

Defining Women's Interests: A Comparative Mapping of Representative Claims

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Abstract

The promotion of 'women's interests' is a central focus and concern of advocates of women's political representation. Examining the policy priorities and initiatives of female office-holders, existing research seeks to establish whether there are links between women's presence and policy outcomes favorable to women as a group. A growing number of scholars, however, criticize this approach as overly focused on the impact of numbers, asserting that 'critical actors' are more important than a 'critical mass' of female legislators. While taking this point on board, this paper aims to advance two further arguments. First, dynamics of political representation are not limited to elected bodies; rather, actors in multiple sites articulate policy demands. Second, in the course of their lobbying efforts, these actors make claims about who women are and what women want. Reframing representation in this manner has the crucial advantage that it does not assume *a priori* what 'women's interests' are, but instead, leaves this question open to empirical investigation. The implications of this approach are illustrated via four case studies, which point to substantial within- and cross-case variations in defining 'women's interests.' The analysis concludes that 'women' and 'women's interests' are constructed through, and not simply reflected in, political advocacy on their behalf.

The promotion of 'women's interests' is a central focus and concern of advocates of women's political representation. Exploring whether, and under what conditions, representatives 'act for' women has therefore been a core interest of research on gender and politics. Normative arguments for increasing the number of women in political positions contend that the under-representation of women is a problem for democratic justice, legitimacy, responsiveness, and effectiveness. They also suggest that a greater proportion of women will enhance the quality of decision-making on a substantive level through the inclusion of women's interests and perspectives (Phillips 1995; Young 1997). A large body of empirical work has subjected these intuitions to closer investigation. The finding that female politicians do not always advocate women's issues is often explained in terms of the absence of a 'critical mass' of female legislators, on the grounds that they are unlikely to have a major impact on policy outcomes until women grow from a few token individuals into a considerable minority of all elected officials. As women's numbers increase, they will be able to work more effectively together to promote women-friendly policy change and influence male colleagues to accept and approve legislation promoting women's concerns. These arguments have met with increasing skepticism over the last several years as scholars have uncovered no linear relationship between women's presence and policy outcomes favorable to women as a group (Childs and Krook 2008; Grey 2002; Weldon 2002). To make sense of these patterns, new research has begun to theorize the role of 'critical actors' in achieving women-friendly policy change (Chaney 2006; Childs and Krook 2009; Childs and Withey 2006).

While this revised approach acknowledges differences among women, at the same time that it recognizes men as potential actors on behalf of women as group, there are

limits to focusing exclusively on one set of actors and a single site and mode of political representation (Celis 2006a; Lovenduski 2005; Weldon 2002). Stated slightly differently, policies formulated and approved by elected officials constitute only one means by which political actors may advocate on behalf of a group. Further, in the course of promoting such policies, the rhetoric of these actors contributes to the construction of both the group and its interests (Saward 2006). Viewing representation through this lens has important implications for political analysis. First, it requires researchers to consider multiple sites of political action. While most studies focus on national parliaments, representation may also occur at different levels of government and in a variety of political forums, like cabinets, women's policy agencies, political parties, civil society organizations, and even courts (Celis et al 2008). Expanding the number of locations in this way permits a richer analysis of the debates surrounding 'women's interests' by uncovering a wider range of conflicting policy positions. It also facilitates and improves the leverage of comparative analysis by recognizing that the particular balance of actors may vary in important ways across contexts. A second effect of focusing on claims, rather than on policy proposals and outcomes, is that it compels researchers to abandon *a priori* definitions of women's issues. While deciding the issues to analyze has been a crucial part of traditional research designs, leaving this question open has the important advantage of avoiding essentialism by turning attention instead to how 'women's interests' are articulated by various actors, who in the process contribute to the construction of 'women' as a group. In other words, through their claims they paint a picture of *who women are* and *what women want*.

To elaborate the contrast between this approach and traditional views on political representation and 'women's interests,' the paper begins by presenting an overview of

existing concepts and findings. It argues that dominant modes of theorizing political representation and operationalizing its effects tend to assume a relatively static notion of interests as entities that exist ‘out there,’ ready to be brought into the representational process. This point is illustrated with reference to how empirical studies have tended to define ‘women’s interests.’ The limits to such an enterprise are evident in the diversity of meanings employed by researchers, including practical and strategic interests (Molyneux 1985) and feminist and non-feminist definitions (Celis 2006a; Childs 2004; Swers 2002). Inspired by recent work by Jane Mansbridge (2003), Michael Saward (2006), and Judith Squires (2008), the paper embraces a more ‘creative’ view of representation in the second section, where it makes a case for viewing ‘interests’ as actively constructed by political agents speaking from a variety of different locations. The utility of this new framework is then explored in the third section, which comprises case studies of claims-making in four countries: Belgium, Finland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The cases were selected because they share important features in common, at the same time that they reflect a broad array of contextual features that influence the opportunities and constraints for actors to articulate claims on behalf of women as a group. The exercise of mapping these claims reveals three main points of variation: (1) the key actors involved in debates over ‘women’s interests,’ (2) the issues identified across sites and across countries, and (3) the views on the content of ‘women’s interests’ in each issue area. These patterns indicate that ‘women’s interests’ are not fixed or easy to define, but rather, are the subject of vivid and ongoing political debates, rooted in competing normative visions of who ‘women’ are and should be. Recognizing the constructed nature of ‘women’s interests,’ in turn, undermines a notion of political representation as an authentic reflection of the

values and needs of society. Representation is now a more active and contingent process driven by efforts to alter, resist, or reinvent prevailing paradigms of social organization.

Representing Women's Interests: Traditional Approaches

Most theoretical and empirical studies of political representation begin with Hanna Pitkin's seminal work, *The Concept of Representation* (1967), which identifies four main types. Formalistic representation refers to the formal bestowing of authority onto a person to act for others. The problem with this conception for Pitkin is that while representatives are held to account for what they do, all of their actions count as 'representation,' regardless of the quality of their interventions as they occur. Descriptive representation is the correspondence between the characteristics of the representatives and the represented. The poverty of this notion, according to Pitkin, is its emphasis on the composition of a political institution rather than its activities, because individuals cannot be held account for 'who they are' but only for 'what they have done.' Symbolic representation, or the more diffuse 'meaning' of representation, resides in the attitudes and beliefs of the represented. The downside of this conception in Pitkin's eyes is that it is open to manipulation by representatives and involves images that are largely arbitrary.

Compared with these three facets, Pitkin is more positive about substantive representation – what she often refers to as “acting for” representation – which she views as the one true type. In her definition, substantive representation captures a relationship between the represented and representative in which the represented are “logically prior,” whereby the representatives must be responsive to the represented and not the other way around. In most circumstances, this implies that that the wishes of the represented and the

actions of the representative will converge (Pitkin 1967, 163-5). However, this congruency can be realised in two ways. First, the represented may give the representative a mandate clearly stipulating what they should do, which transforms the representative into a delegate with no independence. Second, the represented may empower the representative to act on their behalf, which empowers the representative to act as an independent trustee. Pitkin argues that representatives should behave as delegates in instances where the representative and the represented are considered to have equal capacities. Conversely, they should act as trustees in cases where the representative is considered to be superior in wisdom and experience to the represented.

The key role of constituent interests in this account has required feminist theorists to identify ‘women’s interests’ – and by extension, why they cannot be represented by men – in order to build a case for increasing the numbers of women in political office. In the face of assumptions that women were represented through the political participation of their husbands and fathers, this work argued that the gendered division of reproductive and productive labor gave women a different socio-economic position in society, which in turn generated a distinct set of political interests (Diamond and Hartsock 1981; Sapiro 1981). Later scholars, wary that such assertions might reduce women’s interests to biology, pointed to differences in the life experiences of women and men that led them to have distinct perspectives on questions of general concern. These gendered patterns had political relevance, they argued, in light of the fact that elected representatives are often called upon to make decisions on issues that have not yet been the subject of extended discussion in the public at large. In these moments, representatives’ social backgrounds became important for pursuing choices that are in the interests of the population at large

(Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Young 1997). For this reason, it is crucial for women to be among the ranks of elected officials, as a means to give voice to their concerns (Jónasdóttir 1988; Williams 1998). This view suggests, in turn, that there are gendered interests that need to be represented in a diverse range of policy areas (Lovenduski 2005).

Inspired by these discussions, empirical work has defined ‘women’s interests’ in three main ways. The first equates women’s interests with concerns that belong to the private sphere according to established views on gender relations (Meyer 2003). These encompass issues linked to women’s bodies, sexuality, and the possibility of giving birth. The second, related to the first, concerns the position of women in the public sphere, especially with regard to the labor market and welfare state policy. These two categories of concerns have been labeled by Maxine Molyneux as “practical” interests “arising from the concrete conditions of women’s positioning within the gender divisions of labor” (1985, 233). A third set of definitions involve what Molyneux describes as “strategic” interests “deriving from the analysis of women’s subordination and from the formulation of an alternative” (1985, 232). Focusing on the public and private spheres together, this feminist formulation can be seen as having three components: (1) recognition of women as a social category, (2) recognition of a power imbalance between men and women, and (3) commitment to implement a policy that increases the autonomy of female citizens (Wängnerud 2000).

Reflecting these diverse viewpoints, case studies have analyzed a combination of practical and strategic interests. On the whole, however, scholars have tended to privilege feminist definitions (cf. Childs 2004). Debra Dodson and Susan Carroll (1995) employ the former approach to distinguish between “women’s rights bills,” those with a feminist

undertone, and “laws concerning women’s traditional arenas of interest,” referring to the role of women as care-givers and their priorities in relation to themes such as health and education. In contrast, researchers like Beth Reingold (2000) and Valerie O’Regan (2000) reference some practical issues, but largely focus on feminist concerns. Reingold compares the voting behavior of male and female members of Congress with regard to their support for legislation on topics like abortion, discrimination, domestic violence, and breast cancer. The issues identified by O’Regan include “salary protection,” laws on equal salaries, maternity leave, job opportunities, and childcare, and “social policy,” laws concerning marriage and divorce, child custody, domestic violence, sexual abuse, abortion, and education. For the most part, scholars have sought to understand whether there is a relationship between women’s presence and legislation promoting women’s interests. In general, their work has shown that women more than men tend to prioritize and pursue legislation on a variety of women’s issues, whether these bills address more traditional concerns like healthcare and child welfare or more feminist demands like rape and equal pay (Bratton 2005; Dodson 2006; Swers 1998; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Wolbrecht 2002).

Despite these findings, a growing body of research casts doubt on straightforward relationships between numbers and outcomes. This literature finds that female members of parliament (MP) do not vote more for women’s issues than men (Reingold 2000), do not introduce more bills on women’s interests than men (Tremblay 1998), and in fact, a large proportion of female legislators are not active at all in proposing bills on women’s rights, families, and children (Htun and Power 2006). Further, in situations where gender differences did and did not emerge, they could be explained often with reference to other

factors like party discipline (Cowley and Childs 2003; Swers 2002), positional power (Beckwith 2007; Norton 2002), and the support of internal or external women's groups and networks (Burrell 1994). Taken together, however, all of these studies reflect several important, and often unstated, assumptions: only women can represent women's interests, representation occurs only in elected political bodies, and the representation of women's issues requires that female legislators be distinct in some way from men. Yet, it is well-known that not all women in office seek to promote women's concerns, at the same time that some men do. Further, research on women's movements and state feminism suggests that actors other than MPs may seek to promote women as a group, as much as and perhaps even more than women in elected politics (Weldon 2002; cf. Childs and Krook 2009; Celis et al 2008). Combined with the diverse meanings of 'women's interests' offered in existing studies, these possibilities indicate the need for a new approach for understanding how 'women's interests' are articulated in the representation process.

Women's Interests and Representative Claims: A New Framework

In the wake of Pitkin (1967), the distinction between delegates and trustees has informed an enormous literature on political representation. However, it has recently been criticized by several scholars on the grounds that it assumes a relatively static notion of interests as entities that exist 'out there,' ready to be brought into the representational process. These accounts stress instead the importance of acts that unfold over time as the representative and the represented respond to one another in an iterative fashion (Rehfeld 2006; Saward 2008; cf. Urbinati and Warren 2008). Jane Mansbridge (2003) describes these in terms of three further concepts of representation: gyroscopic, surrogate, and

anticipatory. In gyroscopic representation, the representative ‘looks within’ – perhaps to interests, ‘common sense,’ or principles derived from his or her own background – to formulate a basis for action. Surrogate representation, in contrast, occurs when legislators represent constituents beyond their own territorial districts, whose values or identities they nonetheless share. Anticipatory representation, finally, refers to cases where representatives focus on what they *think* their constituents will approve at the next election, not on what they promised to do at the last election.

Taking this ‘creative’ aspect of representation one step further, Michael Saward (2006) advocates a shift towards understanding representation in terms of “representative claims,” which are utilized by would-be representatives to forge a distinction between themselves and the represented. These “claims to be representative” can be made by a variety of actors, which may include elected politicians but also “interest group or NGO figures, local figures, rock stars, [and] celebrities” (2006, 306). From this perspective, traditional notions of substantive representation are wrongly “unidirectional,” as they depict representatives acting for the represented who otherwise remain passive (2006, 300). Further, they ignore the fact 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” (2006, 300-301). This is because “would-be political representatives... *make claims* about themselves and their constituents and the links between the two” (2006, 302). Consequently, representation is not a passive procedure of receiving clear signals from below; rather, it is dynamic, performative, and constitutive.

Reframing representation in this way has implications for studying the substantive representation of women (SRW) by problematizing the existence and nature of ‘women’

as a group to be represented. Connecting these debates to insights in feminist theory, Judith Squires (2008) argues for shifting the analytical focus from ‘women’ to ‘gender.’ While ‘sex’ is generally taken to refer to the biological differences between women and men, ‘gender’ captures the social meanings given to these distinctions. The concept of gender, therefore, moves the focus away from binary opposites to a continuum of identities, at the same time that it replaces singular attention to women with a dual lens on the relative status of women and men. This shift, in turn, reframes the question from the extent to which women and their interests are represented in policy-making to the ways in which gender and gender relations are constructed in the representative process, a process that Squires labels the “constitutive representation of gender” (CRG). The allure of this approach is that it does not start from a pre-given category of ‘women’s interests,’ but instead, is concerned with the ways that these get constructed by those who claim to represent them. The CRG perspective thus focuses on the ways that representatives *speak about* gender relations and the interests and identities of their constituents, in contrast to the SRW literature which studies how representatives *speak for* their female constituents. As a consequence, the CRG approach concentrates on top-down processes, rather than the bottom-up perspective theorized with regard to the SRW. Taken together, these shifts reframe the research question from *whether* women are adequately represented to “*how* gender relations are constituted through representative claims making processes” (Squires 2008, 188; emphasis in original).

Combining these insights with the contributions of Mansbridge and Saward leads to the possibility of a new framework that, compared to traditional theories, incorporates (1) a broader range of actors and sites of representation and (2) a more fluid and dynamic

conception of ‘women’s interests.’ This approach recognizes that legislatures are one of many arenas where claims-making about ‘women’ and ‘women’s interests’ occurs. While these locations vary across countries and over time, they may include – among other possibilities – civil society groups, women’s policy agencies, political parties, and courts of various kinds (Baines and Rubio-Marin 2004; Sainsbury 2004; Squires 2008; Weldon 2002; cf. Urbinati and Warren 2008). In the course of making claims, these actors may both reinforce and contradict one another (Haas 2004; Holli 2008), leading to variations in the range of competing discourses on who ‘women’ are and what ‘women’ want. For feminists, this reframing presents an opportunity to recognize diversity among women by destabilizing the category of ‘women’ and denaturalizing the concept of ‘women’s interests’ (cf. Fuss 1989; Spelman 1989). While avoiding assertions about the essential nature of ‘women,’ however, this approach also explicitly names ‘women’ as a group, arguing the category worthy of further attention and examination, rather than emptying it of all significance. This solution is consistent with work arguing that ‘women’s issues’ are context-related and subject to evolution (Celis 2006; 2009), as well as a collective product that emerges as women interact to identify their priorities (Weldon 2002). It goes beyond these insights, however, to advocate more inductive research into the ways in which groups and their interests are constructed in the course of claims-making by a wide range of different actors.

Mapping Representative Claims: Patterns and Comparisons

Traditional research designs on the question of women’s political representation are relatively straightforward: they examine the policy priorities and legislative activities

of female MPs in relation to a pre-defined set of 'women's interests.' Efforts to analyze representative claims and their effects on definitions of 'women' and 'women's interests,' in contrast, require a new approach. To begin, it is no longer possible to pre-select elected bodies as the primary site where representation takes place; it is necessary to consider a range of possible actors and locations. It is also no longer sufficient to narrow the focus to a limited number of issue areas; it is vital to retain an open mind regarding the topics that might involve a gendered dimension and therefore contain claims about who women are and what women want. While the research is substantially more complex, an initial investigation points to the intellectual benefits of this approach. Four cases were selected for closer examination. Supporting the argument that 'women' and 'women's interests' are constructed through, and not simply reflected in, political advocacy on their behalf, the analysis reveals three categories of variations: (1) the key actors involved in debates over 'women's interests,' (2) the issues identified across sites and across countries, and (3) the views on the content of 'women's interests' in each issue area.

The cases chosen for closer study are Belgium, Finland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They were selected on the grounds that they share important features in common, at the same time that they reflect a broad array of contextual features that influence the opportunities and constraints for actors to articulate claims on behalf of women as a group. Together, these countries reflect a broad array of contextual features. Their political structures are unitary (Finland) and federal (Belgium, UK, US), and parliamentary (Belgium, Finland, UK) and presidential (Finland and US). Their electoral systems are proportional (Belgium, Finland) and majoritarian (UK, US), leading to both multi-party (Belgium, Finland) and two-party systems (UK, US). Finally, their state-

society relations are corporatist (Belgium, Finland) and pluralist (UK, US). As a consequence of these characteristics, the core actors and locations of representation vary across these states, as does the presence and strength of their women's policy agencies. Similarly, the descriptive representation of women in their national parliaments diverges to a great extent: the US has less than 17% women, while the UK has 20%, Belgium 35%, and Finland 42% (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2008). At the same time, however, the four countries also share important features in common: they are wealthy, democratic, and largely secular nations.

To discover how 'women' and 'women's interests' are constructed through claims-making, each case study begins by identifying the core actors and arenas that may play a role in representing groups and their interests. These locations will vary across countries, stemming from differences in state structures and state-society relations. Thus, although the focus in these four case studies is on actors in civil society, political parties, and the state, the analysis of other countries might also – or alternatively – include actors in the international realm, as well as a greater range of actors in these existing categories, like religious authorities in countries with less secular tendencies. The next step is to examine how these various actors articulate who women are and what women want, making note of the issues mentioned as well as their content. Although attention to actors and claims is presented in a step-wise fashion, however, this research design is best understood as an iterated and reflexive procedure, open to incorporating new actors, sites, and claims, should these manifest themselves over the course of the research.

To ensure that the data collected for each country is roughly comparable to one another, the paper examines representation claims at four moments in time: the year of

the previous election, the first year of the legislative session, the middle year of the legislative session, and the year of the most recent election. Given differing election cycles, slightly different years are investigated across the four countries. The goal of this research strategy is to investigate cases at similar stages of political decision-making cycles. The year of the election and the first year of the legislature are the ones in which political programs are put forward and political and civil society actors communicate extensively about their political priorities. The middle year of the legislature might be regarded as one of the most active ones and gives insight into ‘business as usual,’ in contrast to electoral years that may be more exceptional. Viewed together, these moments afford a series of snapshots into the various claims made on behalf of women as a group. Although the years chosen for analysis are defined by the legislative calendar, the analysis pays special attention to claims made by actors outside of parliamentary arenas regarding gender and gender relations. In selecting groups and claims for further study, special care was taken to include a diverse array of groups, both feminist and non- and even anti-feminist, as well as those speaking for dominant and marginalized groups. Their claims for representation are analyzed through key speeches and documents, including websites, manifestos, bills, press releases, declarations, and other decisions produced by each group of actors.

(**what follows is a very preliminary, initial analysis**)

Belgium

In Belgium, four main locations of representation were identified: governments and parliaments (both federal and regional), political parties (both Flemish- and French-

speaking), women's policy agencies (both federal and regional), and women's organizations (federal umbrella organizations). The relevant speeches and documents were analyzed for the years 2004-2006, 2006-2007, and 2008-2009. An examination of these claims reveals diverse views on 'women's interests,' with actors across sites often emphasizing different issues and actors within sites often presenting different perspectives on the same issues, reflecting opposing views on the proper role of women. On occasion, however, there is congruency and consensus within and across sites (see Table 1). Debates in government and parliament focused primarily on issues concerning women's participation in the labor market and the related issue of combining work and family demands. The question of how to reconcile women's economic rights with motherhood, therefore, continues to be a concern, despite first being introduced into parliamentary debates more than a century ago. Discussions in the regional parliaments differ somewhat: diversity and migrant women are prominent in debates in Flanders, while violence against women received more attention in Wallonia. The parliamentary committees on equality at both levels also focused on questions related to discrimination in insurance fees and women in neo-corporatist decision-making.

Moving to the political parties, there was a much greater deal of diversity on the issues and perspectives put forward. In addition, some parties – the Christian Democrats in particular – were more active than others in making claims on behalf of women as a group. While all parties addressed the wage gap and the glass ceiling, as well as pressed for measures to better combine work and family, there were important differences along ideological lines. Socialist parties were in favor of a 'soft quota' to increase women's participation in the job market, which the liberal parties opposed. Christian democrats

placed a stronger emphasis on promoting equality within the family as well as maternity issues. The extreme right, especially in their position on abortion, stressed the role of women as mothers and housewives. In terms of their position on migrant women, left-wing parties were more positive in their treatment, proposing concrete measures to assist with the specific problems of migrant women, with the goal of guaranteeing their equal rights. Right-wing parties, in contrast, were more passive and negative on this question. The liberals were less concrete in their proposals, the extreme right focused primarily on the irreconcilability of women's rights and Islam. In addition, there was an important difference across parties by language: French-speaking parties brought greater attention to the issue of violence against women, as compared to the Flemish-speaking parties.

Women's policy agencies dealt with a similar range of issues as government and parliamentary actors, focusing primarily on labor issues at the federal level, diversity and migrant women in Flanders, and violence against women in Wallonia. In comparison, women's organizations addressed more issues, including divorce, education, equal pay, migrant women, political representation, sexism in the media, single mothers, women's health, and work-family reconciliation. They also touched on issues overlooked almost entirely by other political actors, like sustainable development and role of women in peace building. Further, the treatment of issues across regions was more balanced than in other action locations: violence against women received attention in Flanders, as did migrant women in Wallonia. These patterns indicate that women's groups recognize a greater diversity in women's needs and experiences.

Finland

In Finland, four main locations of representation were identified: government and parliament, political parties, women's policy agencies, and women's organizations. The relevant speeches and documents were analyzed for the years 2003-2004, 2005, and 2007-2008. Two sets of issues were shared across actors and sites: women's position in the labor market and different manifestations of violence against women (see Table 2). The former has been a traditional and dominant concern of Finnish gender equality policy. All actors endorsed the need to reduce the gender pay gap (currently at 20%), increase women's employment, and create opportunities to reconcile work and family as key concerns for gender equality. All actors also held the view that men should be encouraged to take up the paternity leave and women should not be punished for taking maternity leave. An important sub-theme was decreasing gender segregation in the labor market. The Finnish labor market is amongst the most segregated in the Western world and is divided into 'women's jobs' and 'men's jobs,' and, as a result, 'women's employers' and 'men's employers.' Coupled with generous maternity and parental leave policies, this has had some detrimental consequences for women's employment, because the costs of parenting are not equally divided between women's and men's employers. This has resulted in a large number of short-term work contracts for young women because of the fear of employing costly young women. There was also a new theme and emphasis on women entrepreneurs and women in leadership positions, although this was not a priority identified by women's organizations. Women's groups, however, do lobby around questions of gender balance during election time.

The labor market policy is closely tied with family policies and childcare facilities. Childcare has been high on the agenda of the Finnish women's movement and state feminists since the 1960s and has become a concern of the state actors since the 1970s (Kantola 2006). On the issue of childcare women's concerns are framed differently on the political axis of left-right parties. Parties on the left traditionally stress the benefits of municipal childcare system and the statutory right of all children under the age of seven to a municipal childcare place (at low cost to parents). Parties on the right emphasize the parent's right to 'choose to stay at home' and care for their children. The key too here is the Home Care Allowance that enables (mainly) mothers to stay at home and look after their young children (Kantola 2006). The emergence of the populist right wing party the True Finns meant that the traditional family structure was argued to be a concern for women.

The second key theme shared by all actors across all sites was that of gender violence. Despite the fact that Finland tops the European statistics on domestic violence, the issue gained public attention only in the 1990s as a result of international and European pressure (Kantola 2006). It has since become the key concern for the women's movement, women's policy agencies, and also political and state actors as illustrated by the table. The language used by the political parties, parliamentary and governmental actors is that of gender neutral 'partnership violence' rather than more political and gendered 'violence against women'. The women's movement organizations try to keep the gendered nature of the violence on the agenda. Despite the high prominence of the issue it has to be noted that little has been done nationally to tackle violence against women. Closely connected but separate is the issue of trafficking in women and

prostitution that is seen by all actors as a women's concern. There is a high level of consensus among the women's organizations, women's movement, and women's policy agencies on criminalizing buying sex along the lines of the Swedish model.

Within the women's policy agencies, there are clear differences across agencies. The gender equality ombudsman represents women's concerns mainly in relation to the labor market. The Gender Equality Council, by contrast, extends the focus to topics such as gender violence, trafficking, and women and the media, and gives a central role to men and gender equality. This includes both men's role in gender equality work and male-specific topics such as military conscription. These differences are understandable when looking at the different mandates of these bodies (see Holli and Kantola 2007: 85). The Equality Ombudsman has a law-enforcing function: it supervising compliance with the Act on Equality between Women and Men, giving statements on individual citizens' complaints on gender discrimination as well as providing advice and information on the law and its application. The law thus sets boundaries on its action and articulations of women's concerns although, in line with the Nordic tradition and in contrast to the UK one, it has strong 'equality promotion' tasks. Hence there is the emphasis on gender equality planning in the workplace. The ministerial Gender Equality Unit, in turn, has the executive-administrative function of preparing and developing governmental gender equality policy and implementing gender mainstreaming. The Council for Equality between Women and Men embraces a political-advisory function. It is a parliamentary advisory body consisting of thirteen members, most often MPs, nominated by the Cabinet on the suggestion by political parties, as well as women's movement representative.

Unlike state and political party actors, women's movement organizations place emphasis on gendered stereotypes and women in the media. New concerns articulated by them include a focus on young girls, schools, and education, all of which are seen as a way to influence gender equality in the future. The issue of women's diversity is mentioned by some of the actors, but framing it as a key gender equality issue or women's concern is clearly missing from the Finnish debate. Gender is rarely considered in conjunction with the other basis of inequality such as class, race and ethnicity, religion, disability, age, or sexual orientation. Political parties' women's organizations mention elderly women and the issue of poverty. The Green party program takes up the rights to family of lesbians and gay men. The Gender Equality Council mentions the multiple discrimination faced by disabled women. Gender and ethnicity or immigration is seen as important by both the women's organizations in the political parties and the women's policy agencies. Unlike in Belgium, however, the issue of ethnic minority women is not a key concern for any of the actors. This is characteristic of the Finnish gender equality policy more broadly. It has been suggested by a number of commentators that it mainly focuses on the equality of the white heterosexual working mother (Kantola 2006; Raevaara 2004). This is also a key criticism directed at the Nordic public policy on gender equality, the priorities of the women's policy agencies and the women's movements. 'Mainstream' gender equality issues that have characterized the Finnish agenda for years including women's labor market participation, equal pay, and childcare facilities may have little relevance for black and ethnic minority women.

Finally, it is notable that there is little emphasis on international issues, for example development aid. Globalization and its gendered consequences are mentioned by

some actors, such as the political parties' women's organizations. Health, reproductive rights, abortion, taxation, pensions, and technology are issues mentioned only by actors in one site. Attention to gender mainstreaming is partly a result of EU influence (Holli and Kantola 2007) and is kept on the agenda by the government and the governmental Gender Equality Unit. Women's movement organizations have adopted the language of gender mainstreaming too, although they do not articulate it as a key women's concern. Related to gender mainstreaming is the new emerging emphasis on gender budgeting.

United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, four main locations of representation were identified: government and parliament, political parties, women's policy agencies, and women's organizations. The relevant speeches and documents were analyzed for the years 2004-2005, 2005-2006, and 2007-2008. There were six issues raised across actors in all sites: violence against women, pensions, equal pay, political participation and representation, flexible working, and maternity provisions (see Table 3). Four were raised across four sites: childcare, equal opportunities and discrimination, education, and employment. In the parliamentary setting, the concerns constituted and addressed as women's concerns are fewer than those articulated by political parties, suggesting a filtering system. Both the Queen's and the prorogation speeches are brief and succinct, not only including few concerns but also offering little substance to how the government sought to deal with these concerns or had acted on these concerns. For example, the government would be "improving childcare," "extending maternity benefits," and "tackling" the gender pay gap. Nonetheless, these parliamentary debates are also sites of partisan politics, with

politicians on both sides praising their record and criticizing their opponents. To illustrate, opposition leader David Cameron accused Prime Minister Gordon Brown of copying the Conservative party's policy on flexible working. Even so, there are very few indications of challenges over direction: all parties seemed to be traveling along the same path in parliamentary debates. One exception was abortion: while this issue is subject to a 'free vote,' Labour MPs are more likely to favor easier access and Conservative ones more restrictive approaches. A backbench Conservative MP, David Amess, for example, was "fearful" that a government Bill might make "having an abortion even easier."

Significant party differences are apparent in the distribution of women's concerns across the political parties' manifestos. The Conservatives primarily discussed women's concerns in respect to "bringing back matrons" to keep hospitals clean, offered childcare payment for informal as well as formal care, offered respite for carers, and more flexible maternity pay and leave. The last is an issue that all parties agree on in principle. In contrast, the parties in the center and on the left addressed a wider range of women's issues. The Liberal Democrats had more policy prescriptions than Labour, even where both parties addressed the same concerns and were broadly in the same direction of travel. Moreover, the Liberal Democrats, the smallest party, identified a number of issues not traditionally recognized as 'women's issues' as being of direct concern to women. For example, they noted that student loans for university had a harsher impact on women because of women's unequal pay, women had greater contact with the National Health Service as both patients and as those who bring others into contact with these services, and women were more worried about violent crime.

There are inter and intra party differences in terms of the breadth of concerns constructed as women's concerns by the parties' women's organizations too. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the Conservative Women's Organization, the Parliamentary Labour Party women's committee, and the Women Liberal Democrats highlight a greater number of concerns than their parties, including those addressed by their respective party leaders on BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour in the run up to the 2005 elections. The party leaders also varied in their positions. The Conservative leader was less at ease talking about shared childcare, rejected any extension to flexible working, rejected a citizen pension which would compensate for women's absence from the paid employment market, and made a strong statement in favor of marriage. The other leaders recognized the increasing role of men in childcare. Even so, there is some consensus between Labour and Conservative leaders about the importance of the business interest relative to women's participation in paid employment and the gender pay gap.

Contrasting the women's organizations inside the parties, there was significant overlap in what they identified as women's concerns: employment, pensions, political participation, health, violence against women, childcare, international development, and a desire to women vote at the 2005 general election. The Conservatives also addressed other issues, most notably those associated with women's roles as peacemakers, victims of rape in war, the environment, and the gender pay gap. Initially at least, the focus by the CWO on some of these concerns particularly women's relationship with paid employment might look surprising given Conservative women's more traditional outlook. However, their focus on international dimension and violence against women might be regarded as reflecting a longer standing and more traditional concern with 'women's

condition' (i.e., women as the victims of men). It was the WLD, however, that discussed the most extensive set of women's concerns, including those that were explicitly gendered as well as concerns that are not normally identified in this way, such as a criticism of local council tax, public transport, or student loans.

The parliamentary questions to the women's ministers showed evidence of partisan politics, both in the style of the questions and parties' policy prescriptions. Two examples of the former include: Vera Baird, a Labour woman MP who congratulated the Minister on setting up the Women and Work Commission, whereas Eleanor Laing, a Conservative woman MP, who noted that the Chancellor of the Exchequer had reduce the value of pensions. Examples of the latter include an interaction between Laing and Hewitt (the Minister for Women) regarding flexible working. Laing states: "does she not agree that parents – especially mothers – do not need to be patronized by central government and told what they have to do to look after their children," or on another occasion, consideration of the business interest by Laing: "Will she consider the Equal Opportunities Commission's proposal to make enforcement of equal pay rates easier, while not putting unnecessary burdens on businesses, particularly small businesses?" or in respect of political participation: "does she share with me the happy anticipation that, when my party occupies the Government Benches in only a few weeks' time, there will be more than 40 women on our side?" to which the Minister replied: "I am proud of the fact that our party took advantage of that [Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates)] Act to take such positive action. I regret that the Opposition parties did not do so." Examining women's policy agencies as separate actors, clear differences of focus are evident: whereas the Women's Minister was asked about and responded to questions most often

on women's employment and education concerns – including the gender pay gap and equal pay, pensions and poverty, flexible working and the role of carers – as well as equal opportunities more generally and political participation and representation. In contrast, the Women's National Commission's emphasis was on violence against women, international development, and peace and immigration and asylum, together some attention given to trade.

In civil society, the women's organizations unsurprisingly emphasized their own particular areas of concern: immigration and asylum for Southall Black sisters, violence for Women's Aid, and sexuality for Stonewall. Of note, however, is the way in which some concerns are addressed by each other. For example, Women's Aid, SBS, and Fawcett all considered immigration and asylum, while Stonewall hosted a LGBT Muslim conference. At the same time, questions related to human trafficking, fatherhood, and women's experiences of the criminal justice system were raised by both Fawcett and Women's Aid. The Fawcett society, the UK's leading generalist women's rights pressure group, was consistent about the concerns it acted on and was prescriptive in what needed to be done. For example its demands for equal pay include: compulsory pay audits, well-enforced laws to ensure fair treatment of part-time employees, an increase in the minimum wage, full sign-up to the Working Time Directive, and training and skills initiatives to meet women's needs. As an avowedly feminist organization, Fawcett's demands were underpinned by both a valuation of women's traditional work in the private sphere, such as caring for children, as well calling for women's equality in the public sphere. It also wished to see rights extended to men in respect of childcare and paternity leave and pay. Furthermore, it highlighted issues such as women's experiences

of the criminal justice system: it claimed that imprisoning women might not be the best method of dealing with women's criminality and that the prison system was in effect designed for men. It also suggested that imprisonment might impact negatively on women's mental health by noting women's higher suicide rates in prison and occurrences of self-harm. Children's well-being might also be negatively affected if their mothers were placed in prison. Another example is their emphasis on women's safety on public transport: its 2005 General Election briefing "how will you tackle bogus minicab drivers who target women?"

United States

In the United States, five main locations of representation were identified: the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, as well as political parties and women's organizations. The relevant speeches and documents were analyzed for the years 2004-2005, 2006, and 2007-2008. Senators and Representatives introduced a large number of resolutions in a variety of different issue areas that explicitly mentioned women or women's concerns. A number of prominent bills were introduced related to equal pay and fair labor standards; reproductive rights, including contraception, deceptive advertising in abortion clinics, family planning, and infertility; women's health, including access to care and medicine; violence against women, both in the U.S. and abroad and also recognizing particular challenges faced by immigrant women; and women's rights internationally, especially comments on developments in various countries abroad. There were also a large number of congratulations extended to female athletes and soldiers. The issues that received the most attention were also those with the widest range of initiatives

and views expressed. The greatest diversity of views overall were expressed in relation to reproductive rights, but women's health, equal pay, and women's rights internationally also captured a wide range of viewpoints.

The president's speeches and initiatives were not yet analyzed. However, it is notable that the government of George W. Bush was associated with a number of prominent policy initiatives related to women as a group. Most notably, Bush reinstated the 'global gag rule,' which prevents U.S. government funding of health clinics abroad that provide information on abortion services, and women's rights under the Taliban were used in the discourse leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan. The Supreme Court made several key and controversial decisions during the years examined. Two concerned the right to abortion: one decision ended protection against abortion clinic violence, while the other upheld the nation's first abortion procedure ban (intact dilation and extraction, framed misleadingly as "partial birth abortion"). The other was a decision that reversed decades of precedent regarding the right to sue employers for pay discrimination. In all instances, the court was almost evenly split through 5-4 decisions.

The two main political parties have very distinct profiles with regard to the extent and direction of their attention to women as a group. A comparison of the priorities of the various candidates for president in 2008 offers a striking contrast: whereas Republican John McCain did not specifically identify women's issues as an area of concern, yet nominated a female vice presidential candidate, Democrats Barack Obama and Joe Biden offered an extensive list of priority issues in relation to women. These included women's health, reproductive choice, violence against women, pay equity and other workplace issues, national security, poverty, and education (including the need to defend Title IX, a

measure that promotes equal opportunities in education, both in the classroom and in school athletic programs; the latter is especially controversial). Hillary Clinton's Senate website also focuses on equal pay and promoting women's access to "non-traditional jobs," the need to prevent unwanted pregnancies especially among teens, and the need to combat violence against women. The Republican Party is divided among economic and social conservatives, but in general seeks to curb the right to abortion and promote "family values." Republican committee chairs in Congress have also created important obstacles to the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment and U.S. ratification of the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Women's organizations, as in the other three cases, articulate the broadest range of women's issues. Comparing the claims of feminist and non-feminist organizations also offers a sense of the diversity of normative positions taken on 'women's interests' by these groups. The National Organization for Women gives the greatest priority in their campaigns to questions surrounding abortion, violence against women, constitutional equality (which they link to Title IX), diversity among women, and economic justice and equal pay. Although they had endorsed Hillary Clinton as candidate for president, they later issued a statement against Sarah Palin's candidacy, arguing that voting for her was "against women's self interest." The Feminist Majority Foundation, which also publishes *Ms. Magazine*, organizes the vast majority of its campaigns in relation to Afghan women, global feminism and the global gag rule, issues related to women's health, and Title IX (emphasizing the sports component). The Independent Women's Forum, in contrast, includes the tagline on their website: "All issues are women's issues." It describes its mission as "advancing economic liberty, personal responsibility, and political freedom."

Reflecting its economic conservatism, the group has issued position statements against Title IX and recent efforts to institute equal pay. Interestingly, however, they are in favor of interventions globally in favor of women's rights in countries like Afghanistan. They are also concerned about sexism in the media, especially in relation to female candidates.

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Table 1. Key Actors and Issues in Belgium

<p><i>Civil Society</i> Divorce, education, equal pay, migrant women, political representation, sexism in the media, single mothers, women's health, work-family reconciliation</p> <p><i>Political Parties</i> Abortion, equal pay, equality in family, maternity and motherhood, migrant women, work-family reconciliation</p> <p><i>Parliaments</i> Employment, migrant women, violence against women, work-family reconciliation</p> <p><i>State Agencies</i> Equal pay, migrant women, violence against women</p>
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Table 2. Key Actors and Issues in Finland

Civil Society

Education, equal pay, gender segregation in labor market, political representation, trafficking and prostitution, work-family reconciliation

Political Parties

Child care, eldercare, equal pay, gender segregation in labor market, poverty, trafficking and prostitution, work-family reconciliation

Parliament

Equal pay, gender segregation in labor market, trafficking and prostitution, work-family reconciliation

State Agencies

Equal pay, gender mainstreaming, gender segregation in labor market, sexism in the media, trafficking and prostitution, work-family reconciliation

Table 3. Key Actors and Issues in the United Kingdom

<p><i>Civil Society</i> Education, equal pay, child care, discrimination, flexible working, maternity provisions, pensions, political participation and representation, violence against women</p> <p><i>Political Parties</i> Education, employment, equal pay, child care, discrimination, flexible working, maternity provisions, pensions, political participation and representation, violence against women</p> <p><i>Party Women's Organizations</i> Education, employment, equal pay, child care, flexible working, maternity provisions, pensions, political participation and representation, violence against women</p> <p><i>Parliament</i> Education, employment, equal pay, childcare, discrimination, flexible working, maternity provisions, pensions, political participation and representation, violence against women</p> <p><i>State Agencies</i> Education, employment, equal pay, discrimination, flexible working, maternity provisions, pensions, political participation and representation, violence against women</p>

Table 4. Key Actors and Issues in the United States

<p><i>Civil Society</i> Abortion, diversity among women, education (Title IX), equal pay, gay rights, sexism in the media, violence against women, women's health, women's rights internationally</p> <p><i>Political Parties</i> Education (Title IX), equal pay, reproductive rights, violence against women, women's health</p> <p><i>Parliament</i> Equal pay, reproductive rights, violence against women, women in business, women in sports, women's health, women's rights internationally</p> <p><i>President</i> (*not yet analyzed)</p> <p><i>Courts</i> Abortion, equal pay</p>
