Constituting Women's Interests through Representative Claims

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P romoting "women's interests" is a central concern of advocates of women's political representation. Suggesting that low numbers of

women in elected office is a problem for democratic justice, legitimacy, responsiveness, and effectiveness, supporters propose that a greater proportion of women will enhance the quality and outcomes of policy making (Phillips 1995). Exploring whether, and under what conditions, representatives act for women has thus been a core focus of gender and politics research. Empirical work has sought, in particular, to ascertain whether female members of parliament (MPs) identify "women" as a constituency whose interests are central to their legislative work (Childs 2004; Dodson 2006; Swers 2002).

   Although feminist activists and researchers have long grappled with the question of defining "women's interests" (Jónasdóttir 1988; Molyneux 1985; Sapiro 1981), a recent wave of contributions revisits these debates, offering new perspectives on theorizing and operationalizing this core concept for the study of women's substantive representation (Chappell and Hill 2006; Jónasdóttir and Jones 2009; Schreiber 2008). A 2011 symposium in *Politics & Gender* is an excellent example of how scholars have begun to rethink the notion of "women's interests" in both theoretical and empirical work.[1] As a group, these authors advance the discussion in vital ways, grappling with a host of theoretical, empirical, and methodological challenges related to *who can articulate women's interests*, and thus where to look in order to figure out what these may be, and *how to avoid essentialism*, and consequently incorporate a more diverse set of women's experiences into the analysis.

   These essays raise important questions, proposing new solutions that can help reorient this field of research. This article argues, however, that several of these suggestions could be taken much further — and tensions across the contributions could be bridged — through a revised framework for thinking about gender and political representation. This alternative approach is inspired by recent work in political theory arguing that scholars tend to address the *political-institutional* dimension of representation but neglect the *aesthetic* and *cultural* aspects, or "representation" in a broader sense. This is an important omission because "claims to speak *for* also speak *about*" a given group (Saward 2010, 49; emphasis added), "representing [a group's] needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*" (Alcoff 1991–1992, 9; emphasis in original). These dynamics lead Michael Saward to speak about the "politician as artist, as a maker of representations, as a portrayer of the represented" (2010, 16).

   1. "The Meaning and Measurement of Women's Interests." *Politics & Gender* 7 (3): 417–46.

In his 2010 book, *The Representative Claim*, Saward proposes redefining political representation as "an ongoing process of making and receiving, accepting and rejecting claims — in, between, and outside electoral cycles" (36). As a result, he expands the remit of investigation to include both electoral and nonelectoral actors (Rehfeld 2006; Street 2004; Weldon 2011b) to explore how group interests are constructed both before and during debates over bill passage. Examining how groups and their interests are framed by different actors, in turn, is necessary for fully appreciating the implications of policy making, as bills and laws inevitably contain a partial vision of the group in question, regardless of how inclusive they intend to be (Bassel and Emejulu 2010; Strolovitch 2006).

This article integrates these emerging conceptions of "representation" with contemporary feminist reflections on the concept of "women's interests" to provide a framework for applying Saward's (2010) approach in empirical research, in the process forging a new research agenda that can generate innovative insights into what representation *is* and what it *means* for particular groups. Being able to undertake empirical studies sensitive to "creative" accounts of representation, which simultaneously recognize diversity among women, is acutely important given that women in society hold different views and a wide array of actors — self-appointed advocates of "women's interests" (cf. Montanaro 2012) — make claims on behalf of "women" as a group. As a result, the simple presence of female elected representatives pursuing feminist goals within political institutions can no longer be taken as the standard test of women's substantive representation (Celis 2012). Rather, this revised approach suggests, "good" substantive representation is better conceived of as a process, involving debate, deliberation, and contestation over group interests, occurring inside and outside formal institutions (Celis and Childs 2013; Montanaro 2012).

The first section of this article presents a brief genealogy of how gender and politics scholars have applied the concept of "women's interests" in their research, followed by a discussion in the second section of the essays comprising the recent *Politics & Gender* symposium, highlighting their innovations — and limitations — in resolving the dilemmas they signal in relation to existing research. The third section develops an alternative way forward, expanding on the notion of multiple actors engaged in claims making to propose that scholars (1) study the claims put forward by male and female actors in a variety of locations, not simply the electoral arena, and (2) employ an inductive approach to map diverse visions of *who* "women" are and *what* "women" need. To this

end, the section outlines a research design for determining which actors (or "claims-makers") to include in the analysis and which sources to select in order to engage in a critical reading of these claims.

The fourth section demonstrates how this framework might be implemented, drawing on materials from three countries: Belgium, Finland, and the United Kingdom. This approach could certainly be used to study single cases, which would, indeed, permit the most in-depth analyses. A comparison of three cases is employed here, however, for purposes of illustration to highlight how this framework can be adapted in line with local conditions and how it can uncover diverse efforts to represent "women." The findings reveal, first, that a broad range of actors make claims on behalf of "women." Second, when subjected to a more open-ended investigation, rather than assumed *a priori*, a wide array of women's issues can be identified, and vivid debates over "women's interests" are apparent. Battles among these claims and competing representations are likely to shape subsequent policy making, as particular portrayals of "women" are selected and privileged over others. The article concludes that political representation is best conceptualized as an active, multifaceted, and contingent process, driven by a broad swathe of actors with various views on group issues and interests, rather than as an authentic reflection of the values and needs of society by legislators through the vehicle of public policy.

STUDYING WOMEN'S INTERESTS

Most theoretical and empirical studies of political representation begin with Hanna Pitkin's seminal work, *The Concept of Representation* (1967), which identifies four types of representation: formalistic, the formal bestowing of authority onto a person to act for another; descriptive, the correspondence between the characteristics of the representatives and the represented; symbolic, the more diffuse "meaning" of representation that resides in the attitudes and beliefs of the represented; and substantive, described as "acting for" representation.[2] For Pitkin, substantive representation deserves to be privileged above all others because it captures a relationship between the represented and representative in which the represented are "logically prior" (140). Representatives must be responsive to the represented and not the other way around. This responsiveness can be realized in two ways. The represented may give the

2. See also "Hanna Pitkin's 'Concept of Representation' Revisited." *Politics & Gender* 8 (4): 508–47.

representative a mandate stipulating what to do, transforming the latter into a delegate with no independence. Alternatively, the represented may empower a representative to act on their behalf, enabling the representative to act as an independent trustee (cf. Burke 1968).

This traditional approach to conceptualizing representation as responsiveness has inspired those interested in questions of gender to explore whether women in elected office "act for" women in the broader population. Placing representatives at the center of analysis has required researchers to define "women's interests" prior to investigation in order to assess the actions of female lawmakers. To identify what these interests might be, early scholars argued that these derived from the gendered division of reproductive and productive labor (Diamond and Hartsock 1981; Sapiro 1981). Later researchers, wary that such assertions reduced women's interests to biology, pointed instead to differences in the life experiences of women and men that led them to have distinct perspectives (Jonasdóttir 1988; Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Young 2000).

Together with feminist projects, academic studies have thus theorized "women's interests" along three lines: women's traditional roles within patriarchal societies, as shaped by their bodies, sexuality, and possibility of giving birth; women's participation in the labor market; and women's opportunities to transform their roles to attain greater gender equality (O'Regan 2000; Reingold 2000; Wängnerud 2000). A key point of contention has been, therefore, whether to emphasize "practical" versus "strategic" interests, stressing women's everyday needs or more abstract feminist goals (Molyneux 1985; cf. Carroll 1995). Consistent with survey-based evidence for gender differences in policy priorities and perspectives (Campbell, Childs, and Lovenduski 2009; Swers 1998), this work finds that female legislators tend more than male legislators to prioritize and pursue legislation on a variety of what are recognized as "women's issues" (Bratton 2005; Dodson 2006; Kittilson 2008; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003). Related research on state feminism explores the conditions under which women's movements and women's policy agencies succeed or fail in advancing "women's interests" in different policy areas (McBride and Mazur 2010).

RETHINKING WOMEN'S INTERESTS

A recent wave of contributions has begun to challenge these reigning approaches to the study of women's substantive representation. The 2011

symposium in *Politics & Gender* captures many of these critiques related to unease among gender and politics scholars regarding universal definitions of "women's interests," *a priori* assumptions about the nature of "women" as a group, and tendencies to overlook the perspectives of women in civil society by emphasizing the role of female elected officials. Despite these theoretical advances, it remains unclear how to devise a new way forward that recognizes multiple voices and respects diversity among women as a group.

In the first contribution, Lisa Baldez argues in favor of transcending feminist versus feminine definitions of women's interests, both of which "essentialize gender norms, exclude certain groups of women, or define women's interests too narrowly" (2011, 419). Her proposed solution is to look to the issues identified in the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a document ratified by nearly every state in the world that has also been continually updated through recommendations by the UN's CEDAW Committee. Baldez contends that, as a result, the issues identified do not merely apply to one subset of women and have, importantly, reflected changes over time. Despite this effort to expand the scope of issues affecting women's lives, however, Baldez also remains committed to a notion of "fixed, stable, and measurable interests," which must be uncovered "to know what women want before we can assess how well politicians represent them" (2011, 419).

In a related effort to avoid essentialism, Karen Beckwith (2011) distinguishes between "interests" (fundamental to women's life chances), "issues" (strategic choices emphasizing components of interest), and "preferences" (positioning actors to select among alternatives). While this conceptualization suggests that women as a collective might differ in terms of their choices and positions, its starting point implies that women do share a common set of interests. To unearth these empirically, Beckwith recommends looking to locations where women have organized autonomously — for example, in social movements. Although she is not the first scholar to advocate looking to women's organizations for statements of women's interests (cf. Celis 2006; Vickers 2006; Weldon 2011b), this formulation is notable in that it expands the traditional focus on women in elected positions in the literature on women's representation. At the same time, it positions women as an authentic vehicle for articulating women's interests that exist prior to the investigation.

Several assumptions made by Baldez and Beckwith are criticized, albeit indirectly, in the contribution by Beth Reingold and Michele Swers. They

argue against the idea that "women's interests exist, that women have political interests that can be defined and measured" (2011, 429). Instead, they advocate avoiding *a priori* definitions in favor of examining what female elected officials themselves say in policy debates. Reingold and Swers view this "endogenous approach" as a way to explore how ideology shapes how legislators think about women's interests and pursue policy solutions, how power operates among different groups of legislators, and how multiple political goals affect the strategic behavior of parties and legislators alike. As a result, they contend that defining women's interests is an intensely political process. Yet, in comparison with the two previous authors, Reingold and Swers restrict their focus to the legislative setting and treat "issues" and "interests" as if they were interchangeable concepts (430).

The essay by Wendy Smooth extends the theme of diversity among women, arguing that when speaking about "women's interests," it is imperative to ask, "which women's interests?" (2011, 437). In contrast to Beckwith, Smooth highlights the problematic nature of using social movements to define "women's interests," pointing out that advocacy groups typically have to simplify — read: homogenize — their group's interests in order to make a case for policy attention, in the process amplifying the most privileged women's voices (438; cf. Strolovitch 2006). Like other authors, however, she does recognize multiple locations for the articulation of women's interests, identifying "elected officials, interest groups, community leaders, and movements" as "lay[ing] claim to representing women" (437). Implicitly making a case for a more inductive approach, Smooth refers to interviews with African-American female legislators who challenge what are usually taken as "women's issues" by mentioning topics like criminal justice. She thus embraces a more open approach to thinking about "women's interests," looking at visions put forth by actors in a variety of locations. By restricting her intersectional focus to "race, class, and sexual identities" (437), however, Smooth overlooks another important dividing line, namely ideology. A growing literature has sought to recognize the claims made by conservative women with regard to "women's interests," often undertaken with the explicit purpose of contesting the representations put forward by feminist actors (Celis and Childs 2012; Childs, Webb, and Marthaler 2010; Schreiber 2008).

The final piece by Laurel Weldon problematizes many of the above perspectives. While arguing that it is not necessary to claim that women share interests, she is skeptical of approaches presenting interests as

"subjective, contingent, and/or context sensitive," which she views as "unsatisfying for those who want to link women's representation to the fact of their oppression, exploitation, and discrimination" (2011a, 441). Preferring instead to focus on "women's perspective" (cf. Young 2000), Weldon suggests that a better starting point is the fact that "women" are designated as a collective, or series, via social institutions and practices. Each woman necessarily has only a partial vision based upon her personal experiences. However, deliberation among diverse women can generate knowledge of women's perspective, opening up possibilities for building solidarity and identifying shared priorities (Weldon 2006). Weldon thus overlaps with Beckwith and Smooth, respectively, with regard to including actors in civil society and recognizing diversity. Yet, she glosses over the possibility of strategic framing, signaled by Reingold and Swers, whereby actors package their demands in a more pragmatic way after weighing various constraints. Like the other authors, she confers a privileged position to women as articulators of women's concerns.

WOMEN'S INTERESTS AND REPRESENTATIVE CLAIMS

The symposium thus raises important questions about how to theorize and operationalize "women's interests" in policy-making processes. As signaled above, however, the authors as a group, either implicitly or explicitly, confine their focus to women as political actors and tackle questions of diversity in ways that generally privilege the search for convergence among different views, with individual scholars dissenting in various ways. Recent work in political theory, however, argues against the notion of group interests ready-made to be brought into the political process, stressing instead acts that unfold over time as the representative and the represented respond to one another in an iterative fashion (Mansbridge 2003; Rehfeld 2006; Saward 2010; Squires 2008).

   The version proposed by Saward (2010) calls on scholars to focus on "representative claims," recognizing that "at the heart of the act of representing is the depicting of a constituency *as* this or that, as requiring this or that, as having this or that set of interests" (71). According to this view, substantive representation is not a passive process of receiving clear signals from below, but rather, both dynamic and performative, with influences coming from multiple directions. Politicians tend to conceal the active nature of this process because, when claiming to have unique insights into constituents' needs, they "prefer to be seen to be addressing

preexisting, natural, or fundamental interests that are already 'out there'" (54). Usefully, Saward's emphasis on elected and nonelected actors enables scholars to spotlight the efforts of international figures like Michelle Bachelet, the former head of UN Women, who was active on a variety of questions; local activists like Caroline Criado-Perez, who campaigned to ensure that a woman was pictured on at least one banknote in the UK; and celebrities like Angelina Jolie, who travels the world speaking on behalf of female rape survivors. The claims-making approach, importantly, does not necessarily refute the possibility that women share a common set of interests;[3] rather, its strength lies in highlighting the fact that numerous actors are involved in portraying and thus constructing what "women's interests" may be.

Translating this perspective into empirical work requires three alterations to assumptions underpinning traditional research designs. First, representative claims may be made by elected and nonelected actors, including state agencies, social movements, international organizations, and even celebrities (Celis et al. 2008; Lovenduski 2005; Saward 2010; Squires 2008; Street 2004; Weldon 2011b), although their levels of authority and legitimacy may vary substantially. Second, actors do not promote preexisting interests but instead draw on their "creative capacity" to offer specific portrayals of groups and interests, projecting "selected or ascribed and idealized characteristics of the subject of the claim" (Saward 2010, 74, 48). Third, in line with social movement research on framing (Benford and Snow 2000), actors are restricted in their opportunities by the need to "craft" positions based on claims that can be plausibly made in a given context (Saward 2010).

Finding Representative Claims

Saward's arguments have attracted note but have not yet been applied extensively in case studies (but see theoretical discussions by Celis et al. 2008; Childs, Webb, and Marthaler 2010; Severs 2012). While pointing to many potential actors and sources of claims, existing work does not offer criteria for determining which actors and texts to include in an empirical analysis. Taken to its fullest reach, the claims-making perspective might be applied to nearly all instances of political debate. Saward (2010) is almost deliberately vague, while those who implicitly share his approach concentrate on particular actors that they argue have

3. Many thanks to a reviewer for drawing attention to this point.

been overlooked (Rehfeld 2006; Squires 2008; Weldon 2011b). As actors may differ across cases (Mansbridge 2011), at the same time that those in different locations may generate competing discourses (Haas 2010; Holli 2008), delineating which actors are relevant in a given context is essential for mapping and comparing the claims made on behalf of a group.

Focusing on multiple actors — which may vary across countries — has crucial implications for analyzing the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation, as well as for evaluating the quality of women's substantive representation. More specifically, prior literature has tended to focus on policies proposed and passed by elected politicians, a research design that — from the perspective of the claims-making approach — is partial, capturing the efforts of only one set of actors and limiting the focus to a single forum and dimension of political representation. By the same token, devising a single list of actors to be studied across all cases is inappropriate, given that the political landscape may differ in significant ways — potentially introducing additional actors and locations or rendering common ones irrelevant.

To this end, this article proposes two broad criteria: (1) actors who form part of *official decision-making channels* and (2) those who participate in *civil society mobilization* on behalf of the group in question. Official channels and civil society groups will vary, depending on the organization of government and the range of civil society groups that have emerged within a given case. Capturing the distinction between the elected and nonelected, actors in these categories speak with differing levels of voice and representative legitimacy. Elections confer a profound source of strength for those who are elected, providing democratic status to their claims. At the same time, elections can also serve to distort popular will as votes are translated into seats as a byproduct of electoral and political party systems. Nonelected actors, in contrast, may have to work hard to make their claims convincing in the public sphere, even as they are able to put forward alternate or competing views in an arena that is often more open to new actors and groups (Saward 2010, 82–110).

This method of selecting actors highlights a crucial difference with existing work: rather than focus exclusively on female legislators, this approach recognizes that (1) male lawmakers and (2) women and men outside legislatures participate actively in claims making in the name of "women" as a group. Recognizing the first is critical, not least because ignoring men's voices denies the reality that men are already involved in policy debates affecting women. Moreover, given that such men

generally occupy the most powerful positions in politics and society, they often possess effective resources to construct hegemonic representations of "women" and their needs. At the same time, the latter emphasizes that no individual women's group or female legislator fully reflects the beliefs and priorities of all women due to interacting identities and ideological disagreements. This approach thus adopts no normative stance regarding which actors should "count" but instead utilizes the landscape of institutions and civil society groups to decide which actors to examine.

   Once the actors are identified, the next step is to devise guidelines for collecting empirical instances of representative claims making. Because claims are only meaningful if they have an audience, this article argues, the appropriate texts to analyze are materials containing *public statements* by actors regarding their views on women's issues and interests. Interventions can be recognized as representative claims about women when the questions addressed are (1) directly constructed as being of importance to women, (2) presented as only affecting women, (3) discussed in terms of gender difference, (4) spoken of in terms of gendered effects, and/or (5) framed in terms of equality between women and men. These five criteria center the investigation on "women" as a category, eliminating more generic references that do not involve representative claims about women per se.

Analyzing Representative Claims

Once these data have been collected, the question of how to "read" representative claims becomes salient. Following the insights of experts on qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2004; Neuendorf 2002),[4] this article advocates focusing on *expressions and meanings* within the texts, critically examining what Saward (2010) refers to as the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of representative claims making. Doing so requires adding a further element to the theoretical tool kit: drawing a line between "issues," broad policy categories, and "interests," the content given to an issue. This distinction reverses the perspective of Beckwith outlined above, which treats "interests" as primary and as giving rise to "issues" and "preferences." This alternative approach seeks

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   4. Quantitative content analysis, in contrast, analyzes large sets of documents to discover definitions, frequencies, and relations between terms, missing an opportunity to examine texts in a holistic fashion and "read between the lines."

instead to displace a notion of "women's interests" as pregiven, recognizing that actors may converge on the importance of a policy area but may diverge in their interpretations regarding the course of action most beneficial to the group. This revision, in turn, permits scholars to map diverse and competing views in debates on behalf of "women."

The first step, therefore, is to read texts closely to identify representative claims and make note of policy categories and the directionality of group-based claims. A table of issues can then be generated, marking the issues affecting women identified by each set of actors. The next task is to analyze the claims themselves, focusing on how various actors frame "women's interests" in relation to each issue category, paying attention to the normative views of women implied by — or stated explicitly in relation to — each representation. This involves determining, for example, whether claims invoke ideals about "women" that reinforce traditional gender relations, seek to promote gender equality, or reflect some combination of the two. It is also possible to explore the degree to which women are presented as a monolithic or differentiated group, as well as analyze how claims are made more broadly in line with other prevailing social or political values.

Listing the nature and content of claims, of course, does not in itself explain why certain issues are mentioned — or why group interests are framed in a particular manner. There are limits to the types of claims that actors can put forward: to have resonance, "representative claims need to be built out of 'ready-mades,' even if they are reinterpreted and re-presented in new ways" (Saward 2010, 75). Observations to this effect have been made in research on social movements and framing processes (Benford and Snow 2000), but how to identify these cultural resources is not taken up at length by Saward or other theorists. At a minimum, *differences in basic values* — on axes relevant to the promotion of gender-based policy initiatives — shape how countries approach questions of inclusion and equality (Krook, Lovenduski, and Squires 2009; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). The specific values that are relevant, however, may vary from case to case.

Developing a Research Design

To illustrate how such a research strategy might be implemented, the remainder of this article draws on materials from three countries (1) to show how the various elements of this framework might be adapted in

practice and (2) to demonstrate in clearer terms how the representative claims approach "adds value" in terms of generating new knowledge for research on women's issues and interests. The analysis focuses on representative claims making on behalf of "women" in Belgium, Finland, and the United Kingdom. These cases share important features in common: they are all wealthy, democratic, western, and largely secular — leading, perhaps, to expectations that they will witness attention to many of the same issues and debates over group interests. However, they diverge in terms of political structures and values, meaning that the actors engaged in claims making differ, with implications for the public statements that need to be collected and analyzed — as well as opportunities for different types of claims to be made.

In terms of official decision-making channels, all three states are parliamentary systems.[5] They differ in terms of organization, however: Belgium is a federal state, with substantial policy responsibilities assigned to regional and local government, while the UK is federal but has devolved fewer policies and Finland is a unitary state with more centralized governance. For Belgium, actors that must be included are the federal and regional governments and parliaments, whereas for the UK and Finland, the focus is on national governments and parliament. Linguistic cleavages in Belgium have also given rise to political parties with Flemish- and French-speaking counterparts. In contrast, British politics is dominated by two main parties, with a third party playing an increasing role, while Finland — like Belgium — has a multiparty system. In the executive branch, all three countries have agencies addressing women's issues, although in Belgium, these exist at federal and regional levels.

With regard to civil society actors, the three cases are characterized by slightly different state-society relations. Belgium and Finland are corporatist, giving trade unions and employer associations a role in policy-making processes, while the UK is pluralist, without such formalized arrangements. One implication is that some women's groups in Belgium and almost all women's movements in Finland are oriented toward the state and political parties, whereas other women's groups in Belgium and nearly all women's movements in the UK prefer to mobilize more autonomously (Kantola 2006; Lovenduski 2005). As a

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5. Finland has a semipresidential system, but in terms of policy-making powers, the president is responsible primarily for foreign affairs and is thus not included in the analysis.

Table 1.   Actors and time frames by country

Country	Actors	Time Frames
Belgium	Governments and parliaments (federal and regional), political parties (Flemish- and French-speaking), women's policy agencies (federal and regional), trade unions and employer organizations, and women's organizations (autonomous and party-based)	2004–2005, 2006, and 2007–2008
Finland	Government and parliament, political parties, women's policy agencies, trade unions, and women's organizations (autonomous and party-based)	2003–2004, 2005, and 2007–2008
UK	Government and parliament, political parties, women's policy agencies, and women's organizations (autonomous and party-based)	2004–2005, 2006, and 2007–2008

result of these collective variations, the relevant actors in these three countries overlap but also differ to some extent (see Table 1).

To focus the analysis, the present study examines representative claims made by actors at four moments in time, based on when the data for this project was being collected in 2008: the year of the previous election, the first year of the last legislative session, the middle year of the last legislative session, and the year including the most recent election. The logic for selecting materials from multiple years was in recognition of the fact that claims are voiced in, between, and outside of electoral cycles. However, these points in time were not selected at random: years of elections and first years of a legislative session are ones in which political programs are put forward and state and civil society actors communicate extensively about their policy priorities, and the middle year of a legislature can be one of the most active in terms of bills being proposed and passed. Variations across electoral cycles mean that different years are investigated in the three countries (see Table 1).

Because actors differ in status and resources, materials containing public pronouncements appear in numerous guises in Belgium, Finland, and the UK. They take the form of government programs, members of parliament (MP) bills and debates, party manifestos, women's policy agency reports and policy briefs, trade union press releases and action plans, and women's organization websites and press releases.[6] The varied nature of these sources reflects the distinct opportunities for actors within each

6. A complete list of source documents will be available upon publication at http://mlkrook.org.

political system to weigh in on policy priorities. At the same time, the documents diverge a great deal in terms of length and detail — and do not always indicate a scale of priorities among issues, especially when the text focuses on a single policy area. Nonetheless, flexibility in the types of documents analyzed is essential for giving voice to actors across locations, as well as for taking into account distinct political structures and practices across countries.

These texts are read closely to identify representative claims and to make note of policy categories and the directionality of group-based claims. Doing this for each country enables a cross-national comparison to determine (1) whether there is any consensus on issues within or across countries, (2) whether some actors recognize a broader range of issues than others, (3) how actors in various locations speak about "women's interests," and (4) what these "interests" suggest about views on who "women" are and should be. The theoretical critiques advanced in this article, combined with emerging empirical evidence, lead to two main expectations.

First, within and across cases, there is likely to be greater consensus over "women's issues" and greater competition over "women's interests" given heterogeneity among women's life experiences and perspectives. As a result, multiple normative visions of "women" are liable to surface in the course of the analysis, even as actors agree on the centrality of particular issue areas. Second, within and across cases, women's groups — grounded in women's collective mobilization — are likely to articulate more comprehensive and varied sets of issues and interests, whereas party political actors will express narrower visions due to partisan and electoral constraints. Consequently, nonelected actors as a group are expected to manifest the greatest cross-national variations, whereas electoral actors with similar ideological inclinations are apt to converge despite national differences.

ISSUES, INTERESTS, AND REPRESENTATIVE CLAIMS

The existing literature typically defines "women's issues" to include reproductive rights, equal pay, violence against women, education, women's health, maternity leave, childcare, and legal issues surrounding marriage and divorce — with "women's interests" being largely defined as women's access or protection within each of these policy arenas (O'Regan 2000; Reingold 2000; Weldon 2002).[7] Many of these issues

7. This approach, as one reviewer suggested, raises questions about the appropriate level of analysis, stressing concrete issues such as abortion versus more abstract notions of women's self-determination.

are indeed found in the comparative content analysis, appearing in all three countries and addressed by all or a majority of actors. Yet, there are also further issues in each case that have received the attention of a minority or even a single actor. Attending to representative claims, therefore, suggests that "women's issues" cannot be easily or adequately reduced to a small range of policy areas. At the same time, there are notable differences among actors in terms of the sheer numbers of issues they identify.

Turning to "women's interests," the benefits of remaining agnostic — and thus avoiding *a priori* definitions — are vividly illustrated by the case study materials. While actors within and across sites can often agree on the importance of certain issues, they can also disagree with regard to the policy content most beneficial to women. Their views on substance appear to be motivated by differing normative views of women as a group. These points are elaborated below by focusing on a single issue in each country that has been subject to extensive claims making on behalf of "women." The analysis reveals that, far from being uncontroversial, questions about what is in "women's interests" are highly debated, given conflicting worldviews on the proper roles of "women."

Degrees of Consensus

Mapping issues within countries by the number of actors who mention them (see Table 2) enables further cross-national comparisons. A striking finding is that there is only one issue, the gender pay gap, shared by all actors in all three countries. Looking at issues addressed by all or a majority of actors produces a more extensive list. Violence against women, access to the labor market, and political representation are identified as women's issues across all three countries, while sex trafficking, maternity leave, childcare, education, and immigration are given priority in two. These trends support some of the coding decisions made in earlier studies but, crucially, also raise questions about the appropriateness of other categories that do not appear consistently while others that do are overlooked.

Turning to issues identified by a minority or single actor, a more differentiated picture emerges. Only at this point do issues like abortion, divorce, maternity leave, and women's health appear with greater

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While sympathetic to this critique, this article opts to privilege the language and terms used by the actors in question, given the focus on claims-making.

Table 2.   Issues and actors by country

Issue Consensus	Belgium	Finland	UK
All actors	1. Gender pay gap 2. Access to the labor market 3. Work-family balance 4. Participation in decision making	1. Violence against women 2. Trafficking in women and prostitution 3. Gender pay gap/equal pay 4. Women's employment 5. Maternity/paternity/parental leave 6. Work-family balance	1. Violence against women 2. Pensions 3. Gender pay gap 4. Political representation
Majority of actors	1. Violence against women 2. Migrant women/female refugees 3. Equality policy 4. Insurance	1. Gender segregation in the labor market 2. Family policy 3. Political representation 4. Female entrepreneurs and leaders 5. Childcare 6. Discrimination 7. Women in media 8. Sexuality 9. Schools/education	1. Childcare 2. Education/"skills 3. Employment 4. Flexible working 5. Maternity provision 6. Health 7. Caregivers 8. Immigration/trafficking 9. International development/peace
Minority of actors	1. Health 2. Poverty 3. Education and training 4. Sports 5. Development 6. Maternity provisions 7. Pensions 8. Social security 9. Mobility	1. Short-term contract work 2. Taxation 3. Men's role in equality 4. Harmful traditional practices 5. Environment 6. Ethnicity/immigration 7. Women in academia	1. Work-life balance 2. Matrons 3. Service women 4. Sexuality 5. Poverty 6. Minimum wage 7. Public services 8. Divorce/marriage
Single actor	1. Housewives 2. Divorce 3. Single mothers 4. Sustainable development 5. War and conflict 6. Housing	1. Older women 2. Abortion	1. Marriage tax allowance 2. Media 3. Tax credits 4. Abortion 5. Childbirth 6. Dinner ladies 7. Environment 8. Ethnicity 9. Older women 10. Criminal justice 11. Fatherhood

Note: Issue names are standardized where possible but are not altered when doing so might change the meaning intended by actors. Closely related issues are indicated by a slash (/).

consistency. However, a number of issues not traditionally associated with women are also mentioned, such as the media, development, poverty, taxation, pensions, the environment, and men's roles. Further, several issues appear in single countries only, like sports, housing, and crime. Although ethnicity and sexuality are mentioned in two cases, for the most part, single-appearance issues are those addressing women in particular roles and professions, including caregivers, hospital matrons, service women, housewives, older women, single mothers, and "dinner ladies" (women providing lunch services in schools). These findings suggest that adopting a more inductive approach yields a much broader array of women's issues than traditional research designs.

Extent of Breadth

Analyzing these data in another way offers insights into a possible reason for these trends. More specifically, actors vary enormously in terms of the numbers of issues they articulate (see Table 3). Although exact numbers differ across cases, a general observation is that women's organizations, whether autonomous or party-based, tend to politicize a much broader range of issues than other actors. They are followed, in descending order, by women's policy agencies, parties, parliaments, trade unions, and employer associations. This distribution, while perhaps intuitive, reveals that a wide range of issues important to women are not, in fact, taken up by elected actors, raising questions — again — about the appropriateness of focusing exclusively on the legislative arena when conceptualizing women's political representation. Yet, by virtue of their location, the groups that speak for women, usually *as* women, also vary in the scope of their claims.

Table 3.   Numbers of issues by actors and countries

	Belgium	*Finland*	*UK*
Parliament	14	10	17
Political parties	16	19	21
Women's policy agencies	17	20	15
Trade unions	3	3	n/a
Employer organizations	3	3	n/a
Party-based women's organizations	14	28	13
Autonomous women's organizations	18	14	18

Note: Numbers for federal and regional parliaments and women's policy agencies are collapsed.

Women's civil society organizations in these cases generally adopt an approach to defining "women's issues" that seeks to encompass many different facets of women's lives as well as recognize diversity among women. They draw attention to a large variety of social, economic, and political concerns, including violence, media coverage, wage gaps, maternity provisions, and political office. They also highlight the ways in which these may be experienced in distinct ways by women depending on their age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. In comparison, the positions espoused by women's groups in political parties are slightly truncated — except in the case of Finland — due most likely in large part to the need to conform to the scope and direction of party ideologies. Nonetheless, in some instances, women's sections have brought new issues to the table, including such items as pensions (Belgium), entrepreneurship (Finland), and student loans (UK).

Among official channels, women's policy agencies also adopt a broad approach to defining issues of concern to women. In Finland, the range of issues comprises the labor market and gender violence as well as trafficking, pornography, the media, and military conscription. In contrast, parties and MPs tend to reference a slightly smaller range of issues on their electoral platforms and in the legislation they introduce. Selection and emphasis appears to be related to the party ideology. On reproductive questions in Belgium, for example, the Flemish Christian Democrats promote motherhood while the French Socialists demand free contraceptives. In the UK, parties of different ideologies "pitch" issues in distinct ways: whereas the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats seek to increase maternity pay, the Conservatives propose payments to grandparents.

Contesting Women's Interests

To explore what is gained by adopting a more open approach to "women's interests," an issue was selected for each case based on what emerged inductively as having been the focus of a wide variety of representative claims by actors speaking from many different locations. This focus does not preclude studies of issues prioritized by a smaller range of actors; rather, it aims — for purposes of illustration to highlight the many positions that might be taken with regard to defining "women's interests." Closer examination of these claims reveals that these positions are far from neutral and objective evaluations of what "women" want

and need. The cases analyzed here uncover four recurring images of "women": victims, agents, mothers, and workers. Although specific images differ — and these categories are not exhaustive — the purpose of these claims is the same: to shape perceptions of who and what "women" are and should be.

In *Belgium*, an issue that has caught the public eye in recent years is the status of ethnic minority women and girls. One of the most sustained controversies, engaging nearly all policy actors, relates to headscarves and *burqas*, exposing tensions between promoting gender equality and respecting cultural differences. Although linguistic groups are the subject of a variety of group-based measures for political inclusion in Belgium, the concept of social partnership is largely limited to already recognized groups (Meier 2000). Claims put forward reveal a broad consensus that, in the conflict between Islam and gender equality, priority should be given to the latter. In the words of the Flemish women's policy agency, and echoed by the Socialist Party's women's organization: "the struggle for equality in Belgium has been long and hard; we should not accept discrimination against women in the name of culture."

The Flemish party of the extreme right, moreover, stated that "foreigners wishing to settle in Belgium need to respect the fundamental values of our society, such as equality between men and women." Declarations against wearing headscarves and *burqas* in public were thus framed as a defense of ethnic minority women and girls. During debates in the Flemish parliament, a ban was justified on the grounds that "the *burqa* is unworthy of a human being and denies women physical freedom," a point emphasized by the Christian Democratic women's section, asserting that the *burqa* is a "physical handicap that hinders women's role in society." A note of dissent was registered by the umbrella organization of French-speaking women's groups, arguing that "the meaning of the *burqa* is plural, not per definition a sign of submission." They urged instead the promotion of "liberty" and "self-determination and equal rights in the family" for ethnic minority women and girls.

Many of the claims in the documents framed ethnic minority women and girls as a more or less homogeneous group. Muslim women were characterized as victims of their own culture, and Muslim men, by extension, were portrayed as the oppressing group. Most actors depicted these women as being in need of help from the Belgian state in order to be emancipated, as passive subjects caught in a double discrimination as women and as "foreigners," who must be saved from their own culture. Yet, these representations are not universal: the portrayal of women as

agents is put forward by French-speaking women's groups, who suggest that ethnic minority women are to some degree already empowered to make decisions and perhaps with some support from the Belgian state, might be further able to emancipate themselves.

In *Finland*, heated debates have revolved around a different topic: reconciling work and family life. A defining feature of social democratic countries is a concern to promote labor market participation and provide social services to ensure citizens' well-being (Esping-Andersen 1985). The actors engaged in making claims in the documents studied here broadly agreed with the need to promote better work-life balance. Yet, those on different ends of the political spectrum offered distinct solutions. Left-wing parties argued that women's interests were served when the state provided affordable, high-quality municipal childcare places for all children, thereby enabling women's labor market participation. In their electoral manifesto, the Social Democratic Party suggested, for example, that this required developing new forms of public care, including after-school programs. Along similar lines, the Left Alliance stated that "[f]amilies need to be supported by developing municipal childcare and education systems so that every father and mother who is capable to and wants to could safely enter the labor market."

Finnish parties on the right, in contrast, claimed to represent women's interests by giving them the opportunity to "choose to stay at home" and care for their children themselves. The conservative Coalition Party manifesto, for instance, stated that the home care allowance — a provision enabling (mainly) mothers to stay at home and look after their young children — should be increased because "this improves families' chances to choose the most appropriate form of care for their children." Further, in a parliamentary debate, a male MP from the Centre Party questioned "why the state wants to guarantee every child a child care place outside the home" rather than "giving families the choice for organizing their own lives." In his view, "all forms of care should be made equal." Additional interventions sought to increase maternity and paternity leave pay and home care allowance rather than the quality of municipal child care, suggesting that childrearing was best done by parents inside the home.

Actors on the left end of the political spectrum thus presented the ideal woman as a working mother. In their view, women's place was in the labor market, combining roles as mother and worker with the help of the state (Kantola 2006). Debates focused in particular on young women as a precarious group in need of (state) protection due to the increase in

insecure fixed-contract jobs. Young women were constructed as no longer benefiting from welfare policies intended for working mothers who have "normal" permanent jobs. Instead, they required help from the state in order to successfully combine work and family. In contrast, right-wing actors constituted the ideal women as mothers who should fulfill traditional gender roles. The needs of the family were in these instances valorized and placed above individual choices, privileging heterosexual partnerships as the norm.

Finally, in the *UK*, an issue addressed by actors across all sites was the under-representation of women in parliament. These debates were shaped by liberal values hostile to candidate quotas, seen as violating equal opportunities (Bacchi 1996). In parliament, an exchange highlighting differences among parties took place between the Women's Minister (Labour) and the Shadow Women's Minister (Conservative): while the latter acknowledged that women in her party "must all keep working to ensure that we have more and more women," the Minister responded with "regret" that only her party "took advantage of legislation permitting the use of equality guarantees" to ensure greater access. These left/right differences were also evident in election manifestos: Labour stressed the need for quotas; Liberal Democrats advocated reform of the electoral system; and Conservatives were silent, remaining averse to measures that might interfere with "merit."

These different approaches found parallels in discussions by the parties' women's organizations. Whereas Labour women tended to be in favor of gender quotas, Liberal Democrat women stressed other more "supply-side" reasons for the lack of women in parliament. For one prospective female candidate, these included child care responsibilities: "fatherhood sells" a male candidate, whereas motherhood was a "millstone around a female candidate's neck." For another, these involved the need to show party "members and activists that [she] was serious about winning and putting [her] all into the campaign." Conservative women, in contrast, encouraged women to take part in public life but also considered women to lack confidence and, because of their "biology," to be more involved with their families than men. The opposite interpretation was given by a women's group in civil society, emphasizing not shortcomings with women, but rather "demand-side" factors like party discrimination toward women in candidate selection procedures.

Concerns about women as workers and mothers were thus invoked in deliberations over how to promote women's representation in the UK, stemming from a perceived incompatibility — for women only —

between work, parenthood, and a political career. In all the discussions studied here, women were talked about as a relatively homogenous group in relation to men. There was broad consensus among actors with regard to difficulties for women in balancing work and family responsibilities. For some, such as the Conservative women's organization, this reflected women's biology; for others, like women's civil society groups, this reflected an unequal division of labor in the public and private spheres. Women were, as a result, constructed by parties and female actors as being in some sense deficient from the typical politician. To overcome these faults, prospective female candidates seemed to believe that women — but not men — needed to "hide" rather than showcase their families and give up paid employment to prove their commitment to politics.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The 2011 symposium on "women's interests" in *Politics & Gender* is part of a recent wave of work seeking to rethink the study of women's substantive representation (Celis 2012; Celis et al. 2008; Chappell and Hill 2006; Childs, Webb, and Marthaler 2010; Jónasdóttir and Jones 2009; Schreiber 2008; Weldon 2011b). These accounts together provide new impetus for an expanded notion of the spaces where group advocacy occurs and a greater recognition of within-group diversity. Inspired by Saward's (2010) notion of "representative claims," this article endeavors to take these emerging perspectives a step further to argue that "representation" is not just political-institutional, but aesthetic and cultural as well. Speaking "for" a group, in other words, also involves speaking "about" the group, making claims about what the group "is" and what the group "wants" or "needs." The result is a critique of unidirectional visions of representation in which formal elected representatives act for constituents whose needs and wishes are logically prior, in favor of a more dynamic view highlighting competing portrayals of "women" and "women's interests" put forward by elected and nonelected actors.

The analysis reveals some overlaps but also important differences in the topics identified as "women's issues" as well as views on the content of "women's interests." This inductive method avoids, more broadly, the problems of essentialism that often preoccupy feminists by not assuming that women are uniform in their needs and desires. While discerning the

portrayals behind representative claims can be an end in itself, the exercise of mapping issues and interest may also serve as a first step in a larger analysis of the processes and quality of substantive representation. Once issues and interests are identified, it is possible to determine which issues are taken up by representatives and which versions of "women's interests" — and normative visions of "women" — prevail in policy making. Such an analysis would, in turn, enable closer consideration of questions of accountability and responsiveness to "women," recognized as a plurality rather than as a homogenous group, and shed greater light on the role of time and context on the fate of various claims. While this next step is beyond the scope of this article, the framework developed here provides a systematic, case-driven empirical approach to defining and exploring women's issues and interests and the sources and potential impact of claims making, where "representation" is recognized as an active and creative process with multiple intersecting dimensions.

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