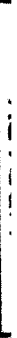


*Edited by Yasmeen Abu-Laban*

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**Gendering the Nation-State**  
Canadian and Comparative  
Perspectives



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## 4

# Assembling Women, Gendering Assemblies

*Linda Trimble*

To this day, women remain markedly under-represented in national and subnational legislatures. The goal of gender parity, achieving roughly equal proportions of men and women in elected representative institutions of government, remains rather remote in most parts of the world. Although some countries, notably the Nordic nations, approximate gender equality in their national assemblies, most reflect the sorts of trends that pull down the world average to a mere 17.4 percent of women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2007). Women's representation in the US Congress is just below the average. Western nations with Westminster-style parliaments feature slightly better representation for women, as they comprise 20 percent of the lower House in the UK, 25 percent in Australia, and 32 percent in New Zealand. In Canada, despite steady progress from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, the feminist electoral project has stalled. As of May 2005, women held an average of only 20 percent of the seats in Canada's federal, provincial, and territorial legislatures.

The presence of more women "in politics" offers symbolic inclusion and disrupts the social construction of politics as a man's game. When the elected representatives are universally or predominantly white males, the gender order may remain invisible in debates, and thus the sex and race privilege enjoyed by white men largely uninterrogated. But there is more to the case for women's representation in formal politics than simply adding women for the sake of seeing them in places where they are not usually seen (or heard). Those who have spent considerable time and effort trying to answer the question of what difference it makes to elect women tend not to be satisfied with the argument that descriptive representation is good enough representation. Descriptive representation does not necessarily encompass the act of representing or guarantee the outcomes of the representative process. Although the "representative should not be thought of as a substitute for those he or she represents" (Iris Marion Young, 2000: 133), the representative

is expected to represent something. Hannah Pitkin's (1967) distinction between descriptive/symbolic/passive representation and substantive/active representation remains persuasive. Thus, gender parity is advanced on the belief that female legislators are likely to engender political discourses and public policy outcomes by voicing women's policy concerns and supporting measures that improve the status of women. Numbers-based theories of women's political impact, including the critical mass theory, posit that when elected women exceed a numerical threshold, their presence can begin to make a difference for women. According to these theories, descriptive representation (standing as women) initiates substantive representation (standing for women). Assembling women in legislatures, therefore, is argued to constitute the most effective way of gendering legislative assemblies.

In this chapter I argue that the imputed link between descriptive representation and substantive representation needs to be interrogated, not least because it hinges on the problematic assumption that there is a set of coherent "women's interests" that can be identified, consolidated, and acted on. The idea that electing more women makes a substantive policy difference for women also implies that women are useful and valuable as legislators only when they are representing women's discrete and identifiable interests and opinions. This is dangerous as well, because it supposes that female legislators have sufficient autonomy and structural opportunities to engender policy discussions and shape legislative outcomes accordingly.

In what follows, I take a four-fold approach. First, I address the weaknesses of numbers-based theories of representation. Second, I discuss the complexity of representation. Since the nature of the legislative system is relevant to the quality of representation, I focus in the third section on the limits of parliamentary governance. I conclude with a call for greater attention to complexity and context in addressing representation. The study of "women in politics" needs to complicate how we think about what is being represented, the activities associated with representation, the various contexts within which the practices of representation occur, and the relationships between them.

### **Linking Descriptive and Substantive Representation: Numbers-Based Theories**

Can legislative assemblies be "gendered" by assembling more women within them? Numbers-based theories suggest that they can. Karen Beckwith (2003: 2) puts forward that there are two types of sex-ratio theories – that is, two approaches to linking numbers of women legislators to legislative behaviour and outcomes: critical mass theory and proportions theory. Each will be discussed in turn.

### **Critical Mass Theory**

The concept of a critical mass is borrowed from physics, where it refers to the minimum mass of a particular fissionable nuclide in a given volume required to sustain a nuclear chain reaction. Until that minimum mass is reached, nothing happens; once a certain proportion is attained, the results are explosive. Translated into the political realm, critical mass theory suggests that female legislators, like nuclear particles, are unlikely or unable to instigate changes until they have more than a token presence. As Beckwith (2003) explains, critical mass is an independent variable measured by women's presence in national or subnational legislatures. Group ratio, the percentage of women in legislatures, is believed to trigger policy change when it reaches a certain level.

Conceptual and practical problems with critical mass theory have been itemized by Donley Studlar and Ian McAllister (2002) and by Karen Beckwith (2003). The idea of a critical mass of women in politics is as yet untheorized, as there is little rationale for the relationship between the independent variable (threshold number of women legislators) and dependent variables (behaviour and policy changes). It is simply assumed that once women reach the requisite threshold of 15 or 20 or 30 percent, they can begin to stimulate the chain reaction leading to more woman-friendly processes and outcomes. As well, a lack of consensus on the critical cut-off or threshold point makes critical mass theory difficult to operationalize. Although many scholars advocate a critical threshold range of 15 to 30 percent (Beckwith, 2003), the percentage needed to constitute a critical mass ranges from 10 to 35 percent or even higher (Childs, 2004a: 4; Trimble and Arscott, 2003: 126). Yet studies indicate that transformations can occur when women are represented at numbers below even the 15 percent threshold (Thomas, 1994; Trimble, 1993, 1997). Female legislators have been able to make modest changes to legislative style, discourse, and policy outcomes by engaging in "critical acts" even when they are not part of a critical mass (Dahlerup, 1988). Linda Trimble (1993, 1997) found this to be the case in the Alberta legislature, where the election of a handful of women to the opposition benches in the late 1980s had a limited but discernable effect on both the content and style of legislative discussions.

The sorts of effects thought to be activated by a critical mass of female legislators read like a wish-list of feminist political outcomes, including increased representation of women in legislatures, enhanced opportunities to enact policy, greater levels of discussion of women's issues in legislative debates, improved civility in legislative behaviour, feminization of public policy, and woman-friendly policy outcomes (Beckwith, 2003: 6). Why these consequences ought to be fostered by a specified proportion of women

legislators rather than, say, a particular ideological or partisan configuration in the assembly remains unexplained. As well, the assumption that electing more women facilitates positive outcomes for women overlooks the possibility of a backlash or negative reaction to the increased proportion of women (Yoder, 1991). For instance, Lyn Kathlene (1994) found that in the United States the increased representation of women in state legislative committees prompted male committee members to become more verbally aggressive towards their female colleagues.

Although critical mass theory has enjoyed considerable intellectual currency, empirical evidence does not strongly support it (Studlar and McAllister, 2002: 23-4). Studies illustrate that even when women are elected in numbers within the posited critical mass threshold of 15 to 30 percent, their impact is considerably more gradual, indirect, and mediated than critical mass theory suggests (Childs, 2004a; Grey, 2002; Studlar and McAllister, 2002; Towns, 2003; Trimble, 1997, 1998). The strongest corroboration of the theory comes from the United States, where legislators do have considerable autonomy from partisan and executive strictures (see Swers, 2001: 173-75). Focusing on twelve American state legislatures, Sue Thomas (1991, 1994) examined the effects of increased numbers of women on legislative style and process as well as public policy outcomes. She found that electing more women did shape policy priorities and outcomes in areas related to family and children, but had little impact on legislative procedures. Yet Thomas argued that when women organize into separate caucuses and mobilize resources and strategies in their party, they can have an impact on public policy even when they form less than 15 to 20 percent of the legislators. Likewise, other studies of state legislatures in the United States found that a critical mass of elected women did not predict support for politics of concern to women or greater conformity in attitudes among elected women (see Studlar and McAllister, 2002: 237).

Female legislators in the United States have more autonomy than those in parliamentary systems because weaker parties and the separation of powers leave them less constrained by party discipline and executive control. Thus, it is unsurprising that tests of the critical mass theory in parliamentary regimes (with strong party discipline and the fusion of executive and legislative power) have proven less supportive of the notion of a critical numerical threshold. Sandra Burt and Elizabeth Lorenzin's (1997) study of Ontario legislative debates during the early 1990s, when women comprised 22 percent of the legislators, found that party was a better predictor of willingness to discuss women's issues, as there were instances when male legislators were as likely as their female counterparts to discuss daycare, employment equity, and abortion rights. Trimble's (1993, 1997, 1998) analysis of attention to women's perspectives and issues in Alberta legislative de-

affiliation, ideological context, and legislative role. As Donley Studlar and Ian McAllister (2002: 238) summarize, several studies "have searched in vain for threshold or critical mass effects on agenda-setting, legislative voting, legislative behaviour and policy outcomes in various countries." Their own cross-national longitudinal study featured twenty countries and examined the period between 1950 and 2000 in an effort to test the hypothesis that electing a critical mass of women will accelerate increases in female representation in legislatures. According to Studlar and McAllister's analysis, the fact that women's increased electoral representation was incremental suggests it did not depend on a critical mass (247).

### Proportions Theory

Proportions theory is more flexible than critical mass theory as it simply maintains that numbers do matter when a particular group, such as women, has minority status within an organization. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1977) work on proportionality and group dynamics indicated that the ratio of women in male-dominated business organizations has an effect on organizational and individual behaviours. When women are present in small numbers, they are tokenized, isolated, treated as anomalous. As the proportion of women increases, their isolation decreases, and their power and ability to organize based on their gender improves. Proportionality, or sex-ratio, arguments thus posit a relationship between numbers and outcomes, with larger numbers of women legislators generating at least the possibility of more representation of women's interests and better policy outcomes for women. Kanter found that when women were present in proportions below 15 percent, they faced pressures to conform by adapting and demonstrating loyalty to the organization. Scholars who have applied the proportionality argument to legislatures therefore look for change when women exceed the 15 percent threshold (see, for instance, Bystydzienski, 1995). However, this proportion is not assumed to be a magic number or particle accelerator; rather, it is seen as the minimum necessary for women to overcome the constraints outlined above.

Proportions theory allows for the possibility that the relationship between numbers and outcomes is neither linear nor unidirectional. Larger proportions of women can generate a backlash or negative reaction, especially when coupled with factors such as populist, anti-feminist rhetoric (Grey, 2006) or newness such as the sudden entry of a group of women elected for the first time (Beckwith, 2003: 14). For instance, the heightened media attention to and derisory treatment of "Blair's Babes," as the New Labour women elected to the British House of Commons in 1997 were labelled, arguably constrained their ability to rebel against the dictates of the party whip (Beckwith, 2003: 14; Childs, 2004b: 163). However, Sarah Childs

legislative activity, that of signing Early Day Motions on matters of particular concern to women, such as the removal of the value-added tax on sanitary products.

Measuring the extent to which increasing percentages of women in parliaments affect women legislators' willingness and capacity to speak and/or vote for woman-friendly policies, even in defiance of the party line, to institute policy changes that benefit women, or to organize gender-based alliances, requires cross-national and longitudinal analysis (Beckwith, 2003: 12). Such analysis needs to be complicated by consideration of intervening variables: the political opportunity structure, the nature of party competition and party ideology, institutional design, and even episodic factors such as the backlash against feminism come to mind here. Those who seek to test proportions theory should be wary of abstracting female representatives from the political and perhaps personal contexts within which they perform the act of representation. As Childs (2006: 162) argues, "An audit of the effect of particular women representatives ... will need to map the multiplicity of spaces within which women act, acknowledge the different roles that women representatives may have – as ordinary representatives, as members of a governing party or parliamentary actors – and contextualize them within the networks in which they operate, both within and outside Parliament."

For example, a particular opportunity structure fostered the "critical acts" supporting representation of (some) women's issues and opinions in Alberta from 1986 to 1993. The strong opposition presence posed a challenge to what was previously almost a one-party legislature; the women's movement in Alberta was active and vocal; the government was vulnerable to critique on a range of policy issues of particular concern to many women; and a handful of newly elected female Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) identified with the policy goals of the Alberta women's movement (Trimble, 1993, 1997). In contrast, the election of the Klein Conservatives in 1993 instituted an entirely different legislative and ideological milieu. Record numbers of women were elected in the Klein years, exceeding 25 percent in 1997, but the Conservative government has pursued a neoliberal policy agenda, reducing funding and support for the women's movement, implementing deep cuts to welfare state programs, and obliterating the Alberta Advisory Council on the Status of Women (Dacks, Green, and Trimble, 1995). Because most of the female MLAs in Alberta were on the governing party benches, the increased numerical presence of women has been unable to prevent policy shifts harmful to many women, which supports Lise Gotell and Janine Brodie's (1991: 55) observation that "mainstream political parties can avoid hard programmatic commitments to the women's movement while being seen to be appealing to a women's constituency by recruiting highly visible and usually like-minded women to the parties' legislative ranks" (also see Sawyer, 2000: 363, 367).

### The Trouble with Numbers Theories

Critical mass theory is unsupported and largely unsupported, but proportions theory holds more promise as an approach to gauging the effect of numbers on legislative behaviours and outcomes in a manner sensitive to partisan and ideological factors. However, there remain four significant methodological and theoretical problems with numbers-based theories, including proportions theory. The first lies with the measurement of the dependent variables. Greater proportions of women are thought to prompt more, and more effective, representation of "women's interests." Quantifying the impact of numbers either requires stripping women's diverse and sometimes conflicting experiences and policy demands down to a rather essentialist and exclusionary set of policy ideas or it means conflating women's interests with feminist policy demands. Second, even if women's interests could be reduced to something measurable, it is difficult to control for intervening variables. Ideological and institutional contextual factors, not least the male-dominated nature of parliamentary politics, provide overlapping and often simultaneous opportunities and constraints. This leads to the third problem with numbers-based theories. Linking numbers of women to outcomes for women places an undue and unfair representational burden on the shoulders of female legislators and suggests that male legislators need not concern themselves with representing fully half of the population. Finally, the measurement of substantive representation focuses on policy outcomes and activities that take place in legislatures, overlooking the rich possibilities in other modes and sites of representation and obscuring the relationships between constituents and legislators.

### Representing Women

The theoretical and empirical research on the question of what, precisely, is being represented when we refer to the substantive representation of women indicates how difficult it is to define, let alone measure, the concept. The very category "women's interests" has been challenged for its homogenizing and essentialist underpinnings (Butler, 1990; Dobrowolsky, 2001: 244-45; Spelman, 1988; Iris Marion Young, 1990a, 1994). Iris Marion Young (2000: 136) presents a cogent argument "against the claim that structural social groups should be thought of in a substantial logic that would define them according to a set of common attributes all their members share and that constitute the identities of these members." Women share neither interests nor opinions. According to Young, interests are those matters that affect the life prospects of individuals. Because of their intersecting locations, individual women can bear multiple and even conflicting interests, and different women's interests most certainly diverge. Opinions are "the principles, values and priorities held by a person as these bear on and condition his or her judgement about what policies should be pursued and ends sought"

(135). Again, women's opinions are no less diverse than men's. Women's various and even inconsistent experiences, needs, and priorities cannot, therefore, be understood as a particular fixed set of identifiable political goals. Political interests are of course gendered, but the social construction of gender is constantly under renovation in ways that reflect class, ethnicity, sexuality, and bounded physical locations, among many other such factors (Towns, 2003: 5).

Attempts to identify women's interests as internally consistent shared political goals run up against the reality of women's diversity. For instance, Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris (2003: 88) accept the concept of women's interests as controversial but for the sake of measurement follow Lena Wängnerud (2000) in defining women's shared interests as lying in policies designed to increase women's autonomy. This definition of women's interests may obscure real political differences between women. There is no consensus within feminist thought or the women's movement about what constitutes women's autonomy, never mind the appropriate role of the state in promoting independence for differently situated women. Indeed, soul-searching internal debates about what is represented by and through the women's movement have exposed the partiality of feminist policy goals and organizing (Mandell, 1998; Yeatman, 1993: 228). For example, in Canada mainstream feminist organizations have been criticized for articulating an incomplete liberal-individualist perspective on women's autonomy, and for failing to recognize the perspectives of women from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean (and, arguably, Aboriginal women) who look to the family and community as a source of strength and support (Agnew, 1996). There are undeniably some policy areas in which women's autonomy is clearly the centre of the issue, such as sexual assault, stalking, and domestic violence. Even if there is agreement on the gendered nature of these issues (and this is actually contested in Canada), solutions to the problem of violence against women differ based on the experiences of the women who are abused, the interests at stake, and the opinions of those seeking policy change (see Agnew, 1996: 54-55). As Iris Marion Young (2000: 122) observes, the "unifying process required by group representation tries to freeze fluid relations into a unified identity, which can re-create oppressive exclusions."

Another approach to operationalizing "women's interests" is to measure the differences between the attitudes and behaviours of women and men on the grounds that "women as legislators will only make a difference if women really are different from men" (Cowell-Meyers, 2001: 58). Lovenduski and Norris (2003: 89) assert that the politics of presence is measurable only if and when "women and men politicians differ in their underlying interests." It seems to me that defining substantive representation of women's interests as female legislators thinking and acting differently from men is

women and men share interests and opinions. For example, the political goals of Aboriginal women may reflect their gendered experiences within the context of a larger project of self-determination for First Nations (Green, 2001). In these and other circumstances, it may well be the case that when "men join forces with women to promote policies of sexual equality" (Phillips, 1995: 23), women's policy goals are more forcefully and effectively represented. Moreover, as Childs (2006) points out, the absence of sex differences in representatives' attitudes and behaviour may not mean that women are ineffective representatives of women's interests; it may actually signal convergence between the sexes and suggest that male legislators are learning from the ideas and policy goals of their female colleagues.

It seems plausible to bypass this conceptual and methodological conundrum by measuring the representation of *feminist* opinions and interests in legislative spaces. Even though many women do not choose to identify with feminism or share the policy goals of the women's movement (O'Neill, 2003), it can be argued that non-feminist women benefit from some of the substantive outcomes of feminist representation. It is useful to determine whether feminist values, opinions, and interests are manifested in the attitudes and behaviours of male and female legislators, but Manon Tremblay and Réjean Pelletier's (2000: 382) assertion that substantive representation of women is synonymous with feminist representation must be challenged on at least two grounds. First, representation of feminist opinions and interests can be carried out by men, so if this is the goal, there is no need to argue for gender parity in legislatures, or to test proportions theories. Men can articulate feminist ideas and push for the policy goals of the women's movement. In fact, Canadian studies have shown that party is often a better predictor of feminist consciousness than is the sex of the legislator (Tremblay, 1992; Tremblay and Boivin, 1990-91; Tremblay and Pelletier, 2000). If electing feminist men is "better" for women than electing non-feminist or anti-feminist women, then it is acceptable for women to be numerically under-represented in political office. The electoral project should, according to this view, shift focus from electing more women to electing more feminists, rendering the goal of gender parity beside the point. Indeed, non-feminist or anti-feminist women will not regard themselves as well served by legislators with feminist goals, be they male or female. In this way, women's various lived experiences, interests, and opinions demand representational diversity, including ideological diversity (Trimble and Arscott, 2003: 152).

Young has developed the concept of social perspective to avoid both essentialism and the trap of homogenizing women's interests. Social perspective reflects the collective "experience, history and social knowledge" derived from different social positioning (Iris Marion Young, 2000: 136). To use



certain questions, reports certain kinds of experience, recalls a particular line of narrative history, or expresses a certain way of regarding the positions of others" (140). Suzanne Dovi (2002) criticizes Young for abandoning the idea of group-based representation, asserting that it is important not to give up on the possibility that historically disadvantaged groups be represented by their own members. However, Young (2000, 137) does not in fact argue against this eventuality. Indeed, she maintains that people who share a social perspective may not always agree on interests or opinions, but they may find an affinity for the other person's way of describing his or her experiences and discover common starting points for discussion. There is evidence that female legislators do recognize their gendered social locations and their responsibility for representing their gender-based differences. In response to Tremblay's (1992, 2003) questions about their role, a majority of female MPs in the Quebec National Assembly and the Canadian House of Commons interviewed in the late 1980s and early 1990s said they had a special mandate to represent women. Women in the US Congress are inclined to see women as a unique part of the constituency and to believe they should represent women's interests in all aspects of legislative activity (Swers, 2001: 175). More than 80 percent of New Labour women MPs elected to Westminster in 1997 considered symbolic representation of women an important dimension of their legislative role (Childs, 2004b: 58). Research conducted in a wide variety of Western industrialized nations shows that most women politicians see their sex as posing unique representational responsibilities.

Contemporary feminist theory has contested the idea of gender as an individually situated identity (Weldon, 2002). In general, theoretical and empirical literature alike indicates that we cannot expect a few women, or even a "critical mass" of women, to stand for all women, given the complex, overlapping, sometimes contradictory, and often internally contested nature of their interests. So, though it is possible that elected women can and do represent their gendered positioning in their own ways, ways that may be neither observable nor quantifiable, the multiplicity and complexity of women's experiences and interests cannot be adequately represented by individual female legislators. After all, we do not expect male legislators to reflect a male gender consciousness in any identifiable or coherent way (though their gender identity tends to be taken for granted in male-dominated legislatures). That legislators share a social perspective because of their sex may lead them to see their representative role as gendered, but it does not infer that they will agree about opinions or policy goals. It is possible to look for representation of gender-based perspectives within the activities of representation. However, the articulation, and perhaps even the realization, of social perspective is both an ongoing process that cannot be captured in a

single representative act and a collective endeavour that cannot be undertaken by an individual representative.

### **Bringing In the State: The Legislative Context**

Since "political institutions are part of the construction of knowledge and meanings surrounding sex and thus help produce and reproduce gender," it is important to understand legislators as positioned within and influenced by the institutional context (Towns, 2003: 6). The formal and informal norms and assumptions embedded in legislatures assign different meanings to different actors and configure relationships between political actors. In short, political institutions are gendered. Gender cannot be disentangled from the act of representation itself or from the representational context, both of which play a role in constructing social and political understandings of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and other identities. The relationship between representatives and their institutional environment must therefore be explored, since the organization of various branches of the state varies. In what follows I will concentrate on the constraints imposed by parliamentary systems.

Greater proportions of female legislators are thought to contain the possibility of more and more substantive discussion of women and their interests in legislative debates, and the feminization of public policy analysis and outcomes (Beckwith, 2003: 6). However, as noted, women in parliamentary systems arguably face more constraints than opportunities for discussing women's diverse interests and meeting their differential needs through policy decisions than do those in presidential systems. In Canada, for instance, parliamentary parties are strong and disciplined, and party whips exert tight control over everything from seating arrangements to speaking opportunities, committee assignments, and voting decisions. At the federal level, the New Democratic Party has on occasion allowed its members to take oppositional stands according to principle, and the Canadian Alliance Party was on record as permitting its representatives to break with the party when constituents' wishes clearly diverged from the official position. But these are exceptions to the rule; in general, in both federal and provincial legislatures, behaviour during debates and votes is focused on maintaining a cohesive party stance. Expecting women to break ranks or defy party whips by voting together on policy issues of concern to women is therefore unreasonable. The high-profile aspects of the job – committee work, debate, and question period – are similarly bound by the partisan straightjacket. The sorts of opportunities that do exist for legislators to escape from the tight confines of party discipline, such as private members' bills, private members' notices of motion, and MPs' statements, typically have little policy impact and negligible effects on the activities of the House (Tremblay, 1998:

442). Weekly caucus meetings offer the greatest opportunity for legislators to speak their minds because they are designed to air disagreements and resolve them so the party can present a united front in the House. However, unless the party style and ideology allow for articulation of diverse interests and opinions, female legislators will be constrained by their peers and/or their own ambitions. For example, Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett was chastised by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien in caucus for publicly criticizing the gender composition of a newly shuffled cabinet (Trimble and Arscott, 2003: 4-5).

Parliamentary systems such as Canada's, which feature executive dominance, concentrate policy-making power in the hands of the political executive. This means two things: first, cabinet ministers will dominate legislative speaking opportunities and, second, they will be overrepresented in debates (see Trimble, 1997). Backbench and opposition party women cannot speak at will, and in fact their opportunities for participation in debates, question period, and the like are controlled by party whips and House leaders. Expecting greater proportions of elected women to transform the content of legislative speeches is unrealistic under most circumstances. Trimble's (1997: 139) longitudinal content analysis of legislative debates in Alberta found that though the appearance of more opposition women MLAs increased the attention to gender-related public policy issues in the late 1980s and early 1990s, much of the discussion was led by cabinet ministers. Tremblay's (1998: 457) content analysis of debates conducted during the first session of the thirty-fifth Canadian parliament revealed that female parliamentarians spoke twice as often about women's issues as did their male counterparts, but this did not add up to very much discussion of women's policy concerns overall.

Additionally, women in cabinet may have their hands on the levers of policy, but backbenchers and opposition members cannot be expected to have much, if any, control over the policy agenda. Thus, expecting a large influx of women to make a difference to policy regardless of their legislative role is bound to be met with disappointment. Canadian women MPs, like their British counterparts, see parliamentary procedures and conventions as posing significant structural and attitudinal barriers to the substantive representation of gender-related issues (Tremblay, 2003: 228-29; Childs, 2004b: 187-90). This is not to say that female legislators have no say; in fact, there are some illuminating examples of women strategizing within and even across party lines to instigate policies to improve the status of women. In the British House of Commons, female Labour MPs and ministers worked together with women civil servants and activists to initiate and ensure the passage of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act in 2001 (Childs, 2006). In Canada in the early 1990s, a subcommittee

from three political parties; its members were therefore able to advance a series of important policy initiatives, including greater firearms control, improvements to sexual assault legislation, and new breast cancer screening protocols (Lisa Young, 1997: 93-98).

Female legislators can learn the rules and can even strategize around them, for parliamentary procedure is transparent and knowable. Informal rules, performative norms, and behavioural conventions tend to be covert and the barriers they pose more difficult to overcome (Puwar, 2004). Canadian and British MPs cite the "old boys' network" as a problematic component of the informal parliamentary game (Tremblay, 2003; Childs, 2006). Canadian legislatures have been described as "men's clubs" that women enter at the risk of being ridiculed, harassed, mocked, and derided (see Sharpe, 1994: 34-52; Trimble and Arscott, 2003: 101). British Labour women MPs interviewed by Childs (2006) said that masculinist institutional norms and the dominant adversarial style of political debate made them feel uncomfortable in the House. Indeed, a magazine article called "Put Off by Parliament" referred to the blood sport of Canadian national politics as "Ottawa's macho game" (Delacourt, 2001).

The hierarchical and closed atmosphere of legislatures is poignantly illustrated by the following story. In the mid-1990s I was invited to give a presentation about my work on women in the Alberta legislature to a small group of former and sitting Alberta women politicians from three different political parties, on the condition of confidentiality about the group's members, name, and purpose. I was told that it had taken over a year of monthly meetings for these women to overcome partisan barriers and develop relationships of trust and support. The group invited me to join the meetings, which continued for another year, and whose discussions revealed a great deal about the institutional context for elected women. The clandestine nature of the group's name and meeting place illustrated how very dangerous it is for women to voice their perspectives in a manner that may be perceived as disruptive of political conventions and "normal" practices such as party loyalties. It also shows how deeply isolating, alienating, and damaging it can be for women to work in legislatures; as Nirmal Puwar (2004: 77) writes, the "costs of their existence, the assimilative pressure to conform to gendered 'fictions' and legitimate/imperial ways and means of parliament" take their toll on political intruders. Indeed, the Alberta group provided much-needed support and a safe place to reflect on personal and political matters. Not only did the sitting MLAs find understanding, advice, and encouragement, the retired politicians were also able to re-examine their experiences and in some cases recognize them as intensely gendered.

Given the extremely partisan, highly structured, and rule-bound nature of parliamentary politics, why would we expect the admission of a few more

inscribed customs and practices? It is not clear exactly why the increasing proportion of women should have this sort of effect on parliamentary procedures (Grey, 2002: 19). Such change is unlikely without fundamental alterations to the institutions themselves (see Guttman, 2005; Warren, 2005). In the absence of democratic institutional reforms, expecting larger proportions of women legislators to represent women's diverse interests in an authentic, passionate, and effective manner is profoundly unfair to the women who are elected.

### Rethinking Representation

Numbers-based theories reflect the expectation that female legislators must expand their rather arduous task of representing their party, constituency, country, and conscience to somehow speak for "all women" in a manner that brings obvious and measurable results. To suggest that more women ought to be elected *because* they will make certain changes and achieve certain goals is to assert that female legislators must accept a larger representational role than their male counterparts and must battle against all the factors that constrain the realization of this special role. As argued above, women cannot be regarded as a unified group with a common set of policy opinions and interests, and the institutional environment may work against the sorts of transformations that women are assumed able to implement. Insisting that the only valid representational acts *by* women, *for* women are those revealing, in a tangible way, women's discrete policy interests thus places an unreasonable burden on women, given the operating assumptions of parliaments, for example, which are structured to configure interests along partisan, regional, and/or ideological lines. The case for gender parity should not, therefore, be based on quantifiable outcomes. If women are elected in sizeable numbers and little or nothing happens by way of discernable policy changes "for women," they are seen as derelict in their duties when in fact the explanation may lie elsewhere.

Measuring the substantive representation of women as the expression of female legislators' attitudes, activities, and determination to challenge institutional norms on behalf of women requires female representatives to serve as delegates, acting according to the mandate of the diverse and arguably internally inconsistent female constituency they are expected to serve. This perspective does not burden male politicians with similar duties; rather, it frees them to act as trustees exercising independent judgment about the right thing to do under the particular circumstances. Moreover, linking descriptive representation of women to substantive representation for women removes men from a key part of the equation. It releases male legislators from the responsibility of ensuring that women's various experiences are taken into account, and that their policy needs are considered when mak-

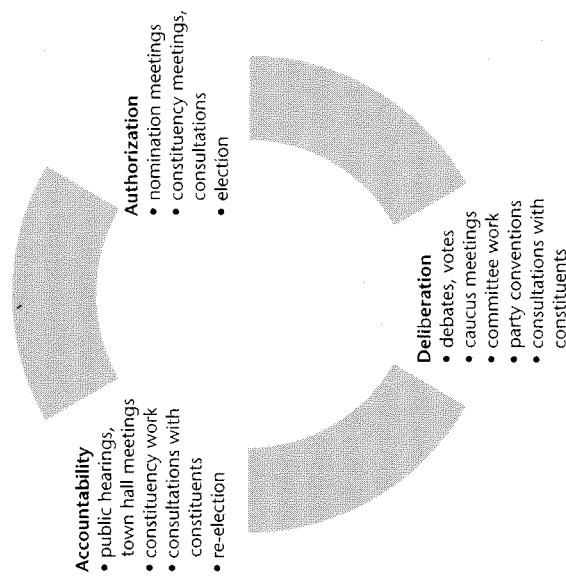
men from their duty to represent half of their constituents. However, all politicians "must be held accountable for their contribution to improving gender equity" (Sawer, 2000: 376).

Suggesting that electing women matters only when female politicians change the style or business of politics not only creates unrealistic expectations for female politicians, it contracts the very meaning of representation. As Iris Marion Young (2000: 125) argues, we need to conceptualize representation outside a logic of identity, for such a logic requires the official to somehow "stand for" the entire will of the people she serves. The classic debates about representation reflect false polarizations, with the official as *either* a delegate *or* a trustee, *either* authorized to act as she wishes *or* held accountable to those she represents. Instead, as Young argues, representation is a complex and mediated series of relationships between members of a constituency, between the citizens and the representative, and between representatives in decision-making bodies (such as legislatures) (128-33). These are interrelated, linked through space and time and history: "Representation is a cycle of anticipation and recollection between constituents and representative, in which discourse and action to each moment ought to bear traces of the others" (129). The official is, or ought to be, authorized by constituents through processes of nomination, constituency and party-level discussions about policy, and elections. Ideally, these processes are participatory and inclusively deliberative (see Dobrowolsky, 2001: 243). In legislatures, representatives should not merely express a mandate, such as a party platform, but participate in meaningful discussions and debates with their peers. At the same time, an elected official should, while deliberating, recall the discussions involved in the processes of authorization, not least because she will need to relate and justify them to the constituents in the processes of accountability. Practices of accountability, presently very weak, typically centre on the blunt instrument of re-election, but Iris Marion Young (2000: 133) feels these should be strengthened by representative activities "where constituents call representatives to account over and above re-authorizing them" and "through which citizens discuss with one another and with representatives their evaluation of policies representatives have supported."

Young's notion of representation as a plural process intrinsic to strong democracy offers two key points for this evaluation of numbers-based theories. First, it shows that representation cannot be reduced to particular attitudes or acts by elected officials. Instead, it is a series of interrelated activities and relationships. Knowing what a politician said about or how she voted on a particular issue may tell us very little about the nature and quality of the representational work she is doing. Second, the activities of representation are much more extensive than the words uttered and deeds enacted in

Figure 4.1

## Iris Marion Young's concept of representation as a relationship



in Figure 4.1. It indicates that there are multiple sites, many of them private and inaccessible to the academic researcher, where the gendered nature of the relationships can be realized. It also shows that in measuring the strength and effectiveness of representation, it is not necessary to abandon the plurality of the represented, or of the representatives themselves, for that matter; rather, we can see these multiplicities as properly expressed within the relationships between constituents and legislators.

### Conclusion

It is fair to argue that descriptive representation in and of itself is a shallow and insufficient vision of gender-based representation. Representation is an activity, a process, a job, a performance. Saying "she doesn't represent me" conveys something meaningful about the ideas and actions of both representative and represented, as well as regarding the relationships between them. That group-based identities, standpoints, and affiliations have the potential to shape legislative deliberations is undeniable. Without representation of the needs and perspectives of oppressed and disadvantaged groups in legislatures, "deliberations and outcomes will most likely reflect the goals of the dominant groups" (Young, 1990b: 184). Ideas cannot be

detached from the bodies that conceive, utter, and act on them. However, numbers-based theories need to be complicated by consideration of women's diversity, institutional norms and processes, ideological and social movement contexts, and the multi-varied nature of political representation itself. As Judith Squires (1999: 185) notes, no "single form of representation will be sophisticated enough to represent complex subjects in all their aspects."

Even though numbers-based theories can be challenged on both conceptual and empirical grounds, it remains possible to make a strong case for assembling women in representative institutions and including them in all manner of representative practices. Arguments for enhancing the descriptive representation of women with a goal of gender parity should centre on the need to speak for women *as* women (Mansbridge, 1999; Williams, 1998). Jane Arcsott and Linda Trimble (1997: 4) distinguish between representation *by* women and that *for* women, arguing that though men can participate in the latter, they "cannot claim power for women and they cannot hold power in women's stead." Those who do not count themselves among the elected decision-makers are political minors, subjected to the rule of others, infantilized as subjects rather than included as full citizens in democratic deliberations (Phillips, 1995: 39). The entry into elected political institutions of those who have been excluded or marginalized is a crucial gesture of recognition, "a public acknowledgement of equal value" and of the capacity for self-government (Phillips, 1995: 40). For all of these reasons, and arguably many others based on justice and democratic legitimacy, women ought to be represented in numbers roughly proportionate to their presence in the population, regardless of how they conduct themselves as public officials or what interests they serve. The goal of gender parity in legislative assemblies need not be linked to specific outcomes such as more civility in legislatures, progressive policies, or institutional redesign.

Iris Marion Young (2000: 128) suggests that rather than construing "the normative meaning of representation as properly standing for the constituents, we should evaluate the process of representation according to the character of the relationship between the representative and the constituents." This view, echoed strongly by Alexandra Dobrowolsky's (2001: 243) call for "democratic expansionism," suggests fruitful avenues for future research. Connections between representatives and constituents are facilitated by constituency work, especially in non-proportional electoral systems. Childs' (2001: 178-80) interviews with Labour MPs revealed the symbolic and experiential links between constituents and their female representatives. Research on the substantive representation of women should therefore examine the collective practices that might allow politically marginalized social perspectives to be voiced and debated both inside and outside parliamentary spaces. As well, Young's relational view of representation prompts expansion of the

research question. In wondering how women can be both corporeally and substantively represented in legislatures, we should also ask how democratic political institutions themselves can be reshaped to become more consultative and inclusive in their processes, more thoughtful and thorough in their deliberations, and more considerate of a diversity of perspectives in their outcomes.

## 5 Feminist Ideals versus Bureaucratic Norms: The Case of Feminist Researchers and the Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies

*Francesca Scala*

Reproductive technologies have become one of the most contentious issues facing governments in Europe and North America. Infertility treatments such as in vitro fertilization, assisted insemination, and surrogacy challenge prevailing values and practices surrounding reproduction, parenthood, and the family. Much media attention and public debate has also focused on the ethical and moral issues raised by the use of embryonic stem cells in scientific-medical research. In Canada, the most vocal critics of these technologies have been feminist researchers and organizations. In the 1980s, several feminist academics and activists formed the Canadian Citizens' Coalition for a Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies to lobby the federal government to appoint an inquiry into the social and ethical implications of these technologies for Canadian society and for women in particular. In 1989, Ottawa appointed the Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies. The commission recruited several self-described feminists to participate in its research program as contract researchers and staff employees.

This chapter examines feminists' engagement with the Canadian state in the production of policy-relevant knowledge on the issue of reproductive technologies. It explores the challenges feminist researchers faced in reconciling their role as advocates for women's health with the bureaucratic demands for "neutrality" and "impartial" policy advice. Drawing from feminist research on the bureaucracy and interviews conducted with feminist researchers, staff members, and several commissioners, the chapter argues that a number of normative and institutional factors undermined attempts by feminist researchers to bring a gendered perspective to the commission's official debate on reproductive technologies. It explores how feminists who wanted to forge an open and democratic debate on the issue were hampered by the commission's strict adherence to classical bureaucratic norms of secrecy, centralized authority, and a hierarchical chain of command. The