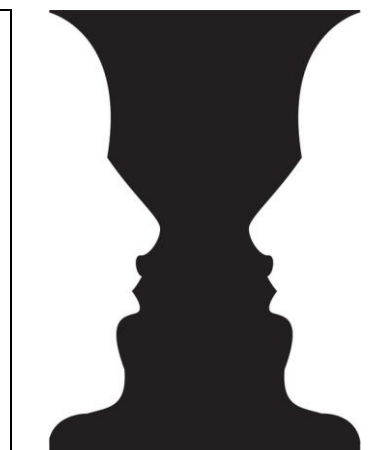

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Women and politics – the glass ceiling

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Abstract

The role of women in modern politics is a subject that needs further insight, considering the growth in number of women that nowadays have relevant political positions on the international stage. There are studies today that emphasize the equality issue and all that is gender role related, but our interest is to analyze the women representation in power related positions. Due to the fast modernization of the political environment and the rapid spreading of the feminist way of thought, several authors took interest in the gender differences in politics. The article follows some key dimensions in understanding the gender-role in politics: the glass ceiling, the role of the media in drawing the image of the woman politician, the gender affinity effect. In the end we would like to point out the differences for men and women in exploiting the opportunities and securing the positions of power.

Keywords

Gender, the glass ceiling, the gender affinity effect, politics

Introduction

The role of women in power related positions is a subject that drew scholars' attention in the last decades². Theories like the glass ceiling, gender affinity effect or gender

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² Relevant works discussed in this article are Sarah Childs, *The Complicated Relationship Between Sex, Gender, and the Substantive Representation of Women* (in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 2006, 13;7), Kathleen Dolan, *Is there a 'Gender Affinity Effect' in American Politics?: Information, Affect and Candidate Sex in U.S. House Elections* (*Political Research Quarterly*, published online on the 25th of September 2007), Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1981), Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases:*

mainstreaming try to reveal the way women that hold relevant positions are perceived – by the public and by the media. Do others relate to women candidates, for example, same way they relate to male candidates? Drawing the history of equality concerning the gender issue, researchers and theorists have tried to explain the present gender gap. This review article tries to put together the key dimensions in analyzing the gender differences in politics – the history, the public and the media, as they are explained in the different works.

Twenty years ago, *the glass ceiling* was considered to be the reason why the arenas of power were dominated by men. The concept stresses out the impossibility of women to advance on the scale of professions higher than they already have, claiming that women do not lack ambition or strong will, but they are kept from doing so by invisible obstacles (Lorber, 1994). The glass ceiling is described as ‘those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management level positions’ (Martin, 1991, apud. Lorber, 1994, 227). Invisible and impossible to overcome, it is not found only at the top of the pyramid, but also in middle-management and where minorities are concerned (people of color, people with disabilities). The artificial barriers are stereotypes, media related issues, informal boundaries. Two decades later, we wish to observe the evolution of the glass ceiling hoping to gain further insight on the women and positions of power emphasizing the role of women in contemporary politics. In order to do so, we will analyze the role of the media in portraying the women that occupy power-related position. Studies (Gidengil, 2003) reveal that the media plays a significant part in perpetuating stereotypes and setting standards for (women) candidates. Another issue that we consider to be relevant for this matter is the way the public perceives the women in the positions of power. Apart from the media influence, researchers (Doland, 2007, Galligan, 2007) believe that we should not deny the relevance of the gender affinity effect – and we will see the arguments and the counter arguments of using this type of explanation.

The issue of gender differentiation in politics has not been of interest to scholars until early 80’s (Griffiths, 1999, 349). The role of women in the areas associated with power and prestige were significant only to some historians who underlined that, on the scene of history, women were most likely playing second roles. It was the feminist movement that drew attention that scientist should look more into this matter. Therefore, feminist researchers (Jean Bethke Elshtain, Cynthia Enloe, Judith Lorber, to name a few) set about to build up a new type of paradigm, where critics pointed out the flaws of the state and politics, which undermined gender equality in the favor of men. The state, the political system, and the positions of power were masculine. The glass ceiling made it hard for women to obtain and secure their places in the same way men

Making Feminist Sense of International Politics (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), Yvonne Galligan, Gender and Political Representation: Current Empirical Perspectives (in International Political Science Review, 2007, 28;557), Elisabeth Gidengil, Joanna Everitt, Talking Tough: Gender and Reported Speech in Campaign News Coverage (Political Communication, 1091-7675, 20:3, 2003).

did. Women needed a different type of support that authors like Hassim (2009) and Lombardo and Meier (2006) had unforeseen consequences. The speech that was supposed to enable women to achieve same type of recognition as men actually made them seem weak and untrusting. Maybe it was the gender role issues that made authors look more into this subject, or maybe it was a trend set by other social sciences; however, the subject became central to the researchers concerned with power and politics.

If politics, foreign affairs and leadership were male-related areas, then women were associated with the private, personal sphere of life, like the family. Elshtain (1987) stresses out the relationship between the role of women in public and personal areas. The stereotypes draw us to believe that there is no successful way in joining the two spheres. The author proves that the way men and women think about themselves has direct consequences on the way men and women act in matters concerning politics, so it is not only an issue regarding the public, but also regarding the way oneself understands his or her role. Politics has a male-related meaning and, as a result, it remains the prerogative of men, states the author. The public domain is ruled by men, while the private, personal sphere of life is mostly feminine.

It appears to be a trend in common knowledge that women are first of all linked to their family and the people surrounding them, and secondly to their professions. Other analysis show that the social context favors mental exclusion of some specific categories of people (women in politics) and that there is a social control that induces people to reject alternatives (women should be wives of presidents, not presidents). The way we think is socially controlled by the pre-existent paradigms (Enloe, 1990 apud. Griffiths, 1999). The constantly changing social structure should enable us to see “beyond the horizon” and realize that there is more to reality that meets the eye. The author considers that all that is relevant is socially determined so by the rules and values imposed by society. That is no news, for the Thomas theorem states that if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. However harsh the critique, we must not ignore the fact that we are socially introduced to our gender roles starting with primary socialization.

Politics – international or domestic - and international relations were until recently masculine areas of interest. This makes it almost impossible for a researcher to see the hidden dimensions – and by hidden we understand what is outside the prescribed way of thought – outside the paradigm. However, this does not necessarily mean that politics are prerogatives of men alone. Enloe does not ignore the presence of women, but emphasizes that their positions were not a highly relevant one. We wish to see if this point of view is valid today, and by that we should analyze the way the public relates to women politicians and the way women politicians describe themselves. The gender affinity effect could let to believe that women benefit from the support of other women – we shall look more into this subject.

However, we find ourselves asking the question: do men relate to men as women relate to women? If so, does this mean that the feminine electorate only votes for female candidates? Most likely, the answer is no. But if we should take into consideration the

gender affinity effect, we should not overlook the media either, which plays a key part in supporting or deprecating any candidate (we will see later on that, as far as elections are concerned, the media has a tendency to focus on the female candidates).

We find the gender related issues important for the contemporary society because the formal speech tells us that there should be no gender related issues. We do not find it necessary to prove if these matters are true or false (and for that, we will remember the Thomas theorem once more, for if something is perceived as being real, it becomes real through its consequences). We do however find ourselves in the position where we should see, as Kulik, if gender is ‘as difference somehow more impregnable than other kinds of social differences? Are women really more reliable authorities on women than men are?’ (Kulick, 2008, 186). The most at hand answer is ‘most likely’. We do not wish to disregard other types of differences (age, ethnicity, sexual affiliation), but the subject of interest is not whether or not women are discriminated, but we want to see the way the public perceives women that, at least at a formal level, are not discriminated. Does their position have the same advantages and disadvantages as the men’s? In other words, if there is indeed an equality of opportunity, is there an equality of perception as well? The second question regards the gender affinity effect – if women are prone to support other women, are men prone to support only men?

The transition to equality

Nowadays we face what seems to be a redistribution of power – public policies, strategic planning, the public and the private all seem to adopt a common language concerning gender equality, social equality, and equality of opportunity and so on. ‘United in diversity’ tells us that men and women, people of all races should work together for a better world. But how does that work empirically? Scholars such as Hassim (2009) or Lorber (1994) consider that the formal egalitarianism speech did not have an effect on the redistribution of goods like services or opportunities on the job market. This means that the redistribution of power is an ideal grievance that is far from having empirical consequences. The authors stipulate that the glass ceiling is formally broken by all the official prerogatives or institutionalized norms that state the equality between genders. However, the formal support and the new rules backfired. We have to take into consideration that by encouraging women to enter the political arena and by facilitating the process in a normative matter (special seats assigned to women, for example), we also draw into attention the fact that women need support, ‘while men do not need training and information on the causes of male domination in politics, its effects on women or the development of more gender-equal attitudes’ (Lombardo & Meier, 2006, 161). In doing so, the masculine dimension of the political world is emphasized. Without disregarding the benefits of political empowerment and formal equality, there seems to be a problem ‘of institutional access to political voice, and from political voice to policy outcomes’ (Hassim, 2009, 2). We will look later on into the matter of cognitive dissonance and inconsistency of status – women that occupy positions of power lack the ability to manage the new found role.

The modernization theory states that the economic growth enabled the expansion of opportunities for women. As the market grew bigger, so did the need for more work power. More and more jobs were available, and so women left the domestic environment for paid work. Most likely, the increase of supply and demand on the market came with unforeseen effects: the unions (syndicates) were not enough to represent the women's rights, and so they needed direct and substantive representation. At the same time, education, the formalization of women's rights and the fact that women could get paid for their work helped them achieve that representation. Another factor that we should take into consideration is secularization - as the religious control that favored gender inequality grew weaker, women's roles in the public and private spheres grew stronger. If the religious way was no longer thoroughly respected, women were able to try to achieve same type of representation as men did. Another theory stresses out that state intervention helped gender equality, because the state was responsible for women to enter paid labor force. We should not overlook the conditions imposed by communist countries, where gender equality was ideologically stipulated and enforced (work obligation for women as for men) (Hassim, 2009). However, works – and the opportunity to work – are not enough for the egalitarian speech to be implemented, because people need more than promises and speeches – they also need a way to take advantage of those opportunities and the means to secure their new gained advantages.

It was the liberalization of politics that helped women obtain positions in the political decision-making. Starting with the 26th of August 1920, known as the day the suffrage battle was won, women could vote (in New Zealand, some parts of Britain, Norway, Finland, women could vote since the last decades of 1800s. 26th of August is the day women were granted suffrage in all US). Since then women desired and acquired political positions. But we find ourselves asking **how this process carries on and what is the role of gender in taking hold of a relevant political position**. 'The important contributors to women's high parliamentary representation came from a combination of socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors interacting with women's mobilization and party activism', states Galligan (2007, 561).

Theories of leadership show that there are two types of leadership styles regarding women: the first describes women acting like men, which has a negative effect on the way they are perceived. First of all, the public has a cognitive dissonance that occurs as a logical inconsistency among what it thinks and believes – in this case, regarding the behavior of the candidate. Second of all, the indefinite gender role makes the candidate appear not worthy of trust. The second theory stresses out the differences between the behavior of men and women, but the similarity in qualities (Lorber, 1994). There are many opinions concerning female leaders – but they do not make the subject of the matter at hand. Activist movements encouraged women to help the process of democratization and liberalization by pointing out that both genders should have equal opportunities in the political area. We talked about the unforeseen effects of the egalitarian speech above. Hassim (2009) analyzes the impact of the feminist agenda on institutions. Were they respondent to the redistribution of power? The answers were women-related and not institutions-related. The contradictory outcomes of inclusion

made the author take into consideration the fact that women do not relate to their new-found positions (status inconsistency), having still limited power. We are not in the era of equality yet, as far as the political venue is concerned, at least. The struggle of women has still limited efficiency, for the glass ceiling is still there. However, women's political participation is more than important for gender equality and development, states the author.

Hassim underlines the very interesting 'paradox of why men would willingly concede women to take seats in legislatures when they may themselves be displaced?' (Hassim, 2009, 9). There are two possible answers. One of them is that the new democracies provide enough opportunities for men and women – therefore, women may enter the political process without displacing men (Hassim acknowledges that the limited number of seats may imply a competition that eventually reduces the opportunities of male politicians, if women do not derive advantage of especially reserved seats). This answer seems somewhat superficial. Politics are not for everyone. The individuals need some type of qualities and abilities that enables them to enter and remain in the political venue for a period of time. Politics are, pre-eminently, a competitive area. There are never enough seats and there are limited resources that need to be exploited. Other scholars state that 'the existence of competing premises is important for understanding potential dangers in the implementation of policy measures. Gender inequality in politics is mainly articulated as a quantitative issue, but this takes us in opposing directions' (Lombardo & Meier, 2006, 159). Policies regarding gender equality could backfire and have unforeseen consequences.

'Gender mainstreaming implies a shift towards a broader concept of gender equality, that explicitly targets patriarchy by tackling the multiple interconnected causes that create an unequal relation between the sexes in the areas of family, work, politics, sexuality, culture and male violence' (Lombardo & Meier, 2006, 161, apud Walby, 1990). Reducing the gender issue at numbers (how many women versus men are employed in several area of interest) is obviously wrong. However, equal political representation of women is an issue taken into consideration by feminist researchers, at least as a way to ensure that women will, at least numerically, be part of the mainstream (Lombardo & Meier, 2006, 161). But gender mainstreaming could emphasize the perception that women need constant support.

Women and the media

As we will see, media plays a significant part in portraying the image of female candidates. The media influence is notable and we will analyze what kind of images it generates. Studies regarding women in politics have revealed that female politicians are unsatisfied with the way the media portrays them (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003). It appears that media has an important role in presenting the woman politician by emphasizing the appearance, therefore neglecting the more significant aspects, like the political agenda. This is not the case where male candidates are concerned. One of the most relevant

consequences is that women are either perceived as sexual objects, either they are portrayed as belonging in a more material, less intellectual world (cooking, not thinking).

However, women have the tendency to become more masculine in image and speech, as to minimize the fact that they are women. We find this effect described as ‘talking tough’ (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003). The study shows that there is a sex-differentiated way of perceiving the images of politicians, known as the “gendered mediation”. Gender mediation, applied to media, points out that the male is the norm in news frames, thus constructing politics in stereotypically masculine terms (Rakow & Kranich, 1991, apud Gidengil & Everitt, 2003). The consequences of gender mediation are experienced in the way the behavior of women politicians is evaluated and analyzed by the media. Authors consider politics to be a male norm because the stereotypes are constantly reminded by the media, and so it creates the image that politics is not a place for women. Not only that, but female politicians find it hard to send their message to the electorate. However, being bold and assertive is not the way to go, either. If women are feminine they are weak and untrusting, if they are too aggressive, they stir up negative reactions. If the speech of female politicians is aggressive and combative, the public is likely to perceive the person itself as being violent (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003). The gender-role expectations are highly confusing regarding this issue, but for women only. When a female violates the norms, her behavior is analyzed enhancing the negative. If a man doesn’t act according to the stereotypes, he suffers far less bad consequences, ‘because men’s claim to leadership is unquestioned’ (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003, 212). This also means that women are more likely to stick to the rules than men are, as far as politics are concerned. Men benefit of a larger area of accepted eccentricity, that they can ‘get away’ with more things that women do, starting with the way they dress, who they have lunch with or who pays for the campaign. Women do not have the same benefit of the doubt, which actually means that there are higher standards for women than for men. So what about equality? As we will see, having the opportunity and exploiting the opportunity are not the same thing for men and for women. Regarding the public, studies (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003) show that women prefer a powerful speech in a woman candidate, whereas men would like to hear powerless ideas. In other words, the female public would like to have someone to represent their needs and opinions – regarding abortion, human trafficking, work opportunities and so on. Men, on the other hand, would rather hear another men talk about these issues (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003).

What about the public? - the gender affinity effect

Dolan (2007) studies the hypothesis that the female electorate will most likely vote for female candidates. This is called “the gender affinity effect” (King and Matland 2003; Sanbonmatsu 2002 apud. Dolan 2007). The author does not neglect the fact that there are arguments supporting this statement, but she continues that focusing on the sex of the voter can neglect the complexity of the gender issue. One of the first questions that comes to mind is, if the female electorate will most likely vote for female candidates, the male electorate will vote for male candidates? The studies of an affinity effect should

take into consideration, first of all, if people are willing to vote for female candidates. Dolan introduces two measures of reactions to candidates: information and candidate affect scores (Dolan, 2007, 79). The feelings of group solidarity represent the first reason why we should start considering that women might vote for women. Secondly, the female electorate may look for descriptive representation. Gender identity is the third reason identified by Dolan. Last, but not least, the decision to vote for a woman could be based on 'the interaction of sex and a set of ideological or partisan sympathies' (Dolan, 2007, 80). We should also take into consideration the possibility that the ethnicity, age or political party could be as relevant as gender.

Galligan (2007) analyzes the three dimensions of political representation: *who* represents, *what* is represented, and *how* it is represented. Without taking this into account, the discussion about gender affinity effect in politics is useless. First of all, the author sets down who represents women – who has the necessary qualities to represent gender interests on the political stage. It appears that women represent women better than man would because of two reasons: similar life experiences and promoting the concept of gender equality. Secondly, we have to see if the target public consists of women only or if a female candidate represents both men and women. Last, but not least, we should take a look at the process of representation.

Regardless of the modernization theory, the liberalization of politics or the activist movements, it is obvious that the role of women in politics is a matter that needs further attention. One issue is that women fill formal positions with no real power attached to them, which provides us a different approach on the male-female political relationship. 'Women who enter parliament through a quota are not accorded the same political legitimacy and respect as their male colleagues. They are seen as second-rate politicians, "clients" of the state on whom they depend for their seat-holding' (Galligan, 2007, 563). Therefore, the role of women in politics seems to be only a formal one, with no real consequences for the public (for the *what* is represented). The process of representation seems a form without substance, if we were to take for granted Galligan's conclusion. However, our doubts do not concern the superficial holding of the position, but the credibility associated with the female candidate. Is a woman politician as credible as a male one? We have seen so far that men are reticent at the idea of being represented by a woman. On the other hand, women would most likely be represented by other women.

The need for substantive representation (the tendency of representatives to advocate for certain groups) could be an explanation for the fact that 'women are more likely to act for women than men' (Childs, 2006, 10), and therefore explain the consequences of the gender affinity effect. Same author states that relying an entire justification on empathy and similarities is obviously wrong and uses Phillips' theory which states that 'while there is no 'empirical or theoretical plausibility' to the idea that women share experiences or that women's shared experiences translate into shared beliefs or goals, women do have particular concerns that derive from women's gendered experiences' (Childs, 2006, 10 apud. Phillips, 1995, 53). This means that the representatives of women should have similar experiences of life, and therefore women understand women better than man do. There are scholars (Kulick, Scholes) who discuss

female experience as it is described in feminism – ‘into female essence, which allows them to subject this proclaimed essence to the deconstructionist formula that proves there is no such thing as essence’(Kulick, 2008, 187). Scholes provides the answer: there is a difference between having an experience and not having it, and a very large and significant difference between having the same experience over and over again and never having that experience at all.” (Kulick, 2008, 187 apud Scholes, 1987). But empathy is not everything. The political affiliation is another factor that needs to be taken into consideration. Institutions have an impact: in political institutions characterized by masculinist norms, indirect discrimination and sexism, heightened inter-party conflict and party-controlled systems of rewards, the space for women to act for women is likely to be reduced (Childs, 2006, 12, apud Considine and Deutchman, 1996; Dodson, 2001; Mackay, 2001). We should not overlook that substantive representation has its part on the political stage: women’s concerns and interest would not be represented as good if there weren’t women activists to talk about them.

Summarizing all the above, it appears that the quantitative gender issue seems to be on the way of being resolved. There are more and more women nowadays that enter the political arena and, more importantly, maintain their position for a relevant period of time. We have here the famous case of Tarja Halonen, who entered politics in 1984 and in the year 2000 became the first female president of Finland. She is currently at her second term, winning the 2006 elections³. The gender issues did not neglect the political environment and the policy-making procedures, and activist movement assured, not without consequences, a formal representation of women:

- ‘1. The women’s movement in democratic states has succeeded in increasing the descriptive (numerical) and substantive (content) representation of women.
2. The women’s movement has been more successful in increasing women’s representation in places where women’s policy agencies have gendered the policy debates in line with the goals of the women’s movement.
3. Women’s policy agencies endowed with institutional capacity have been more effective in linking the women’s movement with policy-makers than their counterparts with fewer resources and less capacity.
4. Variations within the women’s movement or the policy environment, or both, explain the effectiveness or otherwise of women’s policy agencies and the women’s movement in increasing women’s representation.
5. Women’s policy agencies have tended to provide necessary and effective linkages between women’s movement activism and substantive and procedural responses by democratic states.’ (Galligan, 2007, 568)

Another important issue regards the knowledge the public has about the candidate, Dolan states. It is likely that a woman will evaluate a female candidate in more positive terms than a man would. The part of the public that positively evaluates a

³ More details on the President of the Republic of Finland are available on the official Presidency site: <http://www.tpk.fi/> (accessed January 5, 2010)

candidate could become that candidate's electorate. "Could" and not "definitely" because there is still a gap between affect, information and action: the vote. Dolan's conclusions are that although there appears to be a connection between women voters and women candidates, it is more complex than sharing the same gender identity. Another factor that should be taken into consideration is (and here Dolan meets Childs) the partisan preferences (women positively evaluate Democratic candidates rather than Republican in American elections). Even if women support female candidates, 'the evidence suggests that this support can be shaped by party loyalties as much as any gender loyalty. Women in the public evaluate female candidates in the same way that they evaluate all candidates, through the lens of personal and political considerations that take many forms' (Dolan, 2007, 88).

Conclusions

Although from the perspective of formal entitlements men and women have nowadays equal opportunities in obtaining any position, at least as far as the European Union is concerned, the glass ceiling is far from being broken. Studies reveal that the media is a significant factor in perpetuating the gender stereotypes and, as for the political campaigns, it has a negative role in drawing the image of the woman candidate. Maybe it is the need for an interesting story, maybe it is the need to sell the story, the media being focused not on the candidate quality, but on the gender quality.

The gender affinity effect underlines that there is indeed a relation between the female public and the female candidate. However, sharing the same sex identity is not enough to explain the vote choice. Women feel the need to be represented, and feel that other women can do that better than men. But the political affiliation is not neglected. The critical mass concept states 'that women representatives will act for women when there are enough of them present – although the point when this is supposed to happen is unclear'(Childs, 2006, 14). We have presented several theories on why women benefit from the support of other women. We have also underlined that the need for formal and institutional support points out the gender inequality. Men do not need the policies and the support that women do. Success comes with the risk of not having the instruments to deal with it. Achieving representation and power related position does not mean the battle for equality is over, in the feminist point of view.

The modernization of the political venue means indeed that both men and women face multiple and competing opportunities. The way they understand these opportunities is not symmetric. We should not draw the conclusion that this is a men's world and women do not have a place of their own. We should understand that the continuous evolution of society structure is a welcomed proof that stereotypes change too, as well as perceptions. In the end, it may appear to be win-lose situation, but, depending on the attitude, it might well be a zero-sum game, for the entering of women in politics does not mean that men will be replaced.

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