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Men, Masculinity and the Politics of Representation

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Abstract:

Political representation has been a point of discussion for many political scientists and sociologists. The discussion about political participation is spread through a wide range of sub-topics that it would be counterproductive to attempt to discuss all of them. Before discussing the absence of women from the political and public spheres we should first define what political representation actually is in order to determine the forms in which it is executed. Men are a crucial element to the realization of gender equality. The respective authors reviewed acknowledge that men are implicitly, and often explicitly, blamed for the disadvantaged position of women. However, they emphasize that men, too, are disadvantaged, hence an intersectional approach was introduced to better comprehend the complexities of gender dynamics. Understanding expressive subordination (Nussbaum, 2000), exploitation, powerlessness, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young, 1990), are key to understanding those dynamics and how to abolish the unequal political representation of all constituents in a given environment.

Keywords: Political representation, gender equality, women, men, masculinity, class disparities, civil societies

Introduction

“Most people...do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives and actions, and in this sense most people lack significant power” (Young, 1990). Young’s expression of powerlessness implies gender blindness indicating that inequality affects men and women. The UN defines gender equality as the “equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys” (OSAGIAW, 2001). The concept of gender equality is usually associated with women’s rights. However, three essays have proved otherwise. Gender equality is about equal partnerships and relationships, into which men and women organize themselves, execute their rights and obligations, as well as exercise their freedom. The concept of gender equality is not exclusive to women’s rights, yet advocates for a variety of structural and social oppressive situations which affect both sexes. These binary sexes find themselves in a position of disadvantage based on their gender and, *inter alia*, social status. This critical review will discuss gender equality, (wo)men, femininity/masculinity, and politics.

R.W Connell in her piece “Change among the gatekeepers” uses an “inside-outside” (Cox, 1993) theory to explain how gender debates have an international dimension. She claims that gender inequalities affect men as they do women through the hegemonic masculinity theory, which involve hierarchical power relations dimension within the “male” community like power relations between states. She states “Men...control most of the resources required to implement women’s claims for justice. Men and boys are thus in significant ways gatekeepers for gender equality”, thus men’s inclusion into political and social reforms is crucial to achieve gender equality. Her main point is that a need exists to diversify men’s conceptual exposure because “diversity becomes better known, men and boys can more easily see a range of possibilities for their own lives, and both sexes are less likely to think of gender inequality as unchangeable”.

While I feel a sense of frustration with men being unable to see the injustices affecting their lives, I understand that they have internalized socially constructed roles.

While Connell's arguments were groundbreaking the piece was heavily criticized for being too structural and too ambiguous, which led to contradictory results and misuse. For instance, Hearn, *et al*, analyze how hegemonic masculinity has been utilized in Swedish and South African settings for understanding power relations on a national level (Hearn, *et al*, 2012a & 2012b). However, Swedish researchers have also misused this ambiguous concept by using it to legitimize stereotyping and perpetuate existing power relations. Furthermore, Flood argues that the piece lacks a coherent connection between masculinity and men's everyday life, identities, and self-representation (Flood, 2002).

Agreeing with Hearn, *et al*, are Christensen and Jensen in their piece "Combining hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality". They investigate how the concept of hegemonic masculinity by broadening the analysis. Unlike Hearn, *et al*, they offer a theoretical solution to hegemonic masculinity: intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) breaking it down into hegemonic, dominant, and dominating masculinity and using external (men's dominance over women) and internal (hierarchical classification of men) hegemony to better understand patriarchy and "conceptualize how patriarchal relations are legitimate throughout society" (Messerschmidt, 2012). They conclude that adding intersectional approaches to understand the multilayered external and internal power dynamics is essential to deconstruct the differences and enhance research in this field.

Although Jensen and Christensen's approach to hegemonic masculinity improves the theoretical framework it does not mention social contract theory and the ways in which society organizes itself. They implicitly assume a universality of men's hierarchical classifications, and neglected to investigate the crucial differences within societies. Additionally, they limit analysis of the nuclear family and descriptions of male-female dynamics. They fail to address what Craver describes as "the end of gender" and the necessity to breakdown the concept of gender from its origins to reach a more egalitarian society in which human beings are not classified and diversity is accepted and tolerated without labels (Carver, 2007). The fact remains that these scholarly articles partially disregard the LGBTQ community, their self-representation and identities.

Mackay's piece "Nested Newness, Institutional innovation, and the Gendered Limits of Change" moves away from the societal based analysis of men and masculinity. Mackay discusses institutional reform and innovation, specifically in the Scottish context, by exploring the efforts made by women's movements to devolve, ignite *or* create change in the "engineering" phase of institutions by entrenching them with "gender rights and freedoms" (Banaszak, *et al*, 2003; Dobrowolsky and Hart, 2003), which will assist in gender equalizing institutional development (Gooding, 1996; Pierson, 2004). Using institutional feminist perspective, she advocates for the necessity of "locking in" gender equality elements to neutralize historic gender inequality and bias. She uses nested newness to highlight the active resistance or passive negligence – "remembering the old" and "forgetting the new" – of institutional innovation and reform to explain this outcome. She claims that "liability of newness" offers one explanation as to why it is difficult to introduce gendered lenses into political institutions. She concludes that institutions are "nested in time and sequence" which imposes limitations on gendering politics.

Indeed, Mackay makes a compelling argument about how men have a great deal to lose when advocating for gender equality because they are the primary beneficiaries of patriarchy. Connell would agree and reply that "Men cannot hold state power without some men becoming the agents of violence", extending hegemonic masculinities as the source of resistance. Adding to this notion would be Jensen and Christensen's arguments, the class of privileged white males is dominating the underprivileged coloured males, making institutional reformation more difficult. The resistance of men to abolish patriarchal ideologies is associated with social expectations and trade-offs. Respectively, it seems evident that the "liability of newness" coupled with internalized classifications of masculinity and the existence of hegemonic masculinity impose institutional regression into the "old".

The three articles are in agreement with the idea that men are a crucial element to the realization of gender equality. The respective authors acknowledge that men are implicitly, and often explicitly, blamed for the disadvantaged position of women. However, they emphasize that men, too, are disadvantaged, hence an intersectional approach was introduced to better comprehend the complexities of gender dynamics. Understanding expressive subordination (Nussbaum, 2000), exploitation, powerlessness, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young, 1990), are key to understanding those dynamics and how to abolish them.

Political Representation of marginalized groups

Political representation has been a point of discussion for many political scientists and sociologists. The discussion about political participation is spread through a wide range of sub-topics that it would be counterproductive to attempt to discuss all of them. Before discussing the absence of women from the political and public spheres we should first define what political representation actually is in order to determine the forms in which it is executed. Political representation is commonly known as speaking and acting on behalf of others – delegation to third parties – for the vocalization of their interests, needs, beliefs and identities (Squires, 1999:80). According to Stuart Hall political representation is “the production of circulation of meaning through language” (Hall, ed. 1997:8), indicating that representation is in itself subject of interpretation and open for public and political discourse. This also suggests that those who own the power to give meaning and to claim truthful knowledge production are the ones who determine representation.

The main question for this paper is: how can the political representation of marginalized groups worsen their political and social status? Specifically, the essay will focus on how having female quota system actually worsens the status of women more than promoting it. The thesis of this paper is that the additive attitude lobbied for by liberal feminists through the quota system does not recognize the cultural differences and the types of oppressions women are subjugated to in different parts of the world, which has led to the under-representation of women in the political realm. It's not about adding women and stirring, as if the political realm is a big bowl of cake-mix, it's about how to deconstruct and understand the social dynamics through understanding its historical evolution, therefore understand how and be able to re-construct a society based on egalitarianism and equal representation.

The first body of this paper will review the existing literature around the topic of gender quotas. The second part of the paper will discuss why gender quotas are not the optimal choice to include marginalized groups, utilizing the case of Egypt, into politics to enhance political representation. The third part of the essay will prescribe different mechanisms to include marginalized groups into politics other than quota systems. This will lead to questions of whether gender quotas will actually benefit women, or whether gender quotas are an ineffective tool that follows the additive approach of liberal feminists. Lastly, the essay will present some concluding thoughts on how to improve the social base as a precondition for gender quota systems.

Review of Existing Literature

There are many renowned scholars who have all discussed the issue surrounding political representation and political presence, some of which advocated for the necessity of establishing a quota system, and others who have sought alternative ways to include marginalized groups into the political sphere. The most cited and preferred mechanism to include marginalized groups in politics is the quota system in which a specific percentage of seats in the lower house is reserved for women. However, there are many critiques directed to that form of representation – quotas being a form of affirmative action – believed to be “Policies of affirmative action—indeed, preferential policies generally—will (as they already have done) provoke resentment against minorities. Perversely, they will discredit even benign or harmless forms of affirmative action practiced informally by individuals and organizations (Kukathas, 2003:160). Hanna Pitkin identified different analytically distinct conceptions – what and who is being represented – of political representation that need to be tackled and understood before we can discuss whether a quota system is appropriate for all levels of analyses; descriptive-, substantive-, formalistic-, and symbolic representation. Additionally, each conception has different purposes: descriptive representation, aka. Microcosmic representation, regards women as an *identity group*, meaning that it exists “where representative assembles, in their composition, broadly reflect the overall composition of society” (Stevens, 2007:69). Substantive representation on the other hand regards women as an *interest group*, and therefore assumed that “representation of one's interest maybe more important than the representation of one's kind” (Childs and Lovenduski, 2005:120).

For Pitkin descriptive and symbolic representation seek the same end “The representative does not act for others; he “stands for” them, by virtue of a resemblance or reflection” (Pitkin, 1967:61), and defies the purpose of lobbying for the inclusion of women in politics, as Young puts it “Having such a relation of identity or similarity with constituents” (Young, 2000:354). Mansbridge, agreeing with Pitkin, continues to critique descriptive representation, stating “The descriptive characteristics of a representative can lull voters into thinking their substantive interests are being represented even when this is not the case” (Mansbridge, 1999:637).

Nonetheless, the authors agreed that descriptive quota systems should be introduced as base for substantive representation to include marginalized groups of the society, because the lack of diversity in decision-making processes lends itself to a lack of meritocratic system (Phillips, 1995; Young, 1990).

Louis Pojman (1998:99), arguing against Young and Phillips, sees that “giving people what they deserve as individuals rather than as members of groups, we show respect for their inherent worth” making the case against quota systems and the classifications of individuals of “protected characteristics” by arguing that “more important than having role models of one’s “own type” is having genuinely good people, of whatever race or gender, to emulate”. He is therefore arguing for substantive representation over mere descriptive or symbolic representation and further asserts that quotas are what he describes as “reverse discrimination” where historically disadvantaged groups are being compensated for by contemporary discrimination against new generations who played little to no role in the perpetuation of their marginalized and disadvantaged status.

Substantive representation is based on the idea of actions to represent the substantive interests of the represented through both deliberation and aggregation” (Mansbridge, 1999:630) meaning that the actions of the (s)electd representative should not rely on their resemblance to one and rather on her/his advocacy for one’s interest. She continues to criticize descriptive representation by citing Pennock’s famous statement “no one would argue that morons should be represented by morons” (Pennock, 1979:102). For example, in interviews conducted in the US by the Times Magazine, Huffington Post, and the Guardian, youths have thought of Bernie Sanders as a better substantive representative for women as an interest group than Hillary Clinton who resembled them but did not substantively represent them (Alter, 2016; Sawant, 2016; DeMoro, 2016). However, Mansbridge also argues that substantive representation on its own or descriptive representation on its own is not analytically sufficient to achieve political equality. She states “Disadvantaged groups also may need descriptive representation in order to get un-crystallized substantive interests represented with sufficient vigor” (Mansbridge, 1999:630) agreeing with Anne Phillips that the “degree of vigorous advocacy that people bring to their own concern” (Phillips 1995:70) advocating that regardless of how much sympathy and understanding one can have towards a disadvantaged group, advocating for their rights will more often than not be better if the representative is of the group.

Jude Browne in her piece critically defies claims made by Iris Marion Young (1990; 2011), Anne Phillips (1995) and Roland Dworkin (1985). In her piece “The Critical Mass Marker Approach”, she makes a case for quota systems actually perpetuating discrimination over compensation for the historically marginalized, evoke mediocracy over meritocracy, and perpetuates historical prejudice and induces a form of “reversed discrimination” (Pojman, 1998:112). Her critique revolves around that neither of the scholars present a “sufficiently sharp mechanism by which to select ‘strong candidates’ for particular forms of interventionist action” and proposes that the Critical Mass Marker is a “more refined and effective approach to institutional gender injustice than current affirmative actions” because it does not only practically promote enhanced proportional policy measures it can simultaneously serve as an instrument to identify structural injustice and “justifying direct state intervention”. The next section of this paper will critique gender quotas and affirmative action strategies.

What is the problem with quotas?

In the literature review Jude Browne and Louis Pojman have both raised valid considerations regarding the discriminatory features included in the descriptive quota representation of women and defied, contrary to Young, Phillips, and Dworkin’s believe that it will assist in overcoming cultural demands and ascribed gender roles. Browne argues in her piece that “if we accept sex as a proxy for justifying preferential treatment in recruitment via quota, then we would also have to accept sex as a proxy for justifying disadvantage”. Complementing this view is Richard Posner who argues that “the use of physical characteristics as a proxy for justifying affirmative action on the grounds that such policy simultaneously results in both inappropriate advantages and disadvantages” (Posner, 1998:252) and “affirmative action is ‘sexist’ as it fails to treat women with dignity as individuals” (Pojman, 1998:113). This begs the question then: how should we include women in the public and political spheres if not through quotas?

Suzanne Dovi her pieces proposed different strategies to redeem the marginalization of women other than quotas. She advances the argument that the problem with descriptive quota systems is that scholars have been theorizing *about* and *for* historically marginalized groups without actually including *them* as equal voices in the process.

However, none of the authors contemplated the corruption of the social system as a contributing factor that could pose a challenge to gender mainstreaming and neutrality.

Acknowledging the problems existing within the quota system and the critiques directed at affirmative action and preferential hiring, I agree with Browne and Pojman's arguments, yet I do not agree with the proposed alternative mechanisms to combat the marginalization i.e. The Critical Mass Marker Approach (CMM) and meritocratic hiring. The quota system has proven success in some scenarios yet it is cannot be generalizable, nor can the CMM approach, and my reason is simple: they are very global-north centric in the sense that social structures, legal frameworks, and institutional structures most of the authors use as reference to argue for or against their theoretical preferences are different from those existing in the global south. Most of the scholars discussing issues concerning political representations of women did not tackle the social discourses or the rules governing the society itself, neither did they critically examine the legal framework over which they are deliberating, rather they relied on pre-existing knowledge of women being a marginalized group and prescribed ways to combat their marginalized status.

Mansbridge made the argument that proportional representation and quotas are not enough on their own, but coupled with "cross-cutting interest", "power-sharing" and effective considerations for minority groups the deliberative and aggregative functions of democracy could produce a democratically legitimacy within the society. However, how can she arrive at such conclusions without ensuring that in this system those conditions will actually be met by the representatives? None of the scholars presented sufficient mechanisms that could be mobilized in states that do not have a democratic system to begin with, or for states that have recently witnessed terrors of wars or suffrages of all their forms. Furthermore, most of the scholars completely disregarded legal frameworks that could limit marginalized groups from entering the public and political spheres. Moreover, they spoke on behalf of the marginalized without first consulting the marginalized, relying on western-born movements of liberation and equality and subconsciously neglecting eastern- and orient-born movements for reform as a cornerstone for public deliberation. By assuming homogeneity of social, legal and political reforms around the world they have actively participated in the marginalization of others and "essential-ize" women of the global south. The next part will attempt to prescribe ways to introduce women into politics without the critiques directed at gender quota systems which may in themselves be discriminatory.

How to include the marginalized without being discriminatory?

Mansbridge (1999:637) pointed out the possible problems with descriptive representation of groups yet she concluded that the advantages of selective descriptive representation outweigh the disadvantages of it as well as posed solutions on how to overcome the barriers of it. She pointed to the communicative advantages surrogate representatives possess and the benefits of experiential deliberation to represent un-crystallized interests through shared experiences that selected descriptive representatives have acquired. She prescribes the need for critical mass for marginalized groups to convince others, to enunciate the position of minority groups, to disperse into the relevant sub-committees of the governing body, and to congregate a wide range of views and interests within specific groups. However, these propositions are useless when the marginalized group in question does not have a critical mass to begin with. The problem with her reasoning is that if a group is already marginalized from the public and political spheres by social constraints and sometimes even legal ones, in addition to the group in question being relatively small in number, how can we expect the surrogate representatives to make a case for their interests? Having descriptive representation, even if it is selective and not microcosmic, does not address broader social and legal issues confronting the groups in question. For example, the Egyptian penal code ambiguously states the equal social status of men and women, yet the interpretation and application of the penal code is left in the discretion of predominantly male judicial body. So if we were to have more women in political offices how can we combat the legal restraints set out to "push" them into the private sphere?

Pippa Norris and Mona Krook propose that the use of non-quota strategies such as 1) civil society actors, 2) political party actors, 3) parliamentary actors, and 4) state actors as crucial actors that could substantially promote gender neutrality and complement the quota system by prerequisite the proactive participation of those actors before implementing a quota system. Having a social base to work with is important before prescribing policies. Encouraging more women into civil societies highlight the common interests shared by specific groups as well as highlight the diversity of the group. By raising awareness can help reshape the society and public opinion towards the marginalized group, especially a big one such as women.

In the case of Egypt for example, encouraging more women into local civil societies would assist in closing the information asymmetry between different social classes and assist women of privilege to recognize and understand the troubles of others, therewith creating a more comprehensive understanding of what women want. As a second step including political party actors, specifically men, into the conversation would also hold some symbolic contribution and therefore further assist in changing public attitude towards women. Parliamentary actors and state actors, in hopes of re-election, will be 'pressured' by the *interest coalition* of civil society and political party actors to advance the status of women and promote gender equality through social and legal means.

The quota system, because of its affiliation with affirmative action and preferential hiring could further propagate women's marginalization by only opening up the political space for educated, urban women. This could lead to a perpetuation of socio-economic inequalities, and play a crucial role in absence of *all* women from the political sphere. In Egypt for example, if the socio-cultural discriminations against the majority of the population of women who are poor, illiterate, and rural is not tackled first, adding women into the political realm without influencing public opinion and views towards *other women* would only worsen the situation and ensure that most of *group* is left voiceless, unrepresented and absent. Social inclination deems rich, educated, and urban women as *better* than those who are not, and having an additive gender quota system does not improve the situation.

Furthermore, educational opportunities for girls and boys are different in some societies. In a survey conducted by UNICEF in Egypt it was concluded that women see boys more 'worthy' of education than girls because they are 'breadwinners' (UNICEF, 2003; El-Baradei, 2001). How can we then expect selective descriptive representatives to change the mentalities of the society if they themselves have been so entrenched in it that they no longer realize the injustice in it? Furthermore, the study revealed that girls' education is regarded as 'a waste of resources' that could be more efficiently allocated. The proposition therefore is that education for girls and boys should be free and accessible for all children to counter the general attitude towards education

Moreover, the lack of female representative is an outcome of broader gender inequality issues facing the Egyptian society. The legal framework in Egypt is designed to perpetuate the status quo in favor of men and ensure the subordination of women. As depicted above, laws in Egypt are targeting women implicitly by allowing different judicial interpretations of constitutional articles, specifically the penal code. The literature on Egypt largely displays gender equality in Egypt in term of women's rights and women's movements utterly excluding men and masculinity from political discussion in Egypt. If we want gender equality we need to understand that there are hierarchical classifications within the category of "men", which are significantly perpetuated by the society, subjugating men to similar pressures. The fact is, the class divide in the Egyptian context is, in my modest opinion, the root cause of political inefficiency. I therefore suggest that instead of discussing the under-representation of women only, we should also direct our attention to the over-representation of elite, urban, educated men in the political sphere, therewith we focus on gender equality and disassociate the term from its connotation with women's rights only.

Conclusion

Many International Organizations and NGOs have pressured the Egyptian government into adopting a gender quota system. However, the system has proven to be inadequate in the Egyptian context because there is no social base to support or raise awareness of the possible benefits of having women in politics. Having gender quotas in Egypt is like trying to cure a malignant tumor in the stomach by applying hand cream to it. I therefore propose that instead of being problem-oriented we should be more solution-oriented and attempt to see the root causes of the problem, i.e. that instead of imposing gender quotas, which are descriptive and additive in nature, we should first tackle social pressures and constructed gender roles of men and women in relation to class inequality. In the Egyptian context class inequality, I believe, is the main drive behind the perpetuation of many social inequalities. Gender quotas for example are an invention of white, middle-class, western women who believe that adding women to the conversation would result in gender equitable legislative mandates. However, women are already subject to the double burden (free labor at home, and less-than average pay in the workplace), denied access to more than one institutional structure, and men are subject to social ideals of being the breadwinners and disciplining force within the household, how can then a group of people who are not subject to the same pressures, i.e. males and females from the middle class, be representative of the class inequalities and social pressures the majority of the population is subjected to?

How can a middle-class, educated and urban woman identify or understand the burden of being a woman in a poor, rural, illiterate community? The simple answer is, she would and could not.

I propose that first we need to close the class gap through encouraging men and women to participate in local civil societies, which will ultimately lead to a decrease in the social gap, gradually changing social attitudes and gender roles, and then apply a gender quota for the representation of women. Having gender quotas only reproduces class inequalities and increases class discrepancies, because it indirectly includes women of the urban, educated, middle-income classes and excludes women of illiterate, rural, poor classes. Gender quotas, in that sense, treats women as a homogenous class, which in fact it is not. Intersectional feminists would argue that differences in privilege and status constitute differences in needs and interests, we cannot claim that every woman in Egypt, for example, is interested in eradicating FGM, and therefore we cannot have just one privileged group represented in parliament that speaks on behalf of all, if we were to do so, we would only make the situation for the majority of women worse. Henceforward, reshaping the society and deconstructing socially ascribed gender roles and identities should first be achieved to apply gender quotas.

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