More Than Numbers: Building a Feminist Democracy

Article by Karen Celis, Sarah Childs
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Resolving inequality in political representation is not just about putting more women on lists. Karen Celis and Sarah Childs argue that if we are to make our democracies more equal and more feminist, we need a multifaceted approach: one that also tackles substantive and symbolic aspects of representation, and even allows space for non-feminist outcomes.

Green European Journal: **Your book** *Feminist Democratic Representation* **(Oxford University Press, 2020) looks at the "poverty of women's political representation" and how to redress this. How are women and their concerns excluded from, or misrepresented in, politics today?**

Karen Celis: The problem goes way beyond the numerical underrepresentation of women in politics. It's also about what is or isn't discussed in politics, and how. What kinds of problems, definitions, and solutions circulate? And importantly, it's about the lack of systematic accountability towards women in society on the part of official representative institutions. There's a disconnect between what women discuss in society and what's on the political agenda. Although there are more and more women in politics worldwide, there's no guarantee that women will actually be included when women's issues are discussed and decided upon.

Sarah Childs: It's infuriating when problems related to the poverty of women's political representation are swept away or deemed unimportant because women have the vote and are increasingly entering politics and leadership positions. Naming it "poverty" gives it rhetorical power. Even using the word "misrepresentation" goes beyond saying that women are absent or underrepresented because it recognises diversity amongst women. Some women's interests or perspectives might be included, but others might not. Are the issues that are currently regarded as priority women's issues by politicians actually what women want to talk about, or are there other concerns that are filtered out? Some of the good news stories about gains in women's political participation may not be as great as they first seem, even if those changes are welcome.

Why is it that democratic systems and institutions are still failing to fairly represent women, even though past decades have seen more women enter politics?

Sarah Childs: Good representation has different dimensions: descriptive representation counts the number of female representatives; substantive looks at what acts are undertaken for women; symbolic looks at whether or not women *feel* represented in and by politics. Sometimes, there's a failure to recognise that all these dimensions work together.

It's not enough to just target one dimension, for example to try get a few more women into the higher echelons of political parties or to include a couple of relevant policies in manifestos.

Politics is saturated by the historical legacies of men and masculinised behaviour and interests. There's a tendency to think of political parties as being structured along ideological continuums, but we very rarely think about how those conceptions of interest (for instance blue collar and employers' economic interests), wherever they are on the left-right spectrum, reflect men's interests. Political parties protect and articulate their interests as they see them, and often that doesn't recognise their gendered nature. We also need to recognise that some change takes a long time because many parties and institutions benefit from the status quo.

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Karen Celis: Another reason why we still face the poverty of women's representation is that the feminist strategies to enhance women's inclusion in the 1990s and 2000s probably weren't ambitious enough. I don't want to blame feminists and this probably came down to feminist realpolitik. For instance, feminists designed gender quotas because they recognised that demanding women's inclusion was a first step, and a big one at that time. But quotas only impact the descriptive dimension of representation.

Our book looks at Marine Le Pen as an example of the limits of descriptive representation. She's a woman who is divorced and who talks about the interests of single mothers. Yet many women won't feel represented by her, for many reasons. Adopting a holistic approach to what constitutes the good representation of women helps to understand why that's the case.

Sarah Childs: The focus on descriptive representation has also tasked individual women with reforming policies and political institutions when they enter politics. It's asking a lot of female politicians and it's not a systematic way to bring about a politics that's good for women. It should be the responsibility of our institutions and all actors – male and female – to ensure that the basic democratic principles of political responsibility, accountability, and responsiveness are in place. It's a *democratic* deficit.

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Your book goes beyond diagnosis and calls for more women in politics to propose a series of changes to our democratic systems. Can you outline the key elements of feminist democratic representation?

Karen Celis: The key element of the process of feminist democratic representation is a new set of representatives called the affected representatives of women. We also propose two new representation moments as part of the regular processes that take place in representative institutions such as parliaments, assemblies, and councils.

The proposal for affected representatives of women – representatives of diverse women from civil society who are differently affected by the issue at stake – is theoretically underpinned by the idea that all those differently affected must be included in decision-making that concerns them. Women aren't a homogenous group; there are many ideological and intersectional differences. These differences must be at the heart of political decision-making so that when a women's issue is discussed, all the different voices, perspectives, and ideas are part of the process. The affected representatives aren't a fixed group but a flexible one that depends on the issue. Women in society choose their affected representatives, rather than politicians deciding who they want to listen to. The affected representatives then discuss the issue in parliament, the key institution of representative democracy.

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The affected representatives have two key roles to play here. The first is group advocacy. They explain what the problem looks like from their perspective, explaining their self-interests in order to inform the decision-making process. The elected representatives then deliberate to take a decision. This decision is then collectively communicated back to the affected representatives during the second new representation moment we suggest: account giving. Here, elected representatives explain why they prioritised some views over others and persuade the affected representatives of women that their decision is fair and just. Affected representatives are positioned to hold elected representatives to account. There's also a better communication line back to women in society both because parliament is highly visible and because the affected representatives are well connected to the groups they represent. As a result, it's not only the affected representatives that judge the work of the elected representatives and hold them to account, but through them also women in society.

Sarah Childs: We're effectively designing incentives for elected representatives who can otherwise disregard the voices of most women, and particularly women who are marginalised, lacking in resources, and who have rarely engaged in civil society. We want a loud constellation of ideas. We're not working with some naïve notion that these groups of women are going to unite, and that by presenting their different experiences, interests, and ideas the elected representatives are somehow going to please them all. There are areas where women and feminists disagree, and that's OK. What we're interested in is a *process* that over time can be judged as delivering just and fair policy decisions. This would create a sense of trust, legitimacy, connection, and belonging that's really important to help more – and different groups of – women see themselves as political actors.

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Can you walk us through an example of an issue that could be better addressed by a feminist democratic process?

Sarah Childs: In our book we discuss an episode where a woman is wearing a burkini at a swimming pool. In the debate across Europe on whether to ban the veil, decisions are often made by people who are far removed from the lived experience of that issue, who may be more powerfully positioned, and who may be participating in that debate because it enables them to pursue a different set of policy agendas.

Feminist democratic representative processes might enable the reconstruction of a debate about being able to wear a burkini to make it less about questions of religion, immigration, secularism, or rights, and more about wellbeing, health, sport, or leisure, as well as other relevant issues like policing and regulation. Different concerns might come to bear than the ones that currently dominate the political debate, and which we think misrepresent women. For instance, sometimes the debate about the veil is represented as part of an agenda of protecting women from oppression – but to what extent does that perspective really reflect the views of the women who would be impacted by legislation? Witnessing an affected representative explain that they don't support a ban on the veil on these very different terms might transform someone's view.

Karen Celis: It's a great example which also shows that having more women in political parties is simply not enough. There are now more women in politics than ever but they are predominantly white and non-religious. Muslim women are underrepresented. The headscarf is a very hot debate in parliaments but one that is primarily taking place among white, male party leaders, with the main concern being secularism. When it's mainly white men and a few white women discussing the headscarf, how can you not call this a paternalistic, neo-colonial decision-making process? It makes a democracy very vulnerable to criticism.

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Your focus is on the process rather than the outcomes of women's representation. Could this leave space for feminist democratic processes that lead to conservative outcomes?

Sarah Childs: We're very unapologetic in admitting that possibility. It's no different to the early theories of women's group representation, in that it was hoped that gender quotas would have certain feminist effects but they couldn't guarantee them. It's also true for our

design, which we hope would, over time, transform who participates in civil society and elected politics to include more and diverse women. That might include conservative women. Whilst we might as individuals wish to see feminist outcomes, it's really important that we don't assume that all women are feminists and to acknowledge that some outcomes would be differently feminist.

It's not that we're agnostic about outcomes. We care passionately about feminist outcomes, but we also need to recognise that if you were to design a system that produces feminist outcomes, you would have to make decisions in advance about what constitutes a feminist outcome. And that's just too problematic. It risks denying the participation and voices of large groups of women.

Karen Celis: In our book we played with the idea of the feminist despot. "Let's have a feminist despot, and then all problems are solved!" We're democrats through and through. A feminist decision cannot be feminist without also being democratic. Right-wing women have the democratic right to be represented too. Ideological and intersectional conflicts must be solved during the democratic process.

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It always strikes us that this is a question that is only asked when women are concerned. The question is never, "How do we design a system that satisfies men's interests?". That's because we thoroughly acknowledge that men are a heterogeneous group with conflicting interests. Actually, that's why we built political processes and democracies in the first place! So why on earth would we expect something different when women's interests are concerned? Democratic institutions need to work to solve conflicts of interests and views between women just as they do with men.

Sarah Childs: There are core democratic principles that those who participate in representative democracies have to subscribe to. There might be some popular radical-right parties who fulfil those. Others will engage in activities that undermine their claim to be democratic actors, such as political violence or trying to deny women core rights. And if they undermine that democratic minimum, they shouldn't be included in our parliaments. But beyond that democratic minimum those actors have the same rights, even if we don't like what they have to say.

Are there any examples of positive reforms or steps in the right direction in countries around Europe or beyond?

Sarah Childs: There's a huge international agenda for more gender-sensitive parliaments, including UN Women, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, OSCE, and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). There have been some good efforts for two decades now and we've reached an international standard. Our proposal is a substantial step beyond these other efforts, which are largely reformist and incrementalistic, but there's clearly a global desire to make parliaments better for women.

There's even international competition about who's got the most gender-sensitive parliament.

We're often asked whether our work on feminist democratic representation is fantasy planning for the future. But there are some good examples of best practice and we're optimistic about the potential. The Catalan Women's Parliament and the work of Tània Verge also illustrate the potential to systematically open up our parliaments to the representatives of women.

How important are the steps that political parties can take to offer good representation for women, whether it's quota systems, co-leadership, or even the founding of feminist political parties?

Karen Celis: These examples focus on the presence of women in political parties and leadership positions. We're in favour of this, but it won't be sufficient. What political parties could do is have their own feminist democratic processes. Whenever they draft a pamphlet, a manifesto or policy they could ask themselves, "What are the different voices out there on this subject? Which voices do we tend to miss and exclude in our party debates?". Then they should actively reach out to include and be accountable to them. This approach would enable them to better inform their own standpoints but also to better understand the counter-arguments and how to position themselves against them. People talk about the crisis of representative democracy, but really it's a crisis of political parties. It's in their interest to try to better connect with citizens.

As for feminist parties, I'm not against the idea but I wonder how one political party could incorporate all the diversity out there. A party presupposes some common ground, and of course women have some common ground but they're also as ideologically and intersectionally diverse as men. So we can have women's parties, but then you'd need a green women's party, a conservative women's party, a liberal women's party, a nationalist women's party, and so on. In the Netherlands, however, there is an interesting case – an intersectional feminist political party called BIJ1 ("Together"), which focuses not on outcomes but on the complex, intersectional problems of inequality.

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Beyond offering better representation for women, are there insights from your work that could inform the struggles of other under-represented groups? Could feminist democratic processes contribute more broadly to reinvigorate democracy?

Karen Celis: That's our aim, absolutely. We don't explore this idea in great length in our book, but why not have a similar democratic process for other marginalised groups? These processes could connect many groups in society and build trust, a sense of common fates, belonging, and proximity.

The idea of affected representatives would need some adaption to help improve the representation of future generations or nature, for instance. But experts can be affected representatives too. Keeping an open mind about who the affected representatives might be can enable us to achieve an overview of the perspectives, voices, and lived experiences relevant to a particular issue.

Sarah Childs: We debated long and hard about whether to call it feminist democratic representation or just democratic representation. In the end, we felt it was important to call it feminist because it was enacting core feminist principles and seeking to redress the poverty of women's representation. We feel very strongly that this is a better form of democratic representation whose process would create a higher quality of democracy. At least in principle, it should be able to redress the poverty of representation of other groups too. However, it's not a blueprint for any particular country or a specific parliament. It's a starting point and there would need to be another stage looking at how to apply its ideals to particular cases, contexts and times. Colleagues working on the representation of people with disabilities are exploring the extent to which these ideas would be beneficial in practice to those groups. It will be interesting to see how scholars in that field will work with or critique our ideas.

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Sarah Childs is Professor of Politics & Gender at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research centres on the theory and practice of women's representation, gender and political parties, parliaments and institutional change. Her latest book Feminist Democratic Representation was published by Oxford University Press (with Karen Celis) in 2020.