Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives

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Increasing numbers of women have gained entry into the arena of representative politics in recent times. Yet the extent to which shifts in the sex ratio within formal democratic spaces translates into political influence, and into gains in policies that redress gendered inequities and inequalities remains uncertain. At the same time, a plethora of new democratic spaces have been created – whether through the promotion of 'civil society organizations' or the institutionalization of participatory governance mechanisms – which hold the prospect of democratizing other political spaces beyond those of formal politics. This study examines factors that constrain and enable women's political effectiveness in these different democratic arenas. We suggest that 'engendering democracy' by adding women or multiplying democratic spaces is necessary but not sufficient to address historically and culturally embedded forms of disadvantage that have been the focus for feminist politics. We suggest that an important, but neglected, determinant of political effectiveness is women's political apprenticeship – their experiences in political parties, civil society associations and the informal arenas in which political skills are learned and constituencies built. Enhancing the democratizing potential of women's political participation calls, we argue, for democratizing democracy itself: building new pathways into politics, fostering political learning and creating new forms of articulation across and beyond existing democratic spaces.

Key words: affirmative action; community organizations; political participation; NGOs

Introduction

As the numbers of women in politics increase in many parts of the world, it has become more evident than ever that the strategy of getting female bodies into formal political spaces is only part of what it takes to 'engender' democracy. Much of the focus in the debate on 'engendering' democracy has been on how to insert women into existing democratic structures, with an emphasis primarily on formal political institutions. Yet, taken literally, the idea of 'engendering democracy' might be read in a rather different way: as concerned with bringing about changes in political systems that make them genuinely inclusive, *democratizing* democracy. This article begins from the observation that while representative democratic arenas have received the lion's share of attention, understanding women's political engagement requires that we pay closer attention to the other spaces – 'new' democratic spaces as well as more 'traditional' arenas outside the domain of formal politics – in which women participate as political and social actors, and to their pathways into politics.

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The analysis begins with questions that have dominated the debate on women's political representation. It proceeds to examine the extent to which new democratic spaces – from civil-society organizations to interface institutions that mediate the administration of state policies – offer new opportunities for creating more inclusive democratic practices, as well as at some of the potential costs of inclusion for groups contesting the gendered status quo. The final part discusses the implications of this analysis for the strategic engagement and articulation of feminist agendas within and across different democratic arenas, and for democratizing democratic practice.

Beyond Numbers

Efforts to enhance women's political participation have gained new urgency with the designation of numbers of women in politics as an indicator of women's empowerment, as enshrined in the third United Nations' Millennium Development Goal (MDG). Yet there is no straightforward equation between getting women into political office and the pursuit of policies of gender equality by these same women. Measures to build women's presence in public office have been advocated by women's movements around the world for some time. Affirmative action measures to increase the numbers of women participating as public representatives in political institutions, such as quotas of women candidates or reserved seats in legislatures, have returned a growing number of women to public office. The global average has increased, though not spectacularly, from less than 9 per cent in 1987 to 15.9 per cent in 2004. In some cases, quotas have been more successful than expected. In Iraq's elections for the Interim National Assembly in January 2005, for instance, the 25 per cent quota requirement was exceeded, producing 86 women winners out of 275, or 31 per cent of the assembly.

There are staunch defenders of the idea that women's descriptive or numerical representation produces changes in their substantive representation, particularly after a critical threshold has been passed so that women are no longer a token minority – usually this threshold is more than 30 per cent of seats.[1] Yet observers of decision making in countries with legislatures in which more than 15 per cent of politicians are women have argued that the gradual feminization of legislatures does not necessarily produce major changes in what parties and governments actually do.[2] Women in office do not necessarily defend a feminist position on policies. Indeed for some women, winning and keeping office can be contingent upon *downplaying* feminist sympathies.

The assumption that democracy can be made more inclusive by adding women tends to advantage sex difference relative to other factors shaping interests, political skills and accountability relationships – notably, political party affiliation. One of the blind spots of this position is to the possibility that sex may be less determinant of a representative's political interests and aptitudes than their 'political apprenticeship': the routes via which representatives enter and engage in political activity, and which influence how they define and acquire the arts and activities of politics, and negotiate the boundaries of the political.

Defenders of the 'numbers' position point out that it is far too early to expect women in office to have an impact on decision making. Even in most of the 16 countries where, by 2004, women had captured 30 per cent or more of legislative seats,[3] women are simply too new to office necessarily to have made a tangible difference. The sense that women representatives *ought* to be representative of women's interests (regardless of their party affiliation) and have an additional task of accountability to a female constituency is quite widespread in public perceptions (and probably serves to undermine their perceived legitimacy as public representatives in the eyes of some of their male colleagues). But conventional political accountability – the constituencies to which representatives answer and the means of making them do so – makes rather different demands of these representatives. Like male politicians, women representatives must balance obligations to follow the party line with their commitment to their constituents. The affirmative action measures to usher more women into politics neither make parties more responsive to gender equality issues, nor do they help to construct electoral constituencies with an interest in gender equality.

Quotas: A Shot in the Dark?

Most women enter office through methods which do not base the selection of women politicians on the preferences of women as an electoral constituency. In most countries, affirmative action to feminize legislatures is pursued through voluntary or imposed quotas – political parties must front women candidates for a proportion of the seats they contest.[4] Quotas are widely seen as a legitimate means of remedying women's under-representation precisely because they acknowledge that women do not constitute a politically distinct group with interests limited to gender-related concerns. Gender does not map onto distinct geographic areas or constituencies in the way that ethnic or racial differences can do. Quotas enable women to participate in political parties, but those parties' agendas represent a range of often competing perspectives. As Anne Phillips points out, if the parties that women join do not advocate 'an explicitly woman-friendly programme (which men might claim they were equally capable of pursuing) there *is* no guarantee that women will represent women's interests': 'gender parity is in this sense a shot in the dark'.[5]

Available measures to enable group-specific representation for women include reservations systems, such as those used to address the under-representation of ethnic or other minorities which can involve the creation of special electoral districts limiting competition to group members, or provisions for direct appointment to reserved seats in the legislature. Reservations are intended to recognize the autonomy of particular political communities and give them a share of power independently of existing political parties. Yet they have run into a number of problems when used to boost women's political presence, not least because women do not operate as a distinct political community. For several decades, for instance, Tanzania, Pakistan and Bangladesh have filled seats for women in parliament by assigning seats for parties' own female nominees in proportion to the seats they have won. These reserved seats have simply been a way of further boosting government majorities,

not connecting women representatives to a political community organized around interests *as women*.

Reservations have been used in Uganda since the late 1980s to ensure that at least one member of parliament (MP) from every district in the country is a woman. As detailed by Sylvia Tamale, it has never been clear just what constituencies these Women District Representatives are meant to represent. Representatives of other categories of people for whom seats are reserved, such as youth, workers, and disabled people are chosen directly by national organizations that bring together relevant associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but reserved seats for women are filled by a special electoral college composed of heads of local government councils. Affirmative action seats for youth, the disabled, the army, and workers, are described in Uganda's constitution as being for people who will be 'representatives *of*' these special interests. Women District Representatives, in contrast, are not described as representatives *of women*, but as women representatives *for* each district. Women running for these seats must appeal to a narrow electoral college of mostly male heads of local councils in the district, not the local population or the female voters of the area.[6] Inevitably, this selection process favours elite and socially conservative candidates; professing a commitment to women's rights might well virtually disqualify a candidate in the eyes of this electoral college.

Experiments with affirmative action to feminize legislatures, and their unsurprisingly less-than-dramatic impact in terms of bringing feminist perspectives to politics remind us that the interests represented in public office are those that are well prepared in organizations backing each politician – in the political parties and lobby groups providing policy development and resources to advance particular issues. Accountability systems also, of course, provide incentives to politicians to promote some interests over others and electoral system design will help determine to whom public actors feel they must answer, explain their actions, and from whom they can expect sanctions should they fail. As Phillips notes:

> In what sense can we say that the women produced through (party-contested elections) carry an additional responsibility to represent women? In the absence of mechanisms to establish accountability, the equation of more women with more adequate representation of women's interests looks suspiciously undemocratic. How do the women elected know what the women who elected them want? By what right do they claim responsibility to represent women's concerns?[7]

The expectation that the sex of representatives determines their interests undermines ideas about the accountability of politicians to party programmes. It also introduces essentialist equations between sex and interests that obscure the multiplicity of women's perspectives and interests, and disregard the fact that many men can adopt feminist positions on public policy. Indeed, if social justice concerns seeking to redress gender inequity are to make it into public policy they need precisely to garner broader-based political appeal and support.

Feminizing Legislatures: Advancing Gender Equality?

Clearly, if the concern is to bring gender equality perspectives into politics and public policy, a focus on packing public space with female bodies is misplaced unless supported by efforts to bring gender issues into the many other spaces where political interests are formed. Worse, it may actually undermine the project of enhancing gender equality. The 31 per cent female occupancy of assembly seats in Iraq, for instance, offers no protection against the conservative Islamist assault on the country's Ba'ath-era secular family law. A significant proportion of women in the assembly belong to the Islamist Shia list, and are at the forefront of calls to reinstate Sharia law in personal relationships. As Iraq's minister of women's affairs, the Sunni Kurd Narmeen Othman despairs: 'It is very difficult to fight this when their women politicians are advocating Sharia. The men say: "See you are wrong because even these women are supporting us."'[8]

Feminizing legislative delegations may have other undesirable effects. It may erode the quality of democracy and public deliberation where reservations have been a means of reinforcing the ruling party's position with female party 'hacks' unwilling to question authoritarian and highly centralized party leadership – as many claim is the case in Rwanda[9] and South Africa.[10] Women may lack experience of public debate, opposition or deal-making, stemming from their shallow or skewed political apprenticeship, and this may make them ineffective legislators, or legislators who are easy to manipulate. Denise Walsh describes how gender differences in debating styles, and the lack of training in preparing women for the formal culture of parliamentary work, create real obstacles to women being taken seriously in the South African legislature. She cites Mahau Phekoe of the Women's National Coalition: 'At the last budget speech, three women commented on the budget. One read a speech written in English. She struggled with what she had to say . . . Comments were made on her bad delivery. The other two had done no research. This discredited these women.'[11]

Of course, getting more women into public office has always been connected to a wider project of deepening democracy. In this broader democratic project, a challenge for feminists has been to develop a distinct political community of women, and to articulate interest in and around gender-based injustices. Indeed, part of this project has been the recognition that the pursuit of equality and social justice calls not only for broader-based representation of women in formal political arenas, but also for the democratization of other domains and institutions, including the private sphere. It is precisely here that the limits of the feminist project have been most acutely felt, when it became evident that large numbers of women in public office may perform an important role-modelling effect, but beyond that, few feminists make it into or survive in formal politics, and it is enormously difficult for them to have a tangible impact on policy-making.

Two issues arise here that deserve further attention. The first is the question of *how* women enter politics. What are women's pathways into political office? How and where do women learn the arts and activities of politics? How is political apprenticeship itself gendered? The second relates to the nature of the public sphere institutions in which women *do* participate, in the wake of waves of governance reform

over the course of the last decades. To what extent have democratic reforms provided new opportunities to address issues of gender justice? We address each of these issues in turn.

Women's Political and Democratic Apprenticeship

Political participation matters a great deal for women. It does so not only because of the potential gains of successful protest, mobilization around collective interests, advocacy or engagement in policy processes. It also offers women a form of political apprenticeship that enables them to recognize and articulate interests, build alliances, broker differences and learn modes of cooperation and consensus-building to advance common projects. In addition, for participation to yield influence, to sway others in deliberative processes, an apprenticeship in *democratic* practices is useful – a training in the ability to mount an argument and to debate effectively, to tolerate opposition and to accept setbacks and failure. The political arts learnt through these forms of participation can be applied by women who move on to formal political arenas.

Looking at women's pathways into politics, however, making that transition appears far from straightforward. There is no shortage of women's activity – and indeed leadership – in civil society and community activism. Why, then, do these spaces produce so few feminist leaders able to make the transition into formal representative politics and be effective in influencing policy? The traditional incubators of political leaders have been trade unions, campus politics and political parties. They are also the crucibles in which interests are identified, debated, aggregated and promoted. These arenas foster styles of politics and forms of political apprenticeship that can exclude and silence women. Though women participate, they have often found themselves relegated to lower levels in hierarchies and to community mobilization work. Political parties in particular have rarely assigned priority to gender issues or promoted women as candidates for office without being formally obliged to do so. Women in many countries form the bulk of the 'foot soldiers' in campaigning and fund-raising, but parties the world over appear hostile to women's engagement in decision-making, especially at top leadership levels.

Proof of the stubborn resistance of parties to women's leadership is their unwillingness to introduce internal leadership quotas. In Africa, only the African National Congress (ANC) has a quota for women in its National Executive Committee. Four parties in Brazil have internal quotas, and these remain the only ones to have more than 10 per cent of women in their leadership. Even then, quotas are treated as strict ceilings, not entry points. The Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) in Brazil, for instance, has filled, exactly, but never surpassed its 30 per cent quota of women in the national executive for over 10 years.

What matters for *what* issues are represented is *how* women get selected for these leadership positions and for participation at other levels, and the uses to which they hope to put this participation. Where resources, candidacies and positions in parties are determined by patronage, where there is no transparency or internal accountability in decisions about who leads and what policies are promoted, we ought not to expect women leaders, if they emerge, to be connected to gender equality concerns. Parties

organized on the basis of patronage, or indeed a kleptocratic operation of a single powerful family, are often found in developing-country contexts. Such parties often have highly personalized leadership systems based on family dynasties, and decision making is not open to internal challenge. Women's political apprenticeship within such systems involve exploiting kinship connections. Where a woman has gained position within a party via such a route, there is less chance that she will seek connections with organized feminism or other expressions of women's concerns in civil society, or challenge the masculine party hierarchy by supporting gender causes.

'Women's wings' of political parties have rarely provided the essential incubating ground for women leaders, for female solidarity in parties, and for feminist policy proposals. Instead, women's wings are commonly captured by the spouses of male leaders and have developed a species of female sycophancy.[12] In west and east African countries, women's wings in dominant parties have sought to control and contain the wider women's movement, harnessing women's energies to support the president. Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings's 31 December Women's Movement in Ghana was a notorious example, but similar efforts by political spouses to monopolize international resources for women's development and to limit women's independent associational activity has rightly made women wary of engagement with politics and parties.[13]

Expanding Democratic Space: New Possibilities for Women?

Liberalization and governance reforms have cut into old political institutions and fostered the growth of diverse new democratic spaces for participation in governance. This reconfiguration of the landscape of governance is potentially significant for the representation of traditionally marginalized political actors. Pathways into politics were once clearly defined and largely excluded women. New [democratic] spaces offer a variety of sites for learning and networking that might serve to generate new leadership, and alternative entry routes into politics. In what follows, we look first at the opportunities and costs of donor enthusiasm for spreading 'democracy' through support to 'civil society'. We turn from this to look at some of the new democratic spaces that have been created, especially at local government level, and ask: What impact has all of this had on women's representation? In particular, does influence in, and access to, one set of deliberative spaces offer the potential for leverage in others?

The turn to 'strengthening civil society' in the 1990s good governance agenda sought the expansion of the public sphere through fostering the creation of social actors who would both serve as representatives of diverse interest groups and work to hold the state to account. The exponential growth of 'civil society organizations', together with the new political spaces opened by waves of democratization, has offered women's organizations and movements the possibility of exerting influence on the policy process from outside formal political institutions. The unrelentingly positive image that 'civil society' has come to have in donor discourse is at odds, however, with the rather more dissonant and complex reality of the sheer diversity of organizations captured in this category – including those that may serve as

much to domesticate, and even repress, the political agency of marginalized interests as to champion their concerns.

Amid this plurality of organizations, women's movements appear the most promising candidates to further the project of 'engendering democracy'. Yet these, too, are as diversely constituted and motivated as they are different across cultures and political contexts. One obvious contribution they might be seen to make is in incubating political leaders. Yet this has come under scrutiny, precisely because success in grass-roots mobilization, in service provision and survival activities, in mobilization to end authoritarianism (such as in Chile and Argentina), or in fighting social ills such as male alcoholism (such as in Andhra Pradesh in India), often fails to move to a further stage with women activists taking charge of the formal governance institutions that follow. Questions arise about the extent to which these institutional forms provide alternative democratic spaces for women's participation, and opportunities for the kinds of political apprenticeship that can equip women to contend with the masculinism of formal political arenas. Yet feminist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continue to play critical roles in creating what Nancy Fraser terms 'subaltern counterpublics' which constitute 'parallel discursive arenas' in which marginalised groups can find voice, by fostering spaces outside the formal political arena for political learning.[14] One such initiative is a recent project initiated by a consortium of north-eastern Brazilian feminist NGOs. Their *escolas feministas* (literally 'feminist schools') seek precisely to address the question of women's political apprenticeship, using popular education to create spaces for potential political candidates and women in public office to discuss feminist theory and share tactics for engagement.[15]

External support to feminist NGOs and movements has enabled them to expand their scope and range of engagement. Yet it has not come without costs. One consequence that has been highlighted by a number of commentators is professionalization – 'NGO-ization'[16] – of women's movements, with implications both for internal democracy and the political potential of such organizations for promoting broader processes of democratization. Silliman, for example, argues that the expansion of civil society has, paradoxically, served to contract *political* spaces, diminishing the potential of such organizations to take on a more radical redistributive political project.[17] The roles NGOs have come to play in welfare functions formerly performed by the state has also served in some contexts, notably in Latin America, to supplant advocacy with provisioning and produced a shift from horizontal face-to-face relationships to professionalized project administration hierarchies.[18] This has resulted, in some contexts, in a deepening of old cleavages within the women's movement, especially around issues of class. As Schild comments for Chile, 'the clientization of some poor and working-class women, carried out by others in the name of advancing the cause of women, is in effect undermining the possibility that poor and working-class women will come together to articulate their own needs'.[19]

Procedural requirements and competition for funds act as a further constraint. Jenkins cites the director of a Peruvian NGO that evolved with donor funding from origins as a grass-roots feminist organization to a nationally-renowned NGO: 'You win some and you lose some with donor involvement. Perhaps the worst thing that happens is the bureaucratization, and maybe a bit of domestication as well.'[20]

The rosy democratizing ideals associated with civil society sit awkwardly with the realities of NGOs' permeability to, and indeed reproduction of, existing political culture. Jad, for example, cites Shalabi's observations that the internal governance of Palestinian NGOs simply mirrored 'the Palestinian political system based on individual decision-making, patronage and clientelism'.[21] And far from conforming to the neo-Tocquevillian role (after Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*) that is marked out for them in contemporary governance policies, dense relationships of mutual dependency can come to characterize a brake on their political efficacy. In the absence of strong membership organizations and where resources are scarce, Jaquette points out, 'relations between civil society and the state can easily be distorted into forms of clientelism that are weakly democratic at best'.[22] The issues raised here pose acute political dilemmas for feminist organizations: from the hazards of inclusion to the alienation of potential alliances across class and other differences that have cost feminism so dear in the past.

Constituting 'Women'

What of other 'civil society' spaces beyond those associated with feminist movements and NGOs? How do they constitute 'women' as an interest group – and what kinds of interests do they bring into the public arena? In *Crazy for Democracy* (1997), Temma Kaplan argues that traditional conceptions of politics fail to pay attention to the significance of grass roots community mobilization in the United States and South Africa as sites for women's political participation – just as those who participate in these activities may resist regarding what they do as 'politics', and their own politics as 'feminist'. Instead, women often mobilize at the grass-roots around identifications that appear at first sight to reinforce sex stereotypes: as mothers, and guardians of community welfare.[23]

Yet such identities are far from fixed. Indeed, their political salience lies precisely in their malleability. Citing studies that explore how, in the aftermath of economic crisis in 1980s Latin America, women mobilizing around basic needs created institutions that evolved over time to take on a more directly political character, Stromquist shows how the subject position that had provided the basis for mobilization – that of mother – underwent substantive shifts. In the process, maternal identifications were reconstituted and relocated within the public sphere. Competing views exist on whether engagement in these kinds of institutions enables women to exercise greater autonomy in their everyday lives. Yet, as Stromquist argues, they provide important sites for political learning. Exposure to new decision-making and leadership practices can have potentially transformative effects in providing opportunities for the kind of apprenticeship we suggest is vital for women to pursue political careers.[24]

Two questions arise. The first is when – and how – does this kind of political learning carry over into the spheres of formal politics? And, the second, given the non-democratic character of many community-level organizations – whether due to the styles of founder-leaders or the lack of democratic procedures for accountability and decision-making – is what *kind* of political learning do they foster?

One obvious limitation of community-level institutions as 'micro-democracies' is that female identifications reinforced within them may offer women little scope to develop their political agency.[25] Different kinds of organizations foster a range of different – often competing – identifications. A diversity of female subject-positions comes into play as the basis for the construction of group-based interests. Faith-based organizations, for example, can be important sites for women's identification with other women, and social and business networks built in these domains can enable women to 'empower' themselves as individuals.[26] Yet faith-based constructions of the category 'woman' often offer a limited and stereotyped repertoire of subject-positions with which women are identified and come to identify themselves. By domesticating and naturalizing women's grievances, normalizing acquiescence to male authority, and excluding women from positions of leadership,[27] such organizations can work to naturalize the very unequal privileges that feminist organizations seek to redress. As workers of a Brazilian feminist NGO observed, with some frustration, their work involves a constant struggle with the identifications promoted by the evangelical church in which 'there are no rights and there is no citizenship ... and women are told to endure their husbands, rather than to question why they are being treated in this way'.[28]

Informal associations, self-help groups and organized grass-roots women's groups are other sites in which women may gain experience of collective action. A key question for feminist analysis has been to what extent, when this is based on identification with traditional notions of womanhood, does this bring about broader shifts in women's consciousness and mobilization around issues of gender and social justice? The instrumentality with which these institutions have been fostered by development agencies, whether through state-sponsored programmes or the efforts of international NGOs, points to a rather different set of potential outcomes. Von Bulow shows how income-generating groups in Tanzania contain elements of 'empowerment', but are also avenues for individual accumulation strategies for better-off women.[29] Batliwala and Dhanraj paint a depressing picture of the extent to which such self-help groups strip away women's political agency. Drawing on observations from the same area of India that was once the site for large-scale women's political mobilization and is now home to myriad self-help groups, they conclude:

> The neo-liberal rules for the new woman citizen ... are quite clear: improve your household's economic condition, participate in local community development (if you have time), help build and run local (apolitical) institutions like the self-help group; by then you should have no political or physical energy left to challenge this paradigm.[30]

As this example illustrates, it is vital to understand the historical contingencies of women's mobilization against a broader backdrop of changing political configurations and opportunities.

New Democratic Spaces

As governments have pluralized sites for citizen engagement with policy institutions, whether in the form of deliberative councils or Participatory Poverty Assessments – often

at the behest of donors or banks – the interface between 'civil society' and the state has been recast to reflect an ever-closer working relationship, and mutual dependency. At the same time, as claims are made about the extent to which these new democratic spaces offer greater scope for inclusion of diverse voices and interests,[31] questions arise about the extent to which participation and deliberation in these arenas can serve to advance issues of gender justice.[32]

The political logic that accompanied the fostering of civil society organizations in the development process has recast these institutions as *partners*, reconfiguring governance as a collaborative endeavour rather than a terrain of contestation. Civil society organizations have come to 'stand for'[33] the interest groups that development agencies 'target', taking on roles as spokespeople for 'the poor', 'women' and other social groups, with legitimacy claims ranging from proximity to descriptive representation.[34]

The expansion of these 'invited spaces'[35] arguably affords a new set of actors the opportunity to exercise leverage and to develop and advance new forms of representation. The normative basis of these institutions and the forms of conduct that they promote ought to be good for any traditionally marginalized actors. Such institutions have been seen as offering a particularly important opportunity for women to expand their political skills and to improve the quality of public decision making by introducing their views. As the means of entry into many of these new democratic spaces is mediated by civil society organizations, rather than traditional political institutions, they ought in theory to offer greater scope for *feminist* social actors to gain political space.

In some parts of the world, notably in Africa where women have successfully mobilized across older divides, the politicization of women's organizations, as they have evolved from responding to needs of engagement in agenda setting and mobilization around women's demands, would seem to favour the possibilities for exercising substantive voice in these new democratic arenas.[36] Evidence suggests that it is precisely where politicized feminist organizations have built skills for engagement that women have been able to exercise voice most effectively.[37] In the north-eastern Brazilian state of Pernambuco, for example, the feminist movement has successfully occupied spaces within deliberative councils and articulated with other movements to pursue political projects within these spaces.[38] Yet in the absence of organizations such as these, women face considerable difficulties in overcoming cultural obstacles to substantive inclusion.

Despite the promise of deliberative institutions as more inclusive and participatory, the challenges faced by women are effectively little different to those in more formal arenas. Gender-based inequalities are embedded even in the range of permissible subjects for deliberation and the language and culture of public debate.[39] Indeed, women may be at a *disadvantage* in deliberative forums, where the onus is on participants to demonstrate altruism and to reach consensus, especially since women may be socialized into a surrender of self-interest. Assumptions about the nature of deliberation in democratic forums, about the ways interests are debated, represented, challenged and changed and about fair and equal participation in deliberation, are no less problematic than those that associate the sex of a representative with their political perspectives.

Young insists on the compatibility between deliberative democracy and guarantees of group representation.[40] But if women fail to gain respect for their methods of articulation, or if the very deliberation of the issues they wish to raise is placed in question, then group representation becomes essential. As Jane Mansbridge points out, it is precisely in situations marked by histories of distrust and where interests are uncrystallized that descriptive representation matters. The conditions that enhance deliberation and consensus may not achieve fair distribution between groups that are in conflict: 'laboratories' for interest articulation are needed, she argues, institutions that are based primarily on self-interest.[41]

But group representation *as women* is not in itself the solution. As Molyneux points out, the sheer diversity of women's interests works against any simple translation of sexual difference with perceived commonalities. Where women's representation in these institutions is through reserved seats, however, it is on the basis of sexual difference.[42] And, unsurprisingly, a similar set of obstacles arise as in the formal political arena. Once again, the lack of opportunities for political apprenticeship for women and for acquiring alternative models of leadership and the exercise of power means that political learning in these arenas may hardly lend itself to the practice of participatory or deliberative democracy. Batliwala and Dhanraj suggest for India's *panchayats*:

> We find that since most women have entered these institutions without any kind of political or ideological training, skills or experience – they have not been members of a political party or cadre, for example – or have only the limited apolitical experience of their participation in a village self-help group, they are forced to learn and acquire these skills in the most arduous ways and at great cost.[43]

Some women are able to find the means for political agency through this kind of engagement, but success stories are overshadowed by a more gloomy picture of women being installed by families and husbands, and remaining silent so as to preserve their reputations. Indeed, women who are included simply to fulfil quota requirements can end up absent from debates altogether, called upon merely to perform certain formalities. In another part of India, Rajasthan, Ranjita Mohanty shows how social provisions guaranteeing women's participation in watershed committees have led to a situation where a woman's signature – rather than her presence – marks her value to the process. Those women who are vocal about their rights and actively claim inclusion risk being labelled as troublesome and ostracized. Mohanty cites an activist, Nirmala, who says:

> Few women here have the awareness about their rights. Some of us who are educated and are aware about our rights, we are seen as a 'nuisance' and a constant threat within the village. Hence, while women who are silent and docile will be called to meetings, we will deliberately be kept outside.[44]

Mohanty argues that while state-created spaces might appear to promote inclusion, the reproduction of stereotyped assumptions about women serve to make women subject to 'multiple doses of humiliation, discrimination and exclusion'.[45]

The reconfiguration of the terrain of governance with the expansion of 'invited spaces' has further consequences for women's political engagement. As co-governance institutions multiply, women who, like Nirmala, are regarded as a 'nuisance' can find older channels for expressing dissent ever more illegitimate. Engagement has other costs, especially for those whose time poverty already presents constraints. There is a very real danger that enlistment in 'participatory' institutions effectively keeps women 'busy and out of harm's way, distracted from wider political considerations and submerged within the minutiae of issues in their own backyard'.[46] The effects of this, as Batliwala and Dhanraj so powerfully illustrate, are not lost on right-wing groups who are able to step into the political void and actively mobilize women. Indeed, as Mouffe argues, 'when these parties are the only ones offering an outlet for political passions their claims to offer an alternative can be seductive'.[47] And the effects involve not only the depoliticization of such organizations, but the de-naturing of the concept of citizenship itself. Batliwala and Dhanraj contend:

> If we combine the mobilizations of women by the fundamentalist agenda, the depoliticized forms of collective action promoted by state-sponsored micro-credit programmes, and the subversion of agency of elected women in *panchayats*, what emerges is a deeply problematic and bounded construct of women's citizenship – a construct that must be seriously analyzed, challenged and re-framed.[48]

Add Women and Stir?

The basic assumptions that lie behind efforts to increase the numbers of women in political office are that the inclusion of women leads to better, fairer and more responsive government. But in contexts in which women continue to have tenuous purchase on basic citizenship rights, and where masculinist political cultures mediate participation in the public sphere, 'democratizing democracy' raises complex challenges.

For many women, available spaces for political learning are patriarchal and traditional institutions (family, community), often apolitical women's associations or informal associations that either assign women to the tea-making brigade (women's wings of parties) or make women's ascent to leadership positions contingent on patronage from a top male leader. In the first case, women receive little training for *democratic* participation. In the second, there is often too weak a foundation to back political interests with constituency support and resources for formal politics. In the third, women leaders are cut off from a constituency base that might enable them to question party leadership and bring women's interests on to party agendas.

Pluralizing democratic institutions has offered significant spaces for mobilization around issues of gender inequality. Yet creating new democratic spaces is not in itself enough to erase embedded cultural dispositions and styles of politics that are often as inimical to women's participation as those in the formal political arena. Ewig argues that the political efficacy of feminist NGOs ultimately depends on 'the cyclical nature of the democratic state, with its shifting politics and priorities'.[49] The issues at stake here go to the very heart of the ambivalent relationship between feminism and

democracy that is mediated through the state. A deeper and more widespread democratic project may not necessarily result in greater social and political legitimacy for *feminist* projects. On the contrary, feminist ambitions for social transformation are so profoundly counter-cultural, that new democratic spaces may end up shepherding in stronger controls over women and limitations on their rights.

Different as their political logics and procedural norms might be, when they are viewed through a gender lens, traditional and new democratic spaces have significant similarities in failing to redress gender injustice and inequality. Why is this the case? The answers may lie less in institutional design or even in styles of politics, and more in the contentious nature of feminist political concerns. With agendas that are often radically redistributive in terms of resources and relations of power, such concerns are only ever likely to be able to win over a minority of supporters within the political arena, whether it is in terms of votes or the possibility of securing consensus. Where redistributive policies have been successfully pursued, it has often been due to *other* political configurations – notably through alliances with progressive bureaucrats and legislators. Yet the very strategies that enable organizations to get a foot in the policy process door may undermine their prospects for pushing radically redistributive agendas. Indeed, Marian Sawer comments, the very delinking of democratization from issues of redistribution may reduce the project of 'engendering democracy' to 'making democracy safe for the free market, with women's presence providing an alibi for cuts to welfare'.[50]

Given that pressures for democratization almost always arise from civil society opposition, Dryzek notes, a shift from opposition to engagement can lead to the reduction of the prospects for further democratization. Unless directly connected with state imperatives, the democratic gains of incorporation are questionable:

> To the extent that public policy remains under the sway of state imperatives, groups whose inclusion coincides with no imperative will not easily acquire the tangible goods they value. They may be allowed to participate in the policy-making process, but outcomes will be systematically skewed against them . . . A high price will be paid by any group included on this basis. . . Inclusion in the life of the state is, then, bought at the expense of relatively unrestricted democratic interplay in the oppositional public sphere.[51]

Further concerns about the terms for inclusion in contemporary democratic politics are posed by Chantal Mouffe, who argues that neo-liberalism and the conflation of politics with morality in the turn to deliberative democratic mechanisms signals 'the retreat of the political'.[52] She contends that:

> the political is from the outset concerned with collective forms of identification; the political always has to do with the formation of an 'Us' as opposed to a 'Them', with conflict and antagonism . . . the very condition of possibility of the formation of political identities is at the same time the impossibility of a society from which antagonism has been eliminated.[53]

Both the aggregative and deliberative models of democratic political theory, she argues, 'leave aside the central role of 'passions' in the creation of collective political

identities'.[54] Crucial to democratic politics, she argues, is how the establishment of an 'Us' can be compatible with pluralism: this, she contends, requires the transformation of antagonism into agonism:

> In the agonistic model, the prime task of democratic politics is neither to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere; it is, rather, to 'tame' these passions by mobilizing them for democratic ends and by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives.[55]

Democratizing Democracy

What prospects, then, are there for the projects of 'engendering democracy' with which we began this paper? As our analysis suggests, the boundaries between political spaces are far more blurred than political theory would have us believe. Similarities between constraints to women's political influence in both traditional and 'new democratic spaces' draw attention to the need to facilitate opportunities for political apprenticeship alongside that of creating the conditions for the effective articulation of positions that challenge the status quo. Recognizing that 'invited spaces' may serve as much to divert and dissipate social and political energy as provide productive spaces for engagement calls for circumspection by international donor agencies. That is to say, should their enthusiasm for creating spaces for institutionalized participation be tempered in the light of the evident reproduction of existing political culture and constraints to inclusion within many such spaces?[56]

Feminist organizations have a key role to play in broadening opportunities for the articulation of gender-transformative agendas in both traditional and 'new democratic spaces'. Yet, time-consuming and inflexible donor procedures and the dampening effects of projectization of funding create significant obstacles. Where feminist movements or NGOs strategize across projectized initiatives, they may be able to overcome some of these obstacles; but the amount of effort absorbed in meeting the demands of donors and shoe-horning projects to fit their funding categories can work to undermine the political agency and efficacy of such organizations. Less structured support given in solidarity rather than in response to LogFramed project proposals could make a broader difference to the democratizing potential of these kinds of organizations.

Lastly, our analysis has highlighted the significance of other spaces outside the formal political or deliberative arenas which can incubate leaders, and in which women can formulate positions, exchange perspectives and hone political skills.[57] There are important lessons to be learnt from initiatives such as Brazil's *escolas feministas* that seek to work with women within public office as well as to build the capabilities as *feminists* of would-be politicians and women representatives in other democratic spaces. Yet for these spaces to produce political actors who are effective within the political arenas described in this account, it is vital that such 'laboratories' move beyond the conflation of identity with identification. This calls for what Katherine Adams describes as a new politics of 'self-interest', one that

borrows from Arendt's notion of 'inter-est' as that 'which lies between people and *therefore can relate and bind them together*.[58] Such sites would serve 'not merely to articulate different identities and agendas, but to instrumentalize those differences towards the formulation of new identities, new agendas, new alliances, and new political forms'.[59] It is in the use of these spaces to develop bridges into the political arena – developing the bases for new alliances, as well as offering opportunities for political learning – that the challenges of *democratizing* democracy, can perhaps begin to be addressed.

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