

Articles

WOMEN POLITICIANS AND ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Darlene E. Clover

University of Victoria

Catherine McGregor

University of Victoria

Abstract:

The lack of participation of women in electoral politics is a problem of justice, equity, and democracy. Although feminist scholars have explored this phenomenon from a variety of angles, few have focused on the adult education or learning dimensions. Using a feminist approach that included individual interviews, focus groups, and observations of two training programs, our two-year study uncovered how women in British Columbia were educated or learned to be or become politicians. Findings show a web of practical and tactical learning and training, an emphasis on communications, and complex knowledge-power relations of passion, activism, subservience, neutrality, and normativity. We illustrate how this web of powerful, problematic, and often contradictory practices contribute to but also impede women's political empowerment and substantive political change.

Résumé

Le manque de participation de femmes dans la politique électorale est un problème de justice, l'équité, et la démocratie. Bien que les érudits féministes ont exploré ce phénomène d'un assortiment d'angles, le quelques s'est fixé sur les dimensions d'enseignement pour adultes ou érudition. Utiliser une approche féministe qui a inclus les entretiens d'individu, les groupes de foyer, et les observations de deux programmes de formation, notre étude de deux-an a découvert comment les femmes ont été instruites à Colombie-Britannique ou ont été apprises à être ou devenir des politiciens. Les conclusions montrent une toile d'érudition et l'entraînement pratique et tactique, un accent sur les communications, et les relations de connaissance-pouvoir complexes de passion, l'activisme, la soumission, la neutralité, et normativity. Nous illustrons comment cette toile

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de pratiques puissantes problématiques et souvent contradictoires contribue à mais empêche aussi de l'autonomisation des femmes politiques et le changement politique important.

Introduction

This article shares findings from a two-year feminist study of how women in British Columbia learn or are non-formally educated to be or become politicians. The study was part of a broader international comparative study with India. We undertook this study for two key reasons. Firstly, co-author Darlene Clover has spent many years focusing on women's political empowerment through education outside formal politics. With key decisions that substantively affect the lives of women (and men) taking place inside the formal world of politics, she wondered how the women who chose to enter that arena were faring. Secondly, co-author Catherine McGregor has actually been a BC provincial minister for the New Democratic Party (NDP), holding portfolios in environment, municipal governance, and advanced education. Within the daily rough and tumble of “doing” politics, she truly had little time to reflect on what was being learned and the related implications to herself and other women. The coalescing of as yet unspoken interests came when the co-authors travelled to India for a conference in 2008 and had the opportunity to take part in a feminist adult education workshop for women politicians. The government of India had recently passed legislation that mandated 33% of the municipal seats to women and the “scheduled castes”—something that has since risen to 50% in some states—and both governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations were actively delivering educational programs to respond to this dramatic increase of women, who came from a diversity of castes (classes) and were often non-literate, into political power. As we marvelled at this progressive legislation and observed the training, we asked each other: wither Canada?

Immediately following the federal election in Canada, Paperny (2011) published an article in the *Globe and Mail* noting that:

for the first time in Canada's history, and exactly 90 years since the first female Member of Parliament strode into the green chamber, women make up a quarter of the 308 seats in the House of Commons. That record high is nothing to sneeze at, advocates say—but it's also nothing to be overly proud of. Canada remains 52nd in the world when it comes to female representation in political office, and it's falling further behind as other countries take more aggressive measures to even out the gender balance. (p. A7)

Canada has no official affirmative-action legislation, so the greatest number of women politicians is found at the municipal level. We would argue this is due to school board trustee positions—women's “natural” area. But even this falls short of the 33% benchmark set by the United Nations—a level at which substantial change can occur (Cool, 2010; Heard, 2008). While the NDP in British Columbia does have a “gender parity” policy, McGregor was very much involved in this process and can report it was a difficult struggle, and many still see it as a bias that will adversely affect the party. Even in that “progressive” party, patriarchy runs deep.

Equally problematic is the persistent downturn in participation levels by women in formal politics in Canada over the past decade, often attributed to a lack of role models and/or the patriarchal nature of politics (Heard 2008; Young 2000). Feminist scholars who promote gender parity place their emphasis on inclusion and democratic representation. The monopolization of power by men in the formal political sphere is not only “patently and grotesquely unfair,” as Phillips (1998, p. 229) argues, but ensures women’s points of view “remain unheard, under-represented and in some cases, all but ignored,” thereby weakening democracy as a whole (Shamshad, 2007, p. 139). Given the lack of affirmative-action legislation, the struggle to maintain it at party levels where it does exist, and the diminishing numbers of women interested in politics in Canada, we can be assured things will not change much in the near future. However, a second response to our “wither Canada?” query is to acknowledge that learning and educational activities for women are taking place across the country. For example, municipal governments and one volunteer women’s organization in British Columbia host yearly educational activities. Moreover, women politicians live in a perpetual state of learning. Yet feminist political theorists seldom focus on these key dimensions. Our feminist approach combining observations, interviews, and focus groups revolved around questions of what the non-formal education programs and informal learning activities comprised, and their ability (or not) to create substantive change in the working lives of these women and, by extension, society.

We begin this article by outlining ideas and debates in feminist political and adult education theorizing pertinent to our study, followed by a description of our research design. We then present the findings and conclude with a discussion of implications. We contend that deconstructing and revealing how women (although we recognize “women” is a very non-heterogeneous category, we will show it unfortunately is heterogeneous in the case of Canadian politicians) in government or those aspiring to formal political life are educated non-formally or learn informally has something important to tell us about gender equality, equity, and socio-political change. Adult education and learning can be powerful instruments in discursive and strategic struggles for change, but equally for maintenance of the status quo.

Feminist Political and Educational Theories

Feminist political theorists have uncovered a number of contested and problematic interwoven conceptualizations and practices that we have used to frame our study. Okin (1998) set the stage by uncovering examples of what she refers to as a growing “gender neutrality” within political discourse. Although on the surface this may seem a progressive turn, language and discourse are key resources through which social and political capital operate, as language and discourses have deep symbolic power. In describing symbolic power, Bourdieu (1999) links the authoritative position that the individual or group holds as a primary means by which the power of the language is able to “bring into existence the thing named” (p. 223). Of importance to our study are the links between language, power, and politics. Indeed, language can:

sanction and consecrate a relation of power between agents with respect to the names of professions and occupations, an essential component of social identity.... The symbolic power of agents, understood as a power

of making people see ... and believe, of producing and imposing the legitimate or legal classification depends ... on the position they occupy in the space. (pp. 240–243)

Symbolic knowledge production, then, is an outcome of managing social and political spaces and the control of particular discourses and practices that normalize and thereby neutralize.

Picking up on the latter are feminist scholars who explore concepts such as leadership in relation to issues of social conditioning and normative identity formation (e.g., Pant & Farrell, 2007; Phillips, 1998). There is a deeply engrained gendered nature to politics and patriarchal power supported, as Weber (1946) once argued, by a history of traditions and myths of what makes a “good” leader. This type of leader is singular, decisive, rational, reasoned, and, of course, articulate (Dhanda, 2009; Tremblay & Pelletier, 2000). Problematically, these culturally engrained attributes run contrary to the “idealized” female disposition toward compassion, emotion, and teamwork, and this creates a bind. Although politicians must display these leadership attributes to be taken seriously in the public, women who do so pay a price. There is an unspoken yet deeply felt faux pas in going beyond recognized, stereotypical gender roles. Dhanda illustrates how the media will play vigorously on any deviation to influence voters or undermine women candidates. Gouthro (2005) calls for education to help women realize a renewed sense of the power of their femininity as compassionate caregivers, which raises contested theories of difference. Phillips argues that “women *are* different from men, and if these differences are not explicitly acknowledged, political analysis will continue as an analysis [and practice, we would add] of men” (p. 11). Indeed, women often bring alternative visions to politics grounded in their diverse reproductive roles and experiences and raise crucial questions that need to be addressed if social policy is to improve for women (Dietz, 1998; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). Yet Phillips reminds us that although “we often talk as if we want to make politics ... more grounded ... in doing so we (women) gamble with our own marginality” (p. 11). She cautions how focusing on difference can turn into a “sentimentalised vision of women’s place or role—and, in the sentimental vision, women are usually subordinate” (p. 11). The idealized vision of the nurturing and caring mother can mire women in the particularities of family rather than the generalities of the public sphere required in visions of “good” politicians (Dolan, 2005). Yet responding to Gouthro and confronting and changing these myths and traditions of political capital and power authority are among women politicians’ greatest challenges, as we will demonstrate in our study.

Linked to the above are contested notions of equality for women in the political realm. On one hand, some feminist scholars argue that an increase in the number of women in politics is what will make a difference, reflected in the United Nations argument of 33% (noted in the introduction as the level India adopted). Without a critical mass of women in the political arena, little will change, for power lies in having a sufficient number of women who can band together and speak with a common voice. But it is this common voice that poses a problem for other feminists. Tremblay and Pelletier (2000) assert that a numerical increase in women representatives and the representation of women’s or feminist interests do not necessarily coincide. Ackerly (2000) and Erickson (1997) concur, adding

the ideological (i.e., feminist) underpinnings of those in political power—whether male or female—are what matter most to social and/or political change. But there are further complications. As we noted earlier, the category of “women” is non-heterogeneous. Within “women” exist intersectionalities and hierarchies of identity based on class, race, ethnicity, and so forth. Moreover, identity—how women are assigned identities and how they create or sustain their identities—is never fixed, but always shifting and changing, influenced by structural forces, social conditioning, and their sense of individual or collective agency (Pringle & Watson, 1998; Vincent, 2003). Our study aimed to explore how identity formations were learned and enacted, and the implications for those in or aspiring to power.

Feminist adult educators believe that all forms of discrimination and inequality must be illuminated through targeted interventions based in a feminist and multi-sectionality vision of empowerment. This requires “a process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others” (Rai, 2007, p. 73). For some feminist adult educators, empowerment through education needs to emphasize the growth of the individual to build self-esteem and confidence, since social conditioning continues to leave some women bereft of a sense of personal power or agency (Heng, 1996). Others recognize that knowledge emerges in particular contexts, and this determines the extent to which particular discourses can be enacted, reproduced, or altered. Feminist educators Walters and Manicom (1996) call this process “the construction of political subjectivity” (p. 17) that takes place within what Pessoa de Carvalho and Rabay (1999) refer to as the “continual and complex theoretical and practical process of learning about and within relations and practices of power” (p. 257). Shamshad (2007) calls for educational empowerment for women to be “a process ... that challenges traditional power equations and relations” (p. 141). Just how much this is the case is the foundational question of our study, to which we now turn.

Methodology

As feminist researchers, we stand on the shoulders of those who suggest the need for more gender-informed studies and analyses to advance the quest for women’s empowerment and social change (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). The primary objectives of our study were to uncover how women in British Columbia learn and/or are educated to be or become politicians, and to understand how this supported or impeded their own empowerment as well as socio-political change. Questions that guided this research revolved around the backgrounds of the women politicians (or aspiring politicians), their understandings of politics and leadership and, in particular, the challenges they faced, their educational and learning practices and experiences in terms of political and social empowerment, and issues of identity and agency. We wanted to uncover information that would validate the learning and educational practices of and by women. Yet our study also aimed to identify problematic practices. As noted above, politics is mired in male-centred culture—a deeply naturalized political master narrative—and systemic change is required. Political master narratives “create a particular kind of social world, with specified heroes and villains, deserving and undeserving people” (Sandlin & Clark, 2009, p. 1002). Local narratives—those stories told and retold in particular discursive communities, frequently reinforce these frames or ways of thinking about politics and gender. As such, the promise of adult

education and learning as tools for empowerment at the individual and collective levels helps us understand how, consciously or otherwise, the non-formal political education and informal learning challenges and/or maintains these gendered narratives and the status quo.

The 50 women who participated in this two-year study were aspiring, past, or currently serving politicians in British Columbia. The aspiring politicians were drawn from an annual non-partisan, three-day training program in Vancouver titled the Women's Campaign School (WCS), aimed at encouraging women to seek nomination at whatever level of politics or to whatever party. Run by volunteers, this program uses past and current politicians as trainers and guest speakers; includes sessions regarding finances and communications skills; features a media panel; and stages a very clever hands-on mock-campaign exercise. Many of the currently serving politicians who took part in the study were drawn from the two-day educational program organized by the Local Government Leadership Academy (LGLA). This is a leadership development initiative aimed at newly elected male and female politicians. The LGLA also uses past and current politicians as educators; hosts sessions on finance, roles and responsibilities, laws, and specific leadership skills, like how to run meetings; and includes a media panel. Approximately 10 participants were recruited at a major yearly gathering of local politicians hosted by the Union of British Columbia Municipalities. The remaining participants were politicians serving in Victoria, the capital of the province. We also interviewed four key trainers to understand their visions and the aims of their educational work. We also took part in both the WCS and LGLA over the two years, keeping journals of our thoughts and observations. To analyze the data, we met immediately following the educational programs to discuss the emerging themes. The interviews and focus group discussions were all transcribed and then shared with participants to ensure accuracy. Once that phase was concluded, we individually coded each of the transcripts, categorizing the data into themes regarding agency, identity, equality, power, empowerment, neutrality, and type of training. Within this last theme, we developed four categories: practical, strategic, feminist-based, and experiential. We came together formally on six occasions to discuss and refine these categories, eventually distilling them into the four key themes to which we now turn.

Information, Knowledge, and Power

For the majority of participants, the most essential ingredient to being or becoming a successful politician was gaining knowledge of the system—learning the rules, regulations, laws, and functions of government. Laura referred to this as “learning the old time politics of control and secrecy—the *guy* with the most information wins.” Others spoke of how exclusionary “not knowing” was: “So there I sat and they [men politicians] were talking about all these functions and rules and I was not on the ‘inside’ so it was clear I was not part of the conversation” (Doris). To combat this ignorance, the women spent countless hours reading bylaws and policy papers—or took part in training programs—so they would be as well informed as their male counterparts seemed to be. This conviction regarding the need for information was reflected in the training that politicians and aspiring politicians received in both the WCS and LGLA, as the majority of sessions related to governance functions. A woman trainer in the LGLA described the philosophy like this:

The key goals are ... foundational training—the basics, the law, the procedures, current practices, how to function in the meeting, Roberts Rules of Order—the real core skill building. We want to communicate information. Really you cannot generate knowledge about the Charter, you need to absorb it.

This is what we call practical learning, and it is the most prevalent in the training program. The aim is to provide information believed to be the key to creating a more level playing field. It also aimed to build confidence: “If you don’t know the rules you cannot feel confident to speak and if you don’t speak out, well, you are not seen as confident.” The WCS in particular proved invaluable to the women in terms of what Lorna called “demystifying the process, the ‘how-to’ of running a campaign, working with volunteers and finances, so much so it actually looked possible.”

Yet some participants recognized that an abundance of information was insufficient against the power of political capital. Sheila, for example, spoke angrily of how a woman had to “know more than a man if she is to be taken seriously and still that is not enough.” Indeed, having more knowledge than men caused its own problems. Leslie spoke of how she was once “told to ‘shut the f**k up’” by a male member of the council when she pitted her knowledge of a policy against his. No one spoke in her defence. There were other lamentations of abuse at the hands of male colleagues, and even at times female colleagues, when women produced what Kate described as “my near encyclopaedic knowledge of the rules [which really only got me] publicly humiliated for it.” Other interviewees spoke of closed-door meetings by men being bested: “I gave him the information and then he went out into the hall and talked with constituency members like it was his own.” Pant and Farrell (2007, p. 116) refer to this as “character assassination,” and a result they note, and we saw reflected, can be self-censorship: “I learned to be more careful about what I put forward, who I challenged, what I appeared to ‘know’ so yes, I often played dumb although I seethe about it” (Edna). These to us are examples of political capital. While women attempt to position themselves using the discourse of practical and tactical knowledge—tools of rationally centred debate—other forms of symbolic power constrained their use of these discourses and limited political agency.

Yet others learned something quite different about information and knowledge. For Lynne, “knowing is about [having] and sharing knowledge [which] is more powerful because it is for the greater good.” Others suggested the more you knew, the more you realized:

You do not need to know everything about, for example, financial management. You have top-notch financially trained people around you. You need to be able to ask questions. If you understand the larger issue, you will figure out how to strategize on how to get what you need to your community. (Andrea)

Communication: Listening, Questioning, Speaking

Alluded to in the above quotation is the issue of communication, a persistent theme in our data and in many ways linked to information. Asking questions and listening are traits or

practices feminist scholars suggest are most closely aligned with women (Dolan, 2005). Many participants acknowledged this was their tendency but that it ran counter to the more andocentric culture of politics: "Men would probably be the most likely not to ask and women the most likely to ask. Asking is a sign of weakness, though" (Andrea). Martha, a trainer, explained that this local political narrative :

is a cultural issue and by this I mean there is not a culture of learning in the elected official world. You fight an election and you say you know what to do and then you have to admit you don't know everything and you have to register and go to a training school.

While some women seemed to believe a woman could not "learn" to become a politician unless she already had certain inherent traits and abilities—and these were problematically associated with male leadership practice—others felt those traits or ways of acting/being could and, more importantly, should be learned. Helen suggested that what women politicians needed was more "assertiveness training" so they could "sound and look more like a proper politician." Yet when questioned further about what she meant by this, she said, "I want to learn how to speak effectively while maintaining my honesty [and] without jeopardizing my principles; not telling white lies or misleading."

These statements encapsulate a complexity many women shared. On one hand, they wanted to learn "government speak"—to "say something, rationally and with conviction while saying nothing at all like the men do" (Joy). Yet some clearly did not want to learn to avoid the serious issues and lapse into useless abstractions. Many women had begun as activists—a point we will discuss in more detail shortly—and felt that they had been and remained passionate about issues. Yet a number suggested, as best articulated by Lynne, that they should have "some training on how to control my passion, I guess." Complex positioning, both inside and outside of the political master narrative are evident in these local narratives, as women clearly struggle to make sense of and bridge these different discursive communities of rationality versus passion.

The WCS placed an emphasis on "political" communication. An entire session was devoted to teaching women how to stand properly in order to appear confident, to enunciate their words, to use their mirrors at home to practise this, and to control passionate outbursts deemed "hysterical and inappropriate to a politician." The political master narrative of the successful political leader is deeply embedded in Weber's (1946) contention of rationality and decisiveness. Women's modes of delivery are framed as emotional and thereby easily dismissed, which humiliates and discredits. To their credit, various guest speakers in the WCS attempted to re-frame this narrative, as other feminist scholars suggested (e.g., Gouthro, 2005), by drawing on an alternative discourse situated in feminine values:

You need a huge amount of compassion to do this job, a huge amount of empathy, even if you can't do anything else. Words are sometimes not enough—you need to give people a hug. Bringing emotion to politics is perhaps the most valuable thing we can do. I do not mean like question period, which for men is a release valve, given the tensions and conflictual nature of the work. There is often too much testosterone in the room. Many issues will confound you and confront you, but bring your

values of caring, nurturing and empathy—they will get you through any struggle around a decision. (Lydia)

Listening and being approachable were other attributes many participants believed were important to learn if one wanted to be a truly successful politician. As Nancy stated, you must:

open your mind to learn and be willing to talk to people. People may approach you when you are shopping and you need to be able to listen and respect them. You need to be able to tell them the facts in a calm way but then hand them an olive branch so they know they have some power.

This synchronizes with feminist adult educators, such as English (2001), who advocate being a wise listener and remaining open to learning.

Going further, Doris felt listening enabled her to not see the public as “just as a threat.” This concept of “threat” is complex, informed by political master narratives that can create villains and heroes and the competing discourse of alternative feminine/feminist approaches. Media do draw upon these same frames in characterizing women as operating outside these norms, as Agnes noted: “You say a few things and the media will take out a few words and it looks as though you have said something wrong. The media will use the ugliest picture of a woman if it is a bad story.” We see this as one reason why 85% of the women we interviewed asked for more extensive media training. But this, too, is problematic and interwoven with the above. The notion of the public as a threat was actually taught in a panel presentation at the LGLA. Past politicians shared ways to avoid the public, characterizing people as grasping and needy, always wanting something from their politicians. The frequent and in fact derogatory use of the term *special interest group* suggested personal rather than public interest as a means of convincing newly elected politicians of the dangers of listening to ad hoc citizens or groups. In other words, it emphasized a discourse rooted in the binary of elite knowers and misinformed others, the former aligned with the public good and the latter rooted in personal benefit. Mayors were cited as refusing to allow politicians to have email addresses because “it would mean the public could more easily contact you and he saw that as a problem” (Tiana). These examples are in sharp contrast to the women participants’ strong past connections with a variety of socially concerned groups and movements and the relational practices/discourses commonly used within these communities.

Activist and Political Identities

Without exception, the women we interviewed came to politics through some form of activism, as this quote illustrates so well:

I had an activist background that grew from community issues I was involved in. The issues were the environment, housing and women—those were the three vectors that drew me into politics. I was always seeing and speaking with women I felt had something to say but ... they were not being heard. (Joy)

Lisa, when president of her local community association, found “you get to attend council meetings [in this position] and you see things happening that are not quite right. Community in fact is not a partner in many things. That needed *to be taken on* so I went into politics, to do it from the inside.” This passionate spirit and language used to describe their backgrounds was invigorating. The actual physical change in the women—the hunching of shoulders—when they shared their political narratives and spoke a discourse of servitude, was disturbing. Many meekly reverted to discussing how their ability to manage a household was an attribute most applicable to their political role. There is nothing inherently wrong with linking home and politics—feminists argue it is imperative to break down boundaries of public–private (Phillips, 1998; Stolkes, 2005)—or “serving” one’s constituency. Yet these subdued discussions juxtaposed against the fiery words of activism were concerning. It may be evidence of women’s attempt to bridge what are seen as competing or conflicting discourses about political roles. But learning within the privileged, dominant narrative frame of political power has a role to play as well. Belinda spoke of the

civilizing effect it has had on me. I was always so nervous [speaking publicly] because you see, I cared about the issue so much. I wanted to tell people yes, you are right, we [as politicians] are not doing enough but then you soon learn to tow the government line.

This quotation illustrates how discourses operate within educative structures or contexts; educational processes are not neutral in either the formal or informal educative settings, and the discursive practices of those viewed as knowledgeable experts can shape how apprentices to the discursive community take up privileged discourses.

Neutrality and Normativity

When participants were asked if a quota or reservation system for women should be introduced in Canada, an astounding 95% said no. Indeed, there was clear opposition to being selected by gender rather than ability. Quotas or reservations were seen to bias what, despite claims that it was “a man’s game,” was understood as a gender-neutral system. Although we feel many of the women knew intuitively this was not the case, the educational programs certainly discussed the rules of politics as neutral and running for or working in office as a level playing field. Even in the WCS, where obstacles to women’s participation were noted, Pamela, a key organizer, encouraged the women to think “you can do it all—keep your relationship, have children and be a politician. It is a matter of choice and the will to do it.” These types of statements in the mixed-gender space of the LGLA were, of course, non-existent. The majority in the room were male.

Going further—and leaving the WCS aside for the moment, as it is for women only—a number of participants did not believe political education and training should, as Camilla termed it, “ghettoize” women. Noreen, an LGLA facilitator, concurred:

We have never focused on [women] because we have a hard enough time fitting in what we do. I would have a level of discomfort at doing that ... I would probably not initiate that. I think it would cause tension and a separation between the women and men politicians.

Through interviews of WCS participants, we discovered more than 90% did not feel the program should be framed through a feminist lens. As Katherine asserted, “I believe the only glass ceiling stopping a woman in Canada from attaining her goals is the glass ceiling she constructs herself. Patriarchy is not the cause of our problems. I would not want to be part of an [educational] group who thought it was.”

The WCS aims to get women in general to run for the nomination, so it is staunchly non-partisan, just as the LGLA is, given there are no formal political parties at the municipal level. The problem with non-partisan and equality stances is that they seem to have been formulated as neutrality. The LGLA drew no attention to gender at all but treated everyone as equal. The WCS did pay attention to gender and observed how often children were used to create common ground amongst women participants. Indeed, the underlying assumptions were that all women would be married to men and have children and all women would be concerned with so-called women’s issues such as child care or schooling. While these are extremely important issues and we do not presume to suggest they should be ignored, they tended to domesticate the training. Even more decisively, they reinforced notions of heteronormativity. Although one trainer was lesbian, she did not raise the issue and no study participants, when questioned, noticed this normative lens.

Discussion and Conclusions

In her book, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, bell hooks (2000) argues that “feminists are made, not born ... like all political positions one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action ... before women could change patriarchy we had to change ourselves; we had to raise our consciousness” (p. 7). Women’s non-formal and informal education and learning in the political sphere are indeed part of a complex web of powerful yet contradictory practices that at times enable and at others impede women’s empowerment and any notion of social change. Politics, as the women in this study note, is a discursive game of who knows what; power lies in and is exercised through this knowing. Where that power was understood to lie most was in the information and in the learning and teaching of the practicalities of politics. Pant and Farrell (2007) would call this being taught or learning “a sense of intimacy with and control over governance processes” (p. 127), and this did, to a certain degree, give confidence in dealing with the very male world of politics. In other words, this practical learning is important because women politicians, to borrow from Ryan (2001), need “as much information and control as possible into [their] hands” (p. 114). But power through practical knowledge is not equal to men’s power, nor does it ensure access to political capital in an andocentric system. Moreover, if women are simply taught the rules and never to “believe they have the power to change the rules of the game: they can only hope to be successful players” in this man’s game, as so many called it (Rinehart, 2002, p. 21). To paraphrase Ku (in Lee, 2011), although there was the appearance of learning equality, there existed little to substantively challenge traditional politics. Practical knowledge of the rules is not what Thompson (1997) defined as “really useful knowledge” (p. 145). Learning really useful knowledge assists women to understand the subversive nature of oppression and exclusion; it is a political knowledge aimed to challenge, render visible, and exert a powerful influence over conventional understandings of politics. While many of the women had at least some of this understanding, it was not

drawn upon or used in the training to the degree that it could or, we would argue, should be. In other words, the training needs to more fully deconstruct how some ways of being in the world are privileged over other forms and not solely try to adapt to them by teaching or learning, for example, how to be more assertive.

Going further, taking a non-partisan stance in training may seem logical at first glance. The WCS is trying to encourage as many women as possible to enter political office and thereby create the critical mass some argue is necessary for change. It may also seem a good strategy in mixed-gender groups not to “ghettoize” women in the LGLA since it is providing equal opportunities for all politicians. But we wonder if these do not also, along with powerful factors of social conditioning, contribute to problematic notions of neutrality. Clearly politics is biased in favour of men and some participants seemed to appreciate this, but there were too many troubling, unproblematized negative reactions to the idea of instituting a quota system for comfort. Quota or reservation systems, while by no means perfect, ensure that a critical mass of legislated women politicians can contest together for a common cause—a major contribution to social change as the women’s movement attests (Dhanda, 2009; Pant & Farrell, 2007). Reservation and quotas systems are about equality, but perhaps more importantly, about equity. Yet the idea of numbers alone needs to be problematized. How systems can be designed differently to enable a shift from patriarchally informed political systems and cultures to ones that ensure equity of participation is a conversation we need to continue to have. Echoing Ferguson (1993), we need to integrate processes of centring and decentering of women’s experience into all adult educational efforts if change in the male-privileged master political narrative and positioning is to be achieved, if women are not to just aim to best men at their own game. These questions may be in the minds of some participants, but they are not on the training agendas.

All the women interviewed came from activist backgrounds. It is problematic that this aspect played little role in the political educational processes we witnessed and, indeed, in many of the women’s views of their value as politicians. Pant and Farrell (2007) describe the value of linking women municipal politicians with the community through non-formal educational activities. They stress how the proactive engagement through workshops between women’s organizations and women politicians enables them “to work more confidently ... and to deal with issues of women’s empowerment ... and generate unity” (pp. 130–131). Let us not forget that major issues such as violence against women in Canada became part of legal discourse—and of course much still needs to be done—only because a critical mass of activist women spoke out. It would be an asset in training programs to capitalize on this understanding and work with women on how to maintain connections to organizations and groups with the knowledge and ability to support them over time. This also implies more direct efforts at unpacking problematic discourses—such as the ones described earlier that create binaries between elite and naïve citizens, public or private interests—in order to understand how they normalize particular understandings about politics.

Another important discourse that needs to be unpacked further is intersectionality. As noted, women are not homogeneous as a category. Yet the vast majority of politicians and aspiring politicians are white and identified as heterosexual. Even the few Aboriginal

women and women of colour we interviewed did not feel their ethnicity was relevant, although some noted they were the only one in the room once asked. But one prevalent and problematic practice was how heteronormativity was played out in the training. “Heteronormativity refers to norms related to gender and sexuality that reinforces existing power structures of compulsory heterosexism” (Gemmerli, 2009, p. 5). Such norms are reinforced socially, culturally, historically, and politically. Heterosexuality operates as the dominant paradigm in society (Hill & Grace, 2009). This discourse positions women into a particular identity category with its concomitant social roles, among them wife and mother. These identity politics maintain socially produced binaries based on assumed sexual and gender differences while marking homosexual gender identities as abnormal or deviant. Such binaries “[give] the people in power the ability to define the contents of the two categories. This leads to an exaggeration of similarities between people of ‘the same sex’, ignoring the ‘biological’ diversity” (Gemmerli, p. 4). This is certainly evident in the examples used by the women in our study; women are assumed to be most concerned with political issues of home, family, child care, education, and health, all issues understood to be part of the gendered roles that women play in families, and these are the ones relegated to the lowest status. Deconstructing such binaries and challenging the hierarchies of power based in gender differences can create the conditions necessary to promote sexual pluralism as a democratic value (Correa & Jolly, 2008, p. 23). We do not imply here that lesbian women or women in general would not—or should not—be concerned with children and women’s issues; we simply concur with Butler (1999) that these normative lenses marginalize questions of “which expressions of gender are acceptable and which are not” (p. xxi), and how they exclude and maintain the gendered status quo.

Finally, connecting issues of knowledge, power identity, communication, and activism, the question needing to be asked is: what is wrong with being emotional and passionate about an issue? If this is what brought women to politics in the first place, why are we training the passion out of them? This is, of course, complex and gendered. When men speak with passion they are judged as great orators, while women who learn to speak and act like men are charged with being worse than men. This brings us back to the discursive frameworks of the master political narrative and political capital that naturalize what is acceptable socio-political behaviour. Feminist political theorists suggest a critical role for emotions in political deliberations, and it was inspiring to see the WCS trainers take this on. “Emotions help tell us who we want to be. Good deliberation is not fostered by ‘keeping emotion out of it’. Rather, integrative or ‘win/win’ solutions often require the emotional capacity to guess what others want, or at least to ask in a genuinely curious and unthreatening way” (Mansbridge, 1998, p. 151). In noting this, however, we are reminded of the problematic discursive transformation we witnessed from blazing activist to meek-minded servant in so many interviews. We fully support politicians responding to community needs, but the concept of serving withered their defiance and extended the problematic of women as caregivers in the home to the political realm, thereby diminishing their roles as politicians. We would argue that a feminist adult education process that could reposition care and attention by teaching the creative use of emotion to reignite that fire of activism and acknowledge the power and potential of listening would be a more empowering approach to women’s education and learning than an emphasis on enunciation, rationality, and the rules. As Adeleye-Fayemi (2004) argues so truthfully, “Feminism is threatening.

Gender can be accommodated and tolerated by the status quo. Feminism challenges the status quo" (p. 112). Yet we argue it is this feminist political education that we need to challenge and change Canada's current and rapid political descent into neo-liberalism. By expanding the questions rather than simply reducing the answers and by cultivating rather than suppressing women as agents of change, we would better find a way to change.

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