



The Gaze of the State and the Gaze of the Crowd: On the Construction of Female Political Subjectivity Before Law and the Imperative for Pluralist Feminism

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Abstract. Despite formal legal equality, women continue to face systematic injustice in courts across different legal systems. Existing scholarship examines legal inequality and gender inequality separately but lacks a unified theory of how female subjects' political subjectivity is constituted before the law. This paper integrates Foucault's disciplinary power, Beauvoir's othering, and Mulvey's male gaze to analyze three cross-cultural cases: *L. c. France* (institutional gaze), *Magaya v. Magaya* (customary patriarchal gaze), and *State v. Rusk* (judicial evidentiary gaze). It argues that a structural misfit exists between the law's ideally presupposed rational subject and the pre-legally constituted female subject in reality, which manifests the impaired female autonomy and thus their political subjectivity. The paper theorizes pre-legal construction of female political subjectivity as a new concept in feminist legal theory. And by proposing the new concept, the paper demonstrates that pluralist feminism is an ontological necessity and outlines future research directions for digital and AI governance.

Keywords. disciplinary power, male gaze, legal anthropology, autonomy, political subjectivity, plural feminism

1 Introduction

Across legal systems, women who seek justice are often met not with protection but with revictimization. Women, after they are insulted, appeal to the legal system, only to find themselves being examined as objects. Instead of supporting victims, the court exonerates the perpetrators. The phenomenon is widespread and persistent around the world. One must ask, why legal systems, which are meant to maintain justice, instead become injustice themselves? Where can people find the cause of this tragedy? Perhaps, when people see legal systems as products of disciplinary power that execute in liberal modern states, people see how society before law shapes the legal systems. In other words, though liberal legal systems presuppose rational, autonomous, pre-constituted subjects, women who come before the law have already been shaped by the male gaze and other disciplinary norms,

which further shape them as bodies to be managed instead of the subjects of the system, same as men.

Though there are established studies on society before law and the male gaze on females, respectively, there is a lack of a systematic theorization of this pre-legal construction, which is how disciplinary gazes shape female subjectivity before law. This paper, therefore, asks the following research questions: (1) How is female political subjectivity constructed before legal engagement? (2) How do different legal cultures reproduce gendered subjectivity through institutional gazes? (3) Why is pluralist feminism necessary to address structural misfit across legal systems? Then, this study contributes by: (1) theorizing the pre-legal constitution of female political subjectivity; (2) showing how disciplinary power produces a misfit with the law's imagined rational subject; and (3) demonstrating the necessity of pluralist feminism across diverse legal-cultural contexts.

2 Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach combined with feminist legal theory and discourse analysis.

This paper first lays out the foundational philosophies of Locke, Foucault, Beauvoir, and Mulvey, respectively, on legal systems, disciplinary power, and women's subjectivity. Then, this paper will use three precedent legal cases: *L. c. France* [1], *Magaya v. Magaya* (Zimbabwe 1999), and *State v. Rusk* [2]. Each case represents a distinct legal-cultural context (Western European civil law, postcolonial African customary law, North American common law) and a different primary gaze at work (institutional male gaze, customary patriarchal gaze, and judicial gaze). From these cases, the misfit between ideal legal design and the realistic, biased construction of subjects before they enter law is disclosed. Moreover, the diverse cultural contexts of the cases underscore the need for pluralist feminism in legal systems.

3 Women Before Legal Systems

It is necessary to first clarify that Western legal systems and non-Western legal systems differ in many aspects. The difference lies in the respective logics behind the design of legal systems under Western and non-Western cultural contexts. While Western legal systems presuppose individuals to have autonomy and free will in action, non-Western legal systems, mainly Islamic, African, and Asian legal systems, view individuals with a heavy emphasis on their relation to others or their positions in social hierarchy. In other words, western legal systems hold a more individualistic legal ideology, whereas non-western legal systems hold a more collectivistic one [3]. The fact that ideology can fundamentally shape the norm of law shows that law is more of a social practice, and it is embedded deeply in

the general culture in a place [3]. For example, the collectivistic culture of China and the Confucian philosophy of China shape the Chinese legal system to emphasize the individual's relation to others and the individual's duty in a society. And any rule in the Chinese legal system must be understood with its cultural context. This further leads to the definition of law discussed in this paper: law would be viewed as a culture, instead of merely a set of rules. Thus, in this paper, legal systems are seen as the means to practice the culture of law in different states. Though the legal systems are different among different cultures, one can still find a similarity or common goal shared by all legal systems, which can also be seen as an ideal type of legal system.

3.1 Ideal Legal Culture

John Locke can be seen as a significant figure in establishing the theoretical foundation for the rule of law in Western liberal democracies [4]. Specifically, his idea of natural law and natural rights shapes how Western legal culture thinks about rights, property, and sovereignty [5]. Natural law, according to Locke, is basically a set of moral rules that apply to everyone, everywhere, at all times. And natural rights are the rights naturally ascribed to mankind after using reason to examine the natural law. The natural rights of mankind include life, liberty, and possession [6]. And the laws should be established to sustain the commonwealth, and no one has the right to override the law. Thus, subjects' autonomy and rights are much emphasized, or even prioritized as a core defining feature, in a Lockean ideal legal system. Besides, Locke also sees the legal system as flexible in practice. Locke would argue that the legal system should include room for discretion guided by the public good [7]. This allows legal systems to have executive prerogative in emergency or exceptional cases. Thus, the executer of law, such as lawyers and judges, is given sufficient legitimacy to interpret the rules of law, being granted the power to exercise law on subjects. From the above, it can be concluded that an ideal Lockean legal culture presumes that legal subjects are autonomous, rational, and equal individuals who possess pre-political natural rights to life, liberty, and property, and who consent to a system of promulgated, standing laws enforced by a limited government, all of which exists to protect those rights rather than to create them.

3.2 Women As Autonomous Subjects

However, the Lockean ideal does not fully manifest in reality. Before further discussion, the presupposition of subjects being autonomous is already problematic. Foucault would argue that the content of subjects' autonomy is affected or even constructed by the state, and this is done by the disciplinary power, a biopower that makes live. Disciplinary power is realized through the means of surveillance, normalization, and examination. This means that under such monitoring power, individuality is no longer defined by one's distinctive character, but by how one measures up (or falls short) on a scale, creating a record of small deviations and differences [8]. The reason why such a mechanism shapes subjects' content of autonomy is that subjects will gradually internalize such discipline in order to achieve success under certain standards measured by certain manmade scales. In the end, though

subjects may feel that they are autonomously pursuing their goals, whether the desire for such goals belongs to them or not is questionable. More dangerously, subjects will not resist such force that fundamentally reshapes them because it is unlikely to notice even the presence of power when it is being conducted through the “small techniques” of power [9]. For example, students in the school will not see grades as a means to induce power over them, though assigning grades is an act that perfectly aligns with Foucault’s idea of examination and normalization. Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power shows that subjects are not necessarily autonomous because they neither have full control over their bodies (they are always under surveillance), nor do they have control over their desires.

To take the discussion further, women’s autonomy is threatened by not just disciplinary power, but also the male gaze and the social positioning that places women under society’s examination, a disciplinary power exclusively executed on women’s bodies and desires. Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, famously posited that “On ne naît pas femme: on le devient.” (One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.) [10]. In other words, although one can be born with female anatomy, the identity of being a woman, which refers to the way one is expected to act, dress, speak, feel, and think, is something society builds onto the body over time. While man is established as the absolute human norm, the *Subject*, woman, is defined in relation to man as the *Other*. Instead of claiming her own agency independent of man, the woman is essentially seen as *not a man*. Due to the systematic othering of society, though a woman initially has the potential for autonomous freedom just like a man, she nonetheless is forced to discover herself in a world where a man forces her to assume herself as the Other [11]. Othering directly diminishes a woman’s autonomy in that the woman’s freedom is constrained because she is not permitted or recognized as the primary author of her own existence.

Building on Simone de Beauvoir’s foundational claim that woman is positioned as the Other against man as the absolute Subject, Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze demonstrates how this asymmetrical relation of subject to object is structurally embedded in visual culture, where woman becomes the passive image for the active male viewer [12]. Though originally being a concept in film theory, male gaze also provides a lens to analyze broader societal pattern to use visibility to exercise power, as before the invention of moving pictures, many fields of knowledge such as anthropology, political institutions and social discourses were already “dependent to some extent on the visibility of difference and the overidentification of certain groups of people with their bodies” [13]. Specifically, the “overidentification” of bodies means that a woman’s complexity in identity and agency are erased or ignored; instead, she is treated as if her body is her entire identity. This overidentification diminishes women’s autonomy in speaking up for themselves before legal systems, in that, before any law is written, the gaze establishes a social order in which women are not recognized as self-governing subjects but exist primarily as objects to be seen, judged, and possessed. Thus, whenever a woman appeals to justice in legal systems, her words may be taken as unbelievable since women are always sexualized in the public sphere and their appearance may be used to measure their behaviors in the court, both of

which strip them of the right to pursue justice like what an autonomous subject would be able to, contrary to what Locke has pictured.

4 Cases

The contradiction between the legal ideal of John Locke and the real situation women face presents a structural misfit, which will be further demonstrated in this paper through three case studies. The cases span over three distinctive legal cultures, showing the universality of the structural misfit: European civil law in *L. c. France 2025*, postcolonial customary law in *Magaya v. Magaya 1999*, and American Common Law in *State v. Rusk 1981*.

4.1 L. c. France

L. was already vulnerable when she was sexually abused. After going through school harassment at age 9, she experienced serious psychological problems. Her background includes the following facts: withdrawal from school, and social isolation; regular violent tetany seizures resulting in 130 interventions by firefighters in her home; heavy medication for depression and anxiety (neuroleptic drugs capable of sedation); numerous suicide attempts and psychiatric hospitalizations; and self-harming behavior. The abusers were firefighters, who were aged 4 to 14 years older than L., and acted as first responders during her medical emergencies. L. trusted them. Not only did they know her personal background, including her mental issues and attempts to harm herself, but they also told her that she needed to be nice, considering the times they had aided her. More, the abusers disseminated her contact details among firefighters from multiple barracks, resulting in approximately 15 additional men sexually abusing her over two years [14].

The French legal culture in *L. c. France* is rooted in the civil law tradition, specifically the French inquisitorial system, combined with a strong secular, rationalist conception of law. This means that law is primarily derived from written codes, and judges actively investigate facts, with the investigating magistrate (*juge d'instruction*) playing a central role. Also, judges are career civil servants with significant discretion in evaluating evidence and credibility. The legal system empowers the judges in that the magistrates and the trial judges are given wide latitude to evaluate credibility without juries in many cases (except for serious crimes, where it includes lay jurors, but the professional judges still dominate legal reasoning). In *L. c. France*, this discretion allowed the judicial actors to (1) Frame L.'s psychological fragility as irrelevant or even as evidence of active participation; (2) give weight to the firefighters' narratives and discount expert psychiatric reports; (3) treat L.'s body ("morphology") as a form of testimony, claiming that her body was inviting. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) later condemned the French court for failing to apply a criminal-law system capable of punishing non-consensual sexual acts against minors.

The structural misfit in this case is apparent: French legal culture presumes subjects to be autonomous individuals, however L., before entering the legal system as a victim of

sexual abuse, was already suffering from harassment, which mutilates her cognitive ability in resulting in her depression and anxiety; legal systems are supposed to judge as objectively as possible, yet when judges are given evidentiary discretion, they are entitled to interpret the evidence according to their will. Male gaze exists before the legal system as it is instantiated through school harassment, and it exists within the legal system as it is manifested by judges' biased conjecture of L.'s morphology.

4.2 Magaya v. Magaya

Venius Magaya, a member of the Shona tribe in Zimbabwe, died intestate (without a will), leaving two wives. The first wife bore him an only daughter, Venia Magaya (the appellant). The second wife subsequently bore him three children, of whom Nakayi Shonhiwa Magaya (the respondent) was the second son. After her father's death, Venia Magaya was initially granted succession by the community court. However, the respondent applied to have this decision revoked, claiming that not all family members had been notified of the initial hearing. At the re-arranged hearing, the magistrate awarded succession to the male half-brother, arguing that as a woman, Venia could not be appointed heir to her father's estate. After Venia appealed to the Zimbabwe Supreme Court, which dismissed her appeal in a unanimous decision delivered in April 1999. The Supreme Court held the reasons for such decision as that: (1) Under Shona customary law, males are preferred to females as heirs; (2) The Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) of 1982, which granted women adult status at age 18, did not grant women "new rights to heirship and majority status that they never would otherwise have enjoyed" under customary law [15]; (3) A woman could lawfully be appointed heir only if no suitable male heirs were available. [16]

Zimbabwe operates a hybrid legal system combining three elements: general law (Roman-Dutch law inherited from colonial rule, supplemented by English common law), customary law (unwritten traditional norms of Zimbabwe's indigenous communities), and a constitutional framework (the constitution is supreme). This dual system, which is a legacy of British colonial rule, allows colonized peoples to continue practicing their traditions in private matters of family and personal law while European law governed the public sphere [17]. This means that customary law co-exists with general law, and while customary law exhibits a clear sign of sex discrimination, the Constitution of Zimbabwe exempts customary law from non-discrimination provisions in matters of inheritance and personal law [16]. The ruling was later widely condemned by Zimbabwean women's groups and international human rights organizations, and demands to permit such discrimination are made [15].

The structural misfit exists in that sex discrimination is justified, contradictory to the ideal of the legal system, and women, who should be liberated from the old customs of Zimbabwe, are still bound by the traditions, with their rights being suppressed by legal culture. The nature of the loss of autonomy due to the constraints of tradition is especially clear when a reason behind the making of some Zimbabwe customary laws, such as women can only inherit when there are no male heirs, is that women are expected to be married to another family, so they cannot care for their original family well. Thus, before women enter

the legal sphere, their identity as women in the Zimbabwe society determines that they are inferior to men, and the fact that their value is assessed in relation to men itself diminishes their autonomy. In this case, the male gaze does not directly refer to the visual scrutiny of women's bodies but the legal culture's patriarchal subject presupposition, a juridical gaze under which women's harm is neglected or even ignored.

4.3 State v. Rusk

On September 21, 1977, 21-year-old Pat met Edward Rusk at a bar in Baltimore. After closing time, Rusk asked for a ride home. Though Pat agreed, she also clearly stated that it was "just a ride". When they arrived, Pat refused repeated invitations to go into Rusk's apartment, but Rusk, in response, took Pat's car key and turned off her car ignition, nearly forcing her to go inside the apartment with him. Inside, Rusk then threatened Pat by choking her to force her into oral sex and intercourse. After Pat reported rape, Rusk was convicted of second-degree rape. The Maryland Court of Special Appeals reversed, finding insufficient evidence of force. However, later the Court reinstated the conviction, stating that physical resistance may not be necessary in judging the presence of threat[18].

The legal culture of Maryland when the case happened had the features of common law tradition, adversarial system (competing evidence presented first to the appellate courts to decide the legal sufficiency of the evidence), and corroboration of evidence (courts expected corroborating evidence—wounds, bruises, disordered clothing—to confirm lack of consent). The nature of the emphasis on evidence suggests that the victim's body is examined over and over, and the defendant's action is rather not so focused.

The structural misfit in a broader common law legal culture is that the finding of evidence involves re-victimization of the victims by examining and finding evidence from them. One appeals to justice but must be hurt again in pursuit of justice. In this case, Pat, though not directly limited by cognitive disability and social status like in the prior cases, has her autonomy threatened nonetheless as a big reason for her to comply to go inside the apartment is that she feared being alone in a foreign city. Besides, one must question, who has authorized Rusk to shut down Pat's car without Pat's agreement? Is it the patriarchal norm in society that entitles men to intervene in women's property? The answer may be elusive, yet the fact that the question can be raised tells that Pat's autonomy is still repressed since she cannot have full control over her property, which leads her to lose the possibility of autonomous choice in going inside the apartment. Furthermore, after the rape happened, the court incorporated the male gaze by emphasizing the evidence of physical resistance to declare rape. The process itself is scrutinizing Pat's body for signs of struggle. And the court also stated that Pat's fear needed to be reasonable according to the law, implying they cannot know if the raper can cast enough fear on Pat. Then, Pat's fear is deemed unreasonable if judged closely under the law. But what if the law, again as argued in the prior case, induces judicial gaze in itself? The judgments made by the courts would then be simply discrimination against women.

5 Discussion

The three cases represent three kinds of legal gazes specifically: *L. c. France* demonstrates institutional gaze, *Magaya v. Magaya* demonstrates customary gaze, and *State v. Rusk* demonstrates judicial evidentiary gaze. First, in *L. c. France*, L. was given the right to be protected by the social institutions, especially for her vulnerability. However, her vulnerability, besides granting her more care and attention from the social institutions, makes her vulnerable to rejecting the sexual abuse of the firefighters. This institutional gaze extends further to legal institutions. In the court, L.'s bodily behavior is further shamed and judged. The institutional gaze replaces legal objectivity with gendered stereotypes. L. is not seen as a vulnerable child but as a sexualized body whose worth is measured against male-defined norms of proper victim behavior (i.e., resistance, crying). The gaze operates within the judicial institution itself, making the court an active perpetrator of secondary victimization. Then, in *Magaya v. Magaya*, Magaya was granted the right to inherit her father's heritage. However, the local customs that degrade women and deny women's inherent right to be equal to men contribute to Magaya's difficulty in claiming the right she naturally has. The customary patriarchal gaze erases Magaya's legal personhood altogether. Though the discrimination against women is written to be prohibited, the plural legal frameworks cooperating locally still grant the customary law status to exercise sexism. Lastly, in *State v. Rusk*, Pat is expected to act like a victim of rape. The judges deny the fact of rape simply because Pat chose to act obediently to prevent further harm to her, which does not leave much physical evidence of resistance on her body. Pat froze and complied to survive, yet the court treated her compliance as consent. The judicial evidentiary gaze punishes women for the pre-legal knowledge that resistance can escalate violence.

Taking a closer look at the three cases, they mainly illustrate the structural misfit between the legal ideal and the legal reality for women across cultures. In other words, they together expose the universal legal injustice imposed upon women due to the multiple factors of disciplinary power, social positioning, and male gaze. Comparing the three cases, there is a commonality of legal injustice as a result of the legal gaze. To begin with, all three cases show how the ideally equal law produces unequal judgments. In all three cases, misjudgments did not happen because there is no law made to protect females: the French criminal code, Zimbabwe's Legal Age of Majority Act, and Maryland's rape statute are all formally written laws that should have resolved or prevented the discrimination against women in legal practice. In fact, having the legal codes does not entail justice because they all address the imagined woman who does not exist in reality. Although the pronoun of woman is applied, the laws nonetheless have not taken women with their specific social contexts, ignoring the social positioning and male gaze they need to face. Then, the cases show how different contexts produce different subjects. In *L. c. France*, the situation L. faced was extreme mental illness and the fragility brought by it. Whereas Venia Magaya in *Magaya v. Magaya* was facing the societal devaluation of women in Zimbabwean culture. A unitary concept of the female subject would eliminate these minor differences. This

discloses the variations of specific injustice among different female individuals. Lastly, the cases prove that legal reform alone is insufficient in alleviating women's situation in legal cultures since the power of discretion is the key to the injustice produced. Changing the law would not have helped L. unless judges also learned the judicial gaze that reads consent from a girl's body. Changing Zimbabwe's constitution would not automatically dismantle patrilineal kinship norms that constitute women as temporary. Changing Maryland's resistance requirement would not erase the pre-legal knowledge that teaches women to avoid as much resistance as possible when confronted by men. Therefore, the structural misfit between the ideal of law and the reality of law on women is a manifestation of how law is originally discriminatory against women.

From these comparisons, it is utterly clear how legal culture itself serves only as a medium for injustice to happen, yet the real sphere where justice is generated is pre-legal. Pre-legal is not a fresh new concept itself. The pre-legal is the classical democratic concept that legitimate law requires an external political authority, which can be a people, nation, or citizenry that exists before law, exercises constituent power, and whose will is the ultimate source of legal validity [19]. Specifically, in the cases presented above, it could refer to the school in which the harassment of L. happened, the overtly patriarchal Zimbabwe society that devalues Magaya as a legitimate heir, and the American society overall that disciplined Pat to fear Rusk. It is in these pre-legal spheres woman's autonomy, the individual's legal and practical capacity to make and act upon her own life choices [20], is structurally damaged.

Revisiting the philosophers' conception of women's autonomy as discussed previously, the impairment of autonomy, which exists as a priori of political subjectivity, would imply how female political subjectivity is diminished and reconstructed to be alienating in the pre-legal sphere. The autonomy of women before any legal system acts to interfere, as already argued by Foucault, Beauvoir, and Mulvey, is fundamentally reconstructed by disciplinary power and further confined by social positioning and the male gaze. Building on this, political subjectivity can be seen as the exercise of autonomy in political spheres. Political subjectivity refers to the dynamic process through which a person or a group is empowered to stake claims, to voice for themselves, and to be recognized by other institutions [21]. Essentially, political subjectivity is about how people are placed by power structures and how they actively position themselves as agents making claims. However, women are subject to power, yet unable to actively exercise power as agents, showing how their political subjectivity is suppressed. Moreover, political subjectivity is not a fixed status (like citizen or non-citizen) but a property that emerges in specific situations, through interaction with authorities and institutions. I am therefore prompted to propose the concept of pre-legal construction of female political subjectivity. Specifically, it refers to the phenomena, as presented and explained above, that females' political subjectivity is impaired, alienated, and therefore constructed before legal systems, which determines the injustice they face in legal systems. And it is also prominent from both cases and theories that pre-legal construction enacts diversity in itself. Not only does the notion of woman include diverse genders, but also the different contexts of woman and the emergent nature of political subjectivity demand consideration for pluralist possibilities. This attention to pluralist

situations of women corresponds with the appeal of pluralist feminism, which focuses on the twofold character of equality (we can understand each other) and distinction (each person is unique) [22]. The idea of pre-legal construction introduces the legal factors when considering the demand of plurality in feminism. In pursuit of justice, the pluralist contexts, including, again, the broader shared disciplinary power, social positioning, male gaze, and the specific individual minor contexts, must be taken into consideration.

6 Conclusion

To summarize the study, this paper first reviews the existing theories that were synthesized previously as an explanation for the unjust treatment of women in legal judgments and discretion. Then, the cases are compared to show: (1) the common failure of laws in treating women justly; (2) the different female subjects produced by different contexts under law; (3) the demand for a new concept to present the pre-existing impairment of female autonomy in the pre-legal sphere. Most importantly, the term “pre-legal” is explained, and the interdependent relation between autonomy and political subjectivity is argued. Based on this, bringing in Foucault, Beauvoir, and Mulvey again, I propose the concept of pre-legal construction of female political subjectivity, also underscoring the necessity of pluralist feminism.

The concept of pre-legal construction advances feminist legal theory in two ways. First, it shifts the locus of critique from legal content (discrimination in statutes) to legal ontology (the subject law presupposes). This explains why formally equal laws consistently produce unequal outcomes: the law addresses a subject that does not exist. Second, it integrates Foucauldian disciplinary power, Beauvoirian othering, and Mulvey’s male gaze into a unified framework for analyzing how pre-legal power formations shape judicial outcomes. By naming the pre-legal sphere as the primary site of female subjection, the concept opens new approaches for comparative research on gender and legal systems.

Observing the trend of society being increasingly digitalized and globalized, future studies can aim to examine: (1) how AI and Large Language Models internalize and amplify pre-legal gendered stereotypes; (2) whether digital legal governance (e.g., online dispute resolution, AI-assisted judging) reinforces or mitigates the structural misfit; and (3) how global legal governance frameworks (e.g., EU AI Act, UN cyber violence initiatives) can incorporate pre-legal analysis to design more equitable digital justice systems.

Reference

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