moreover, women’s work in the home had been deemed as the defining part of their existence, freeing men from any homebound obligations, which enabled them to focus on their professional careers. This antiquated concept, which evolved mainly as a consequence of the industrial revolution, still haunts women today. Not only are women concentrated in public sector jobs that are characterized by caritas (e.g. nurses, teachers, caretakers), they are also punished financially as work that is regarded as natural to them does not have to be adequately compensated.
Also, in regard to career advancement in the public sector, women were never able to catch up with men. While at the ground level most public servants are female, at the top level women are scarce. Moreover, women, who enter the highest echelons in public administration, are facing a different work environment than men. Because of their female status, women are closely watched as to how they behave, dress, talk, and make decisions. They face criticism if they appear as too masculine (e.g. Hilary Clinton), but also if they are deemed too feminine (which is commonly associated with being weak). This scrutiny in regard to gendered behavior is mostly unbeknownst to men and does not present an additional burden to their work load.

The consciousness that men’s achievements in regard to their professional careers has been enabled by the abandonment of women to the domestic sphere has been successfully suppressed (not only by men, but, unfortunately, also by many women). In her essay Stivers points out that from a feminist political perspective we are “still operating with an intellectual inheritance in which freedom for some (i.e. men) is profoundly dependent on limiting the freedom of others (women)” (p. 476). Hence, it is about time that this “intellectual inheritance” is challenged, that “old boy networks” are abandoned, and that women’s work, caritas or not, is adequately compensated. This would not only make women’s professional lives much easier, but it also becomes particularly important in times of economic crisis, when voices are raised that would like to see women back in the home to make room for male employees.

In my opinion, the public sector should become a pioneer for the acknowledgment of women’s contributions. I would like to see as many women as men in the top echelons of public service; I want women to earn the same as men do; and I want feminist perspectives to be a given in any decision-making process. I might not see all of these changes in my life-time as
cultural and societal change is tedious and does not happen overnight. However, it is also the small steps that contribute to the final goal. Including essays like Stivers in the public administration curriculum is a first step. Even better would be a whole class on feminist perspectives in public administration, which, in my opinion, should become a core requirement (e.g. Gender and Public Administration). The more future public servants learn about the gendered dimensions of public administration, the better the understanding of women’s continuing discrimination will be. Omitting and undervaluing women’s contribution to the public service should not be an option anymore as women have so much to give (at least as much as men, or even more).