

Unsettling the Gendered Power Paradigm: Discomfort, Dissonance and Dissention among Women in Local Government

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Abstract

Despite decades of efforts to achieve gender equity in political life, women remain under-represented in nearly all levels of government. In this paper, we explore the experiences offered by women who have been elected to local government in the province of British Columbia, Canada, to illustrate the persistence of gendered discourses and patriarchal practices within political systems. Drawing upon Bashevkin's (2009) recent discussion of how women's political roles are undermined through the *discomfort equation*, we consider how feminist, adult education offers the potential for creating critical spaces that will support women's greater inclusion in local government.

Keywords: feminist adult education, political learning, gender, politics

Résumé

Malgré des décennies d'efforts en faveur de l'égalité des sexes dans la vie politique, les femmes restent sous-représentées à presque tous les niveaux du gouvernement. Dans cet article, nous nous intéressons aux expériences partagées par des femmes qui ont été élues dans une collectivité locale de la province de la Colombie-Britannique, au Canada, afin d'illustrer la persistance du sexisme systémique ainsi que des pratiques patriarcales au sein des systèmes politiques. S'appuyant sur la récente analyse de Bashevkin (2009) sur la façon dont les rôles des femmes en politique sont minés par l'équation de l'inconfort (femme + pouvoir), nous examinons comment l'enseignement féministe pour adultes offre la possibilité de créer un espace critique qui va oeuvrer en faveur d'une meilleure intégration des femmes dans les collectivités locales.

Mots clés : enseignement féministe pour adultes, apprentissage politique, genre, politique

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Introduction

Bashevkin (2009) recently argued that gendered discourses permeate the ways in which women in politics are perceived and evaluated. She calls this tendency to undermine women in political leadership “the discomfort equation”(p. 2). This concept draws attention to two different but related discourses that doubly marginalize women’s participation in political life. The first discourse that limits women’s participation in political life is that it is gendered—that is, the historical, cultural, and naturalized belief systems about politics as a male-centered domain. The second discourse is that of devaluation; this refers to public and media discourses that denigrate civic life and participation within it. Bashevkin (2009) argues that these two discourses operate iteratively at a macro and micro level, such that women are caught in “a pincer movement that constrains public involvement . . . and permits all the [gender based] patterns . . . to continue” (p. 117). This double bind of naturalized patriarchy and the continual devaluation of democratic processes have had serious consequences for women. As Heard (2008) and Bashevkin (2009) both note, women’s participation in public life in Canada, despite some years of growth in the 1970s and 1980s, is now declining. If participatory democracy is to thrive, all voices—and at least 50% of these voices are women’s—must be represented in political decision making. The question for feminists and educators is: how can such patterns be broken so that women can take up their rightful roles as representatives of and for communities—roles that challenge gendered

assumptions and processes of devaluation? Specifically as feminist educators, we ask the question: how might *political education* be theorized and used as a liberatory tool for such work?

In this article, we document a recently completed study of women in British Columbia who are involved in activities at the local (municipal) level of government so as to better understand the relationships between women's political marginalization, education, and civic agency. We provide evidence of how gendered dynamics are naturalized by women and men in local government, as well as consider how the devaluation of political life creates a double bind for many women who are either involved in, or considering, becoming involved in formal political roles. In particular, we consider how women involved in municipal government currently conceptualize political education, examine the kinds of political learning they value, and the degree to which their learning enabled or constrained access to political leadership roles for them. After examining the educational strategies used by two different political education programmes and considering their potential for enhancing women's roles in formal political life, we suggest that a *differentiated universalisation* educational framework, one modeled after the work of Lister (1997), and centered in feminist educational practices of consciousness raising and recognition of difference, might provide a means of breaking the double bind of gender in political life.

Feminist Adult Education and Political Learning

Feminist adult educators work from a premise that social conditioning has left some women bereft of personal power and a sense of their own subjectivities (Heng,

1996). Within feminist adult education, there are primarily two strategies for empowerment. The first is the liberal, individual approach that places an emphasis on self-direction and personal growth through knowledge and skills acquisition. The aims are to enhance self-esteem, build confidence, encourage voice, and develop a stronger sense of personal identity and agency (Barr, 1999; English, 2001; Walters & Manicom, 1996). The second view of empowerment held by feminists concerns the critical and collective. Since it is “social and political systems which create exclusion and seriously damage people’s lives” (Thompson, 1995, p.145), education needs to be aimed at raising critical consciousness, encouraging critical thinking and reflection, and developing a stronger sense of social agency. They contend that learning devoted solely to “personhood” and “individual self-fulfillment” can be devoid of the socially contextual understandings needed for social or political change (Thompson, 1995). Walters and Manicom (1996) refer to this as “the construction of political subjectivity” (p.17) and they, like others, argue this political subjectivity emerges from and is created within in particular contexts that determine the extent to which particular discourses can be enacted, reproduced, or altered (Wenger, 1998).

We must also acknowledge how the shaping of assumptions on which knowledge continues to be based is influential primarily because women are not always entirely aware of how many discourses operate.. Critical feminists use multiple literacy strategies to uncover these hidden, embedded discursive practices that create hierarchies, marginalise, and exclude— recognising women’s participation as “a continual and complex theoretical and practical process of learning about and within relations and

practices of power” (Pessoa de Carvalho & Rabay, 1999, p. 1). Effective processes that enable the development of a collective voice build this “through dialogue, exchange . . . and by joining forces” (Jain, 2004, p. 65). It is this long-expressed desire by feminist scholars to effect change within political cultures—which have marginalized women’s participation—that informed the study reported on here. Could a different kind of political education, one that draws upon the strengths of current training programmes, but informed by the experiences and knowledge of currently-serving women politicians, offer another way of approaching the existing gender gap?

Defining Political Education

Political education has increasingly become an interest of citizenship educators in the context of the K-12 school system: often described as democratic or civic education, the goal of such programmes and curricula has been to “prepare” youth for their role as citizens, providing them with the skills and attitudes necessary for supporting their active participation in civic life (Hébert, 2002; Osborne, 2000; Sears & Perry, 2000). These programmes also attempt to address the reported “democratic deficit” among youth—designs motivated by a concern with declining rates of political participation by a younger demographic (Sears & Margison, 2006).

There is a long history of adult educators engaging with communities through diverse forms of political education. Examples are the National Farm Radio Forum and the extension work of St. Francis Xavier University and Frontier College. Adults have learned collectively to link the issues in their lives with political involvement at local, provincial, or federal levels. Through this involvement, they gained a sense of agency to

act upon their learning (Selman, 2001). In contemporary contexts, labour or union educators continue this tradition, politicizing their members to more take a more active role in shaping their own futures.

Like feminist adult education, there are also tensions within the field of political education and learning. Adult educators, as noted earlier, take different roles based on how they perceive the educational purposes of their work: for some, social transformation and individual self-actualization remain central to their purposes (Plumb & Welton, 2001). Yet some forms of adult political education focus more on organizational and legal and/or technical-rational forms of knowledge and political decision making. Such organizations see educational programming as a type of market, with knowledge gaps identified and then delivered to fulfill a particular educational need or needs. These educational organizations can be either publicly or privately funded and are characterized by their emphasis on preparing adults for the knowledge economy in the “learning age” (Butler, 2001, p. 60). While providing educational opportunity within this organizational model has powerful economic and personal benefits, there is evidence to suggest this may serve to devalue or undermine potential public or social benefits, including the goal of creating a diverse, vibrant, and participatory polity.

Political education for adults is predominantly characterized as non-formal and informal. Non-formal adult education is an intentional, collective, or group education process such as a community workshop or a union training session. Informal learning is a self-directed, individual (although sometimes mentored) activity that involves things such as searching the web or reading policy papers to garner knowledge and information. Both

non-formal educational programming and informal political learning are topics we explore in this article to help us understand how the women we interviewed came to develop their political knowledge and further, to provide a context for understanding the overlapping and multiple sites where political learning and education happen. Some of these competing tensions we noted earlier are evident in the two non-formal programmes that are reported on in this study.

Methodology

In this paper, we draw upon the experiences of 14 women who participated in a larger comparative study of women's political experiences. All of these women were locally elected representatives from British Columbia, ranging in experience from one to 20 years in municipal, school board, or regional levels of government. We recruited these women for participation in three ways. First, while attending an annual conference for British Columbia (BC) municipal politicians; secondly via snowball sampling from participants recruited at this event, and thirdly, we recruited currently-serving politicians among women participants in a two-day educational programme (held following elections) – offered by the British Columbia Local Government Leadership Academy (BCLGLA). All participants signed voluntary consent forms. Our interviews focused on the participants' experiences as women politicians and how education was implicated in their political learning. We also directly observed two political education programmes: the Women's Campaign School (WCS) and the BCLGLA. In addition, we interviewed two women—one from each organization—who were primarily responsible for the design and delivery of these programmes. Each interview transcript was member

checked; observation notes were reviewed by both authors and then thematically coded. These codes were compared and then thematically grouped. Finally, researcher notes and journal entries were reviewed and analyzed.

Findings

We turn now to the findings of our study. We begin with a summary of the participants' description of their political learning needs, based on a categorizing framework we developed that included practical, tactical, transformative, and emancipatory forms of knowledge. This is followed by a discussion of the dominant discourses within the training programmes and how these enabled or constrained women's political knowledge and practice. Finally, our own reflections as feminist adult educators are analyzed as a means of teasing out the implications of our findings. Please note that all names are pseudonyms.

Practical and Tactical Education

As a politician, you learn by the seat of your pants.

—Annie

The importance of practical knowledge was discussed frequently among all participants; many spoke of the ways in which this practical knowledge had been acquired, including through mentors, observation on-the-job, workshops and/or training programmes or “trial by fire.” Practical knowledge was valued because it provided immediate assistance during an event, such as seeking a nomination or developing an election advertisement. Professional training—particularly around media issues—was also highly valued, and many identified this as a core learning need. Practical knowledge of governance structures, rules of order, various forms of legislation and/or procedural

rules were all seen as critical, particularly when seeking election or in the early days of one's experiences in political life. Tactical knowledge was characterized differently: here we heard how women understood the need to read the "invisible" cultures in which they had become immersed. Tactical knowledge—also characterized as strategic knowledge—describes the interplay of the interpersonal, contexts, politics, ideologies, beliefs, positionality, and gendered identities as critical sense making work.

Few spoke of the need to address gender issues specifically; our direct questions prompted responses that ranged from support for gender specific training to a flat-out denial of any such need. Yet we knew from the many stories women told about their experiences in this male-dominated culture that there needed to be effort put into tackling the blatant and subtle forms of stereotyping that occurs on an ongoing basis, both in and outside of non-formal educational settings. Nancy was one of the few who made specific reference to the need for gender analysis in her training. She said there was a need for:

workshops talking about the background and discussing the differences and how to maneuver different sexist scenarios and especially situations that they may not even see the situation as sexist... Our mayor is a bully... he is mauling¹ me sometimes... I ignore it, some people say just to ignore it, but no one calls him on it, it's been going on for 30 years. Obviously ignoring it doesn't work.

When we probed for a deeper understanding of how participants understood the importance of education for becoming political change agents, we heard a shift in tone.

1

We assume that "mauling" refers to inappropriate physical touching

As Anita put it: “It began to make me aware that there were layers of knowledge that I did not have that I had to get before I would be effective.” This idea of knowledge being layered was an important way in which they characterized the nature of political learning needed for taking on a role as transformational change agents.

The Power of Learning and Learning about Power

All learning is complex and situated; none more so than political learning. An important part of the educative process is tracing how particular practices of political education either enable or constrain women participants from taking up roles within the political system; that is to say, such programmatic activities iteratively shape political or civic subjectivities (McGregor, Clover, Farrell, M., & Battacharay, 2009; Rogers, 2004). Yet we do not assert direct causality; in other words, programmatic activities, socio-political, and historical discourses and everyday experiences all recursively shape how women engage in and understand political life. Political learning can best be understood as part of a learning ecology framework (Barron, 2006). Such a model emphasizes that learning is always situated in local contexts and embedded within multiple communities of practice that “serve as critical mediators of cognitive and social practices” (p. 197). However, an understanding of the non-formal political educational sites in which these women participated is an important point of analysis, and we discuss these sites next.

Political Education in Two Sites

Some of the women who took part in our study were participants in an annual, non-partisan, three-day training programme—the WCS—aimed at encouraging women to seek the nomination at whatever level of politics or to whatever party. Run by volunteers,

the WCS uses past and current women politicians as trainers and guest speakers, and schedules sessions on managing campaign finances, working with the media, political communication skills, and even a “mock-campaign” development exercise: women are assigned to small groups and for the duration of the three days, meet informally to organize a campaign. Each group must choose the candidate, take on other campaign roles, and develop a successful campaign.

Currently serving politicians who participated in this study came from a group who had taken part in a two-day educational programme (held following elections)—offered by the BCLGLA. Financed initially by the province of British Columbia as a leadership development initiative and aimed at newly elected male and female politicians, the BCLGLA also uses past and current politicians as presenters, and hosts sessions on finance, roles and responsibilities within local government, applicable laws. It also includes a media panel and sessions on specific leadership skills, such as how to run meetings. In both programmes, politicians share stories of triumph and pain.

The philosophies and audiences of the two programmes may differ, but they share some common beliefs. The overall goal of the WCS is to encourage as many women as possible to participate in the political process. Its mantra is: “Non- partisan: very deliberate. It’s [the WCS] about the hands-on skills that women need to get elected. We can find, as women, common ground with anybody” (WCS educator). In its programme design, it attempts to balance experiential learning with knowledge presentation.

The LGLA uses more of a knowledge delivery/workshop model, typically beginning each day with a common plenary session for all, followed by concurrent

sessions designed to address the needs of different regional representatives (and their concomitant differing governance models), as well as addressing the learning needs of both novice and experienced politicians. While sessions were differentiated on the basis of experience and type of elected position, they had no sessions for women only. A woman trainer in the LGLA described their philosophy like this:

The key goals are . . . foundational training—the basics, the law, the procedures, current practices—how to function in the meeting, Roberts Rules of Order—the real core skill building. We want to communicate information. Really, you cannot generate knowledge about the Charter, you need to absorb it. . . . We have never focused on [women] because we have a hard enough time fitting in what we do. I would have a level of discomfort at doing that . . . I would probably not initiate that. I think it would cause tension and a separation between the women and men politicians.”(BCLGLA educator)

Both approaches emphasize the need for foundational knowledge and skills and in that sense, echo the discourses of the knowledge economy and the organizational (in this case, municipal government) benefits. Both characterize their work as contributing to purposeful civic life and explore the ways in which civic systems operate. Yet they differ in how they emphasize the operation of power. In the LGLA, the discussion of power emphasized its authoritative and legal nature; that is, power was assumed to flow from the political positions its participants held. Institutional knowledge affords and maintains power over others. In contrast, the WCS training programme emphasized the operation of power as a form of personal, social, and political capital, one that could be nurtured and developed. Political knowledge is useful not only in understanding organizational power, but in learning about power relations, particularly in how gender operates as a

feature of this dynamic. Despite different approaches to understanding the power-knowledge dynamic, both programmes also conveyed a belief in political work as gender neutral, as our subsequent discussions will make clear.

In the next section of this article we summarize key themes discerned through our analysis of the enabling and constraining discourses we heard from the participants when describing their political understandings, knowledge and learning. How these themes are reified and/or disrupted—in other words, the extent to which women “took up” or attempted to disrupt dominant beliefs about political culture—in non-formal and informal learning settings- are also traced.

Gender Binaries: Constraining Effects

My public conduct reflects on all other women whether they are in public service or not. Everything I do when noticed by others says “oh yeah, what a stupid dumb broad” or they say “oh she really thought about that before she opened her mouth.”

—Rebecca

Most of the women we interviewed acknowledged that they understood they “represented” women generally and that they were being measured by a standard that did not assume women capable of engaging successfully in politics. While not always as explicit as Rebecca’s comment above, each of the women described the ways in which she struggled to take up a role that was not “naturally” part of her life. Most expressed this in the form of a comment about competing priorities: family obligations were barriers to their participation—although this was most frequently expressed as their “choice” to wait until their children were grown or until they could become financially stable.

A second barrier frequently identified was how they were perceived by others as to their qualifications for public life: this became evident in how they described their approach to making themselves “sellable” as political agents. While there was acknowledgement of their work as mothers, parent representatives in schools, or their role as community activists in fields such as environmental education, childcare, or education, they understood that such work was not considered a typical measure of political readiness. As Nancy put it, while their lives were devoted to altering the conditions of individuals or families in the community, their work was really “invisible” to the broader political community and society at large. Several women described how they had to be coached to understand how their work in their homes and communities had given them a set of skills that would be useful in political work. Others, like Patricia, described how she could not even imagine how to put together an election brochure given her lack of political experience; this despite years of work as a journalist and a volunteer at a women’s center. We wondered how did such beliefs emerge? Were they the product of a form of political education that valued some experiences—those in the more typical public sphere—over others, such as those in private life? Or, are these beliefs more deeply engrained in the naturalization of political cultures just “being a certain way”?

A third barrier was gender stereotyping. We heard how women were “expected to look pretty, act like a lady, speak when spoken to, not really expected to do much” (June) or required to “wear a ‘power suit’ to show you had the ‘right’ political look” (Doris). Post-election experiences also focused on how gendered dynamics played out in the paid work women were given once elected: June talked about being given “the fluff jobs,

certainly not the important ones like finances or public works!” Gender dynamics played out as well in what work women were assigned: one woman told the story of becoming an expert in local emergency social services when none of her male colleagues were interested in the issues, although that changed later when a major disaster hit the community and there was more prominence given to the issue in the media. Jane put it like this:

It’s very common for men to steal women’s ideas. I don’t know how often I’ve said something in a council or more formal meeting . . . and then 10 minutes later a male councilor will say the same thing and then they say “Yeah, that’s a great idea.” It still holds that when a man says something it seems to have more authority than when a woman says it.

We were not surprised by these stories; they reinforce other literature we have read about the experiences of women in political life (Bashevkin, 1993; Brodie, 1995; Edwards, 2008) and which are foundational understandings that inform gender-specific training programmes, such as the one offered by the WCS. For example, the WCS deliberately schedules a session with practicing women politicians who challenge gender stereotypes, and describe positive strategies such as social and relational networking, drawing upon community and family experiences, and emphasizing a deliberate reframing of women’s political perspectives as central to restoring healthy and socially just communities. Yet, do such approaches transform political learning or do they simply serve to reinforce existing binaries and differences between men and women’s political practices?

Politics is understood as a male-centric culture—a deeply naturalized political master narrative that “create[s] a particular kind of social world, with specified heroes

and villains, deserving and undeserving people” (cited in Sandlin and Clarke, 2009, p. 1002). Local narratives—those stories told and retold in particular discursive communities frequently reinforce these frames or ways of thinking about politics and gender. In other words, if we simply create stories designed to supplant women’s success into a man’s political culture, have we shifted the dynamic or simply bootstrapped ourselves to new binaries? Understanding the interplay and mutually reinforcing nature of how these binaries continually operate outside of and within educational programmes is an important point of discussion: these gendered stories have long discursive roots and leave powerful traces which continuously name/frame and/or re-position gendered binaries in new political locations.

It’s a Man’s World?

[It’s a] toxic hierarchical male underground culture. I guess it’s helpful to know it but certainly not to buy into it.

—Patricia

It’s called “potty parity.”²

—Jennifer

It’s a sign of a healthy democracy when you end up with equal numbers at the ballot box.

—Ruth

We heard many examples of women struggling against what they saw as male-centered practices in political life as the above three quotes make clear. Clearly these women experienced politics as a “male” domain, a cultural containment strategy that places boundaries around what was considered acceptable, and they attempted to challenge and stretch beyond these. Yet the stories were not just about their struggle, they

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This expression we understood to be a play on the term “party,” implying a need for having balance between men and women in political life.

were often framed to positively portray what women might offer as an alternative vision for re-creating politics as a positive endeavour.

You gotta love it, have a passion and believe that you can make a difference because you can.

—Louise.

Women tend to be more humble. I do not stand up and give a speech—it is about the team.

—Debbie

Women are able to see the big picture; to take the little pieces or projects in the community and to see how they fit together... no issue is black or white, there are many perspectives that need to be considered.

—June

Women bring to politics, the understanding of the importance of relationships... Our politics, the back room stuff, all come from the relationships.

—Charlotte

In the examples above we see strong evidence that women understand the attitudes and understandings they bring from their work in communities, families, and not-for-profit organizations as being central to the ways in which they contribute differently to political life.

Political stories that sought to encourage women and men to take up the challenges of political leadership, almost always triumphant and positive, were also evidenced in the educational programmes we observed. Both schools sought to find guests who could give testimony to the power of a positive action: these stories inspired hope and provoked a belief in the potential that morally centred change agents could bring to political work. As feminists and activists we, too, were inspired by such presentations at the WCS; yet in reflection, we questioned the degree to which our readings were self congratulatory, and only served to privilege women's experiences over

men's. Were we substituting a politics of identity framework—another kind of binary that essentializes men/women on the basis of universal gender norms—, instead of considering how one might more thoughtfully create or support intersectional spaces where the complexity of political enactment and difference in practices might be explored? We wondered how these stories might have been framed differently had there been less celebration about one's gender position and more about the multiple sites of power, approaches to political work that sought to bridge differences, or engaged in discussions of the complexity of barriers to success.

Devaluation Discourses

Politician is to my ears and my gut, my chi – is like the most horrible swear word to me. I absolutely detest the fact that what I am doing is labeled being politicians. I have very little faith in politicians, I never understood what politicians were all about, I didn't understand how government worked until I was in it. Now I understand.

—Alice

Alice's comment about her abhorrence of politicians is not uncommon in today's society. There is a deep and persistent cynicism among most Canadians as to the ethics and practices of those who choose political service. Spaces for public discussion or deliberation—particularly spaces which value the experiences of everyday people, the work of local government?—have become rarer. The neoliberal tendencies of new times have privileged a politics that values individualism, rationality, efficiency, and affordability (Hay, 2007; Bashevkin, 2009), thereby displacing the civic engagement model traditionally espoused in Western democratic societies like Canada. Alice's comments are evidence of how these devaluation discourses (Bashevkin, 2009) are taken up and expressed within women's everyday language and expressions about what it means to be a politician. Understanding that women can take up these discourses is

important, but there are other discursive practices that interact with such thinking, including the gendered nature of politics (largely white, middle-class male), and so patriarchy can also come into play.

These ideas—of taking up a new form of politics and being different from men—are reiterated or reemphasized in the ways in which these women continually framed their own practices as *different from* and as *alternative to* the mainstream. This therefore continually reinforces the linking of gender, gender norms, and civic practices, privileging one over the other. This play of difference—the ways in which women engage and participate differently—simultaneously serves to reinforce patriarchal norms at the same time that it seeks to alter them. In other words, by continually drawing upon differences between men and women’s political practices, these differences become even more reified or naturalized into the discourses of political communities.

An argument about the difference that women might make to politics is not without value; this is a central goal amongst liberal feminists who argue that women’s participation in politics will be a tool for the transformation of democratic states. Indeed, organizations like the UN argue that when women are represented at least 33 percent in formal political roles, political cultures will change significantly. However the women who participated in our study were careful to delineate their goals for altering political life as a function of individual, value-based *merit*. For example, Patricia said:

Because if you can articulate things well and it’s coming out of a woman and you have that value system of feminism *then it would just be there* in how you address particular issues—as far as public speaking, it’s really important for

women to get involved in public life but not just to stand up and say I'm a woman vote for me. (emphasis added)

In other words, while women may have a particular gendered civic identity, they believe that politics requires a more neutral approach: one based in values, skills, and abilities. They believe that politics—the nomination, the election, and the practice, should be neutral of gender and instead centered in merit. Indeed most of the women we interviewed spoke vehemently against any sort of quota system, and made a point of arguing that if gender was the principle of their inclusion in politics, they would not participate. One woman said quite bluntly:

If someone phones me and says, “we want you on this committee, we need gender balance.” I say, “no thanks.” Instead I tell them “If you want someone who thinks and is willing to contribute to the debate and discussion, please invite me. But not because I'm a woman.”

The point of this discussion is to illustrate the constraining effects of the devaluation discourses described in this paper's opening: neoliberal ideologies are reinforced (economic rather than social values are privileged) and democracy/engagement devalued (politicians are worthless). Finally, the idea of gender neutrality—another way of framing the individual politician as a rational, independent agent rather than one informed by sociocultural, racial, or gendered identities—is emphasized. Ironically however, as Bashevkin (2009) observed, this gender-neutral discourse is taken up by communities of interest and/or political parties on both the left and right sides of public debates, effectively masking its civic intentions. Social conservatives use the discourse of gender-neutrality is used as a means of limiting public participation to particular kinds of debate (centering on personal agency, choice and freedom from government intervention) that effectively remove women, as a group, from existing as a

legitimate public entity deserving of political representation (p. 121). At the same time, those on the “political left” use gender neutrality to signify progress towards (or achievement of) equality between men and women, and subsequently emphasize the need to enhance and/or broaden public engagement into other representational spheres. In other words, a hierarchy of needs exist and women, having achieved equality, should recognize the need to address the representational gaps of other identified categories and interests. Either way, the efforts to see women assume their role as equal participants in civic life are undermined.

Individuals and groups who seek to enhance women’s civic agency and participation in local politics, as the women interviewed for this study clearly do—are generally unaware of how these messages operate to undermine the political legitimacy and democratic engagement they seek to enhance. The interplay of these discourses and their persistent use by multiple players, including women represented in this study and within the educational programmes that they took part in, is important to observe, and reinforces the double bind described earlier in this paper, making clear the powerful presence and recursive effects they can have on women’s political knowledge and practice.

Political Education Programmes: Liberal Discourses of Equal Rights, Neutrality and Personal Choice

The discussion above makes clear that while many of the women we worked with understood the gendered dynamics of the political sphere, they accepted this as something they had to “manage” or “work through.” They believe, we assert, in a type of ideal but

gender-neutral form of political leadership, one in which their capabilities and interests will result in an enhanced form of public engagement and civic participation. They differentiate themselves from their male colleagues by talking about their activist histories, particular experiences and capabilities that enable them, via the notion of earned merit, to take up political roles differently. These beliefs are also rooted in an understanding that when a critical mass is reached, political cultures will be transformed, simultaneously redressing women's unequal representation in the public sphere and offering new forms of leadership that will re-invigorate political and civic life. Therefore, women have a moral obligation to choose to "take up" political roles. Formal and informal types of education are important routes to engaging women (and men) in conversations about the ways in which political life might be practiced differently and civic agency realized.

Our earlier discussion pointed to the ways in which these women learned about political life, largely in informal ways. Mentorship was one example; we heard evidence of how male colleagues in particular were strongly implicated in women becoming more strategic in their approaches to political engagement. A number of women shared how they had learned from their male colleagues about processes of government, but perhaps more importantly, how to strategically achieve political goals. Others spoke of male mentors as valued allies in their political work.

We also heard how training programmes provided important practical knowledge that enabled a speaking of "truth to power"—in other words, background knowledge about particular local issues gave them credibility as political agents. Practical knowledge

of rules, policies, and processes were seen as key to understanding how policy and processes of political decision-making operated socially and culturally. Formal educational programmes such as the LGLA were referenced by our participants as useful settings in which to learn about political leadership and to network. While our exposure was limited to attending one scheduled two-day LGLA training session in 2010, we noted there were close to equal numbers of male and female participants, yet men tended to dominate the discussions held at the end of each of the six workshops. We also noted an emphasis on political neutrality—that politicians are meant to be neutral arbiters in their decision making, weighing carefully the balance of interests, and avoiding the “partisanship” of advocacy for one position or another. Earlier our discussion identified some of the tensions within political education organizations, including how some agencies privilege institutional knowledge over personal or social transformational knowledge. This emphasis on neutrality in decision-making could be a marker of such an approach. Finally, we note that no sessions were offered exclusively for women. This was surprising given the well-understood constraints that shaped the women’s everyday experiences of the women we interviewed involved in local government.

We also observed on two occasions (2009 and 2010) political education programmes at the Women’s Campaign School; while gender specific in that it sought to “encourage” more women to engage in formal and informal roles in government (local, provincial and federal), we also noted the emphasis on practical knowledge (of nomination rules and media management in particular), strategic knowledge (through the design of a mock campaign) but little in the form of transformative or feminist

approaches to leadership. As noted earlier, while the gendered nature of politics was openly discussed, the principal strategy offered by experienced women politicians who were presenters at these sessions seemed to be that women should ignore these behaviours as individual anomalies rather than as socially and culturally embedded practices. This also reinforced our impression that gender neutrality was the preferred discourse: both women and men can behave badly, but the system itself was a space of equal opportunity and gendered discrimination an anomaly. This is certainly in keeping with the Campaign School's stated vision: "Canada will be a country where 'If women want to, they can', is a true statement and where positions of power and leadership are gender blind" [sic](womenvoters.ca, 2010, para. 3).

Conclusion

I believe in order to save the world we need to get more women involved through encouragement and also saying it's your responsibility. You can't just complain about politicians or complain about this and that- you need to step into the ring. You need to have the guts to do something.

—Nancy

We saw a great deal of evidence that the women in this study were strong, courageous, determined —some can be also characterized as feminist and/or transformative political leaders. The role that non-formal education programmes played in learning how to operate in the political sphere was perhaps less evident than we had hoped, given the potential that feminist perspectives can bring to political sites of learning. Women in this study did credit their continued commitment to learning as a key strategy that informed their work to become effective political leaders. Clearly practical, strategic and tactical knowledge were powerful tools; these educational processes

transformed their thinking and brought a strong morally centered focus to their work. Yet we saw that much of this learning was individually focused, reminiscent of the neoliberal discourse described earlier. We saw, too, the operation of the double pincer movement described in the opening of this paper: gendered discourses of political participation sought to position men and women differently, to undermine the value of women's social experiences in communities, to frame women as less knowledgeable, or to create binaries of different, marking men and women as having essentialized gendered identities which position them differently for the work of politics. At the same time, the civic devaluation discourses identified by Bashevkin (2009) operated to devalue the work of political participation in general. These two conditions within political cultures have created the "discomfort equation" (p. 2) that characterizes how women's participation has been framed and has seeded the ground in ways that makes it difficult for women to take their rightful place as equal participants in the political sphere. We want to emphasize here that these discourses operate systemically within multiple communities: they are taken up by men and women as they participate in multiple political learning sites, both non-formal and informal. Organizationally focused learning was also emphasized, and this, too, contributed to a lack of critical thinking about the civic potential that might be afforded if emancipatory or transformational approaches had been used.

Our view is that without much more systematic deconstruction of how these two sided pincer dynamics operate as a part of participation in politics, women will remain marginalized as legitimate political actors. Indeed, as was described earlier in this paper, the ways in which discourses that unsettle or challenge women's potential contribution to

the political sphere are consistently taken up, re-circulated, and reproduced, as well as the ways in which particular frames reinforce gendered differences and show women as “less than” their male counterparts, will likely ensure that the pattern remains unchanged. We see education—that critically and persistently unpacks these discourses and practices—as a key strategy for altering this. While others have argued that gender mainstreaming might offer such a route (see for example, Hankivsky, 2005; Pant & Farrell, 2007), we want to explore another possible pathway, one that might offer a way to decenter the persistent use of gender binaries while simultaneously building on the beliefs of the women we interviewed: that a strong moral commitment to effecting positive change for their communities is key to civic life, regardless of gender. We will draw upon the concept of differentiated universalism as means of moving towards a form of political education that puts intersectionality—the overlapping and intersecting terrain of human subjectivities—as a centerpiece for the creation of more equitable political communities.

Differentiated Universalism: Blurring Boundaries through Common Commitment

Earlier we referenced the idea of differentiated universalism. Drawing from Lister’s (1997) work, we understand universalism as a means by which democratic and participatory ideals for all members of the community, regardless of their gender or gender identity, are acknowledged. Differentiated universalism however, seeks to

'particularize' the universal in the search for 'a new kind of articulation between the universal and the particular'...Universalism is understood here not as false impartiality but as a 'universality of moral commitment' to the equal worth and participation of all. (Lister, 1997, p. 39)

This concept of differentiation stresses the importance of civic agency and moral commitment to participation and engagement in civic life. We see this strand as foundational to the beliefs of the women we spoke with, and as representative of their own desire to enhance and/or transform the civic sphere through their differently styled approaches to leadership and leadership practices. The earlier discussion in this article where our participants described how they practiced politics differently, bringing commitment and care to their work as politicians was certainly evidence of that. They repeatedly contrasted their leadership differently from the cultural norms they saw represented in their community and in the media.

We also see differentiated universalism as providing a potential common space from which to build understanding among and between men and women—essentially providing a means of deconstructing the gendered divide, blurring boundaries and recognizing the multiplicity of subjectivities that exist as a part of current political cultures and identities. Simultaneously, differentiation—that is, acknowledging the diversity of perspectives and approaches possible—offers a means of growing and/or extending opportunities for creating a more democratically engaged society.

Seeing/recognizing difference also offers insights into deconstructing the “discomfort equation” that Bashevkin (2009) has traced among women politicians in Canada, also evident in our smaller scale study. Understandings about what it means to be different from others, accepting differences and understanding how these characterizations may privilege one subject position over another is an important tool to understanding how discomfort operates socially and culturally. Knowledge of how

devaluation discourses intersect and reinforce these marginalizing discourses could also be nurtured among and between groups or individuals who see their approaches to politics as operating differently. Indigenous peoples, or people from different racial or ethnic groups, are also largely unrepresented in the local government political sphere (Bird, 2008; Bloemraad, 2008) and are shaped by dominant political practices that marginalize. Building an educational space in which devaluation discourses are unpacked creates a common ground from which to re-construct a more engaged, democratically informed public and offers a means of countering contemporary discourses about political leaders.

We are not arguing for a form of identity politics, where each group is represented by an essentialized identity and is expected to represent such interests—as we think such an approach would be resisted by political actors on the basis of a discourse of “special interests” or “special rights”—that is perceived to privilege one group over another. Beyond this, identity politics reifies, polarizes or isolates groups or individuals on the basis of their differences by failing to address the complexity of multiple subjectivities (Butler, 1993) and intersectionalities between multiple forms of oppression or marginalization (Crenshaw, 2003), much like we saw represented in our study. Instead, we think a more open space—an educational one—in which differences are discussed openly and norms made apparent—and how alternative approaches or ways of engaging multiple communities and different ways of practicing political leadership might enhance the capacity for local leaders to meet diverse civic needs and interests, provides the

potential through which differences can be seen as an *attribute* of civic life rather than as a barrier to participation.

This ideal of differentiated universalism can also inform the ways in which we consider political education for women. It seems clear to us that the women in this study were very attracted to the ideal of the universal standard for all, regardless of gender or other differences. We agree with their goal, but also believe that without deliberate attention to the ways in which women practice politics differently—as was described in this paper—and the ways in which gendered stereotypes disadvantage women—also described in this paper—the status quo will not change, and women will continue to avoid political life or struggle individually. By addressing such issues with deliberation in formal educational settings, we can set the stage for people in political life to alter the conditions through which gendered approaches have operated—largely invisibly. We know that many women in local government agree. As Patricia said,

I feel like I am recycling. I never dreamt that when I was taking political science courses and hanging out at the women's centre in SFU that gender would still be an issue in an election but it's huge here in this little mining town. Women have greater challenges whether it's biological or sociological.

We can continue to recycle these ideas in and out of communities and hope for the best—alternatively, we think that education can provide the means by which transformative thinking and emancipatory outcomes for all members of the democratic community can be met and allowed to thrive. We leave the last word to Judith: “We need to build a culture that women understand that-- that's where significant change develops and we need to be at those tables.”

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