# LIFE HISTORIES OF CANADIAN WOMEN AS ACTIVE CITIZENS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN ADULT EDUCATION[1]

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**Abstract**

*Within the context of neoliberalism and globalization, the concept of active citizenship is an increasingly important concern for all countries, including Canada. This paper focuses on the results of a research study funded by the Canadian Council on Learning that profiles life histories of eight women from Nova Scotia as "active citizens" who have made significant contributions at the local, national/international level. Five thematic areas are considered to explore barriers, supports and motivators that impact on women's participation as active citizens which include a) practical concerns, b) caregiving activities, c) identity issues, d) attitudinal differences, and e) political literacies. Using a critical feminist perspective, this paper argues that adult education has an important role to play in supporting the development of active citizenship through democratic learning contexts that take into account structural forms of inequality, including gender differences in experience.*

**Résumé**

*Dans le contexte du néolibéralisme et la mondialisation, le concept de citoyenneté active est une préoccupation de plus en plus important pour tous les pays, y compris le Canada. Ce document met l'accent sur les résultats d'une étude financée par le Conseil canadien sur l'apprentissage que les profils histoires de vie de huit femmes de la Nouvelle-Écosse en tant que "citoyens actifs" qui ont fait des contributions importantes lors du local, national / international. Cinq domaines thématiques sont considérés comme des obstacles à explorer, de motivation et soutient que l'impact sur la participation des femmes en tant que citoyens actifs qui incluent a) concerners pratique, b) activités de soins, c) les questions d'identité, d) des différences d'attitude, et e) politique connaissance. L'aide d'une perspective féministe critique, ce document fait valoir que l'éducation des adultes a un rôle important à jouer pour soutenir le développement de la citoyenneté*

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*active démocratique à travers des contextes d'apprentissage qui tiennent compte de formes structurelles de l'inégalité, y compris les différences entre les sexes dans l'expérience.*

## Introduction

The influences of neo-liberalism and globalization increasingly generate tensions and negotiations around identity and sovereignty within and among nation-states. Within this context, there are debates around "active citizenship" among educators with regard to schooling for youth (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Cook & Westheimer, 2006), but there has been limited empirical research into adult learning experiences around citizenship within the Canadian context.

This paper draws primarily upon a qualitative research study funded by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) that used life histories to explore active citizenship. It begins with a discussion of related literature; provides an overview of the study, methodology, and participants; and discusses five theme areas that emerged from an analysis of the findings: (1) practical concerns, (2) caregiving activities, (3) identity issues, (4) political literacies, and (5) attitudinal differences. A critical feminist analysis is used to consider how policies and teaching practices in the field of adult education can be fostered to enhance learning for citizenship and the development of civil society.

## Related Literature

As Armstrong (2003) notes, "History lives through the forms of its representation" (p. 201). History is often shaped by official voices that leave out minority positions and minimize contributions from women, whose stories are less likely to be recorded (Butterwick, 1998). Life histories are a way of redressing the balance to provide a broader and more holistic perspective of educational experiences. Life history interviews provide opportunities to obtain deep, rich descriptions about individual lives (Yow, 1994). In life history interviews, participants are asked to trace learning throughout their lifespans in detailed, lengthy sessions (Clandinin, 2002; Dhunpath, 2000). A holistic approach is taken in framing the questions. Life histories explore the way people tell their stories or "narrate their lives" (Goodson, 2001, p. 138). Participants discuss various influences, including family, workplace, and social experiences, to reveal richer, more textured understanding of life choices and decisions.

Life histories have been used in educational contexts to explore everyday experiences of educators and learners, such as Elbaz-Luwisch (2004) and Clandinin's (2002) research on teachers' experiences. Antikainen (1998) notes life histories also reveal that important learning often occurs outside of formal schooling contexts. As I found in my Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant on women's lifelong learning trajectories that looked at the experiences of mature women students returning to higher education, an advantage of life history interviews is that they also provide insights into linkages between individual experience and social/structural factors.

Investigating active citizenship involves considering learning around democratic participation to initiate social change. Cleaver and Nelson (2006) explain that "it is hoped

that, through active engagement, individuals will come together collectively to affect change, for the greater good of society" (p. 34). Increasingly, there is recognition that learning within a variety of formal, non-formal, and informal contexts can support the development of active citizenship. Cook and Westheimer (2006) argue that "both formal educational experiences in schools and those educational experiences that take place outside the formal school setting can play significant roles in nurturing civic and political engagement in children, youth, and adults" (p. 350).

Within Canada, there has been minimal empirical research around active citizenship for adults, although there are critical debates around learning in community, democratic education, and civil society. For example, Welton (2005) draws on Habermasian theory to explore notions of "deliberative democracy," whereby citizens are actively involved in shaping the society in which they live, and "civil society," which refers to the grassroots organizations where citizens come together to initiate social change. Feminist scholars, such as Clover (2005) and Butterwick (2003), research women's learning in community, exploring radical pedagogical activities in theatre and arts-based programs. In looking at the experiences of minorities, including new Canadians, feminists note "the marginalisation of immigrant women in the economic and social processes of Canada's nation building," thus drawing attention to the need to explore learning within wider community contexts (Dyck & McLaren, 2004, p. 520). Both critical and feminist scholars point to pedagogical opportunities for people to initiate social change collectively.

A more critical stance on learning for citizenship is required to counter the influences of a neo-liberal agenda within a globalized context. Jarvis (2002) suggests that the encroaching influence of a corporate mentality in all aspects of life may lead to employed individuals becoming active citizens within a business context—loyal and hard-working to meet the needs of the corporation—but somewhat passive in the public sphere, where traditional democratic decisions are made for the welfare of all citizens. Fenwick (2006) critiques neo-liberal influences on educational discourses that envision learning as an individual responsibility, with a focus on competition within the global marketplace. A critical feminist analysis challenges the narrowness of a framework for learning that minimizes concerns around democracy and citizenship, arguing for a more inclusive and holistic approach toward adult education.

## Overview of Research Study

While women are actively engaged in many facets of community life and governance in Nova Scotia and other parts of Canada, their work is not always recognized or acknowledged. This study profiles eight Canadian women with significant contributions as active citizens at the local, regional, national, and/or international level using life history research to provide insights into some of the barriers and motivators that shape their participation as citizens. In addition, interviews were conducted with four key informants—individuals at higher levels of the government and/or policy sectors—about the challenges and support frameworks that impact upon active citizenship.

This study was carried out over one academic year, during which time I coordinated a team of three students from the program I teach in graduate studies in lifelong learning at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). These students, like most learners in our program,

are interested in working as practitioners in adult education. They gained valuable skills working through all stages of the research process, from developing the ethics proposal, to researching potential participants, to conducting interviews, helping with analysis, and presenting at academic conferences. The purpose of this study was to explore active citizenship, to assess the gendered nature of citizenship and validate contributions that women make, and to consider some of the barriers, motivators, and supports that enhance or deter citizenship participation.

## Methodology

The study combined life history interviews with women from across Nova Scotia with interviews with key informants from the government and/or policy sectors. Participants were interviewed in face-to-face meetings by two members of the research team, with students taking the lead on all of the interviews except for two that I conducted with a student assisting me. Interviews took place at sites chosen by participants—often their office or home, although some were conducted in hotel suites and on-campus in an interview room in the MSVU Research House.

Students prepared for the interviews by reading literature about life history research, qualitative methods, and interview techniques. At weekly team meetings we discussed concepts such as developing rapport and asking open-ended questions to elicit responses, and students practised interviewing one another. Students also reviewed examples of transcripts from my SSHRC study on women's learning trajectories (after signing confidentiality agreements) in order to have a better idea of what the final transcripts might look like. When conducting the interviews, one person took the lead in asking questions while the other handled the equipment (digital recorder and camera).

The main difference between the active citizens and key informants was in how we approached the interviews. The identity of the key informants has been kept confidential and identifying features have been screened out of quotes. Interviews with key informants focused on their understanding of the challenges and supports that might impact women's ability to participate actively as citizens and/or in political office. These were shorter interviews, averaging about 45 minutes instead of a couple of hours. The active citizen participants agreed to have their identities revealed and photographs taken, since one of the objectives of this study was to celebrate and acknowledge women's contributions as citizens. In life history interviews, participants were asked to share experiences from childhood into adulthood and discuss influences of family, schooling, the paid workplace, and community. Interviews for both groups were taped and transcribed. Participants were asked to review and edit their transcripts. By exploring questions from these two perspectives, a more comprehensive picture of factors that shape women's participation as citizens and in governance emerges.

### The Participants

The student research team did a Web-based search to develop a list of potential participants who could fit into either the key informant or active citizen category. As noted in an earlier paper (Gouthro, 2007a), the lines between these categories are somewhat blurred, thus

raising the question of "who exactly are the policy makers?" (Griffin, 2006, p. 562). As well, we wondered, who are the active citizens? During our weekly team meetings we discussed possible participants. Ultimately, selection was based on obtaining as diverse a group of representatives as possible for each category. The key informants included both male and female individuals in positions of authority in the policy and/or government sectors. A couple of the active citizens, such as Senator Jane Cordy and Yvonne Atwell, also had experience in politics, so they were able to share insights from that perspective as well.

The life history participants came from various geographical and cultural communities within Nova Scotia. They were of different ages and had a broad range of life and learning experiences. They included Leighann Wichman, who works with the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Project in Halifax, and Jean d'Entremont from West Pubnico in southern Nova Scotia, where she is an active member of organizations for Acadian- and French-speaking women, including *Fédération acadienne* and *Les Femmes des Sainte*-Anne. Senator Jane Cordy is a member of the Canadian Senate who lives in Dartmouth, while Patricia LeBlanc, a disability advocate, lives in Sydney, Cape Breton. Debbie Ouellette is also from Sydney, where she has been a courageous and outspoken activist about the environmental disaster created by the infamous Sydney Tar Ponds and Coke Ovens. Yvonne Atwell is originally from East Preston, "a small predominantly Black community" near Halifax. After living in Toronto for many years, she returned to Nova Scotia where she has been active in the African-Canadian community and currently works in restorative justice for youth in Halifax. Ruth Goldbloom grew up in New Waterford. After living more than 20 years in Montreal she returned to the Maritimes and took a founding role in developing Pier 21, a museum in Halifax that celebrates this entry point of many immigrants to Canada. Krista Hanscomb lives in Antigonish where she works as an Aboriginal student advisor who assists First Nations students with their university studies.

## Findings and Thematic Analysis

Students were asked to review transcripts and share their thoughts at team meetings as to central themes they saw emerging from the data. Five main themes from the data were used to develop conference presentations and posters on the research study, and as coding categories in Atlas.ti, a qualitative software program based on grounded theory. Although these categories often overlap (i.e., childcare is both a practical necessity and a caregiving activity), for the purposes of clarity in this paper sections are organized under the following labels: (1) practical concerns, (2) caregiving activities, (3) identity issues, (4) political literacies, and (5) attitudinal differences.

One realization we made in our team discussions is that sometimes factors that are barriers (i.e., discrimination because of race or gender) may also serve as motivators. Preston (2003) notes a similar trend in his study on citizenship, where he states that "gender . . . acted as both a constraint and a push in engaging [female participants] civically, although we may be critical of the double burden of both family and community care" (p. 247). While we are not suggesting that it is a good thing ever to experience prejudice or injustice, these challenges often influence citizen participation.

*Practical Concerns*

Participants named a number of practical issues that impact women's participation as citizens. In a province as widespread as Nova Scotia (or any province/territory in Canada), transportation is a serious concern. Patricia LeBlanc noted the importance of her husband driving her four hours from Sydney to Halifax so she could continue her advocacy work for the disabled:

> He supports me one hundred percent in everything I do. I go to advisory council meetings in Halifax and I go to [other] meetings in Halifax and he waits in the hall, sometimes reading a paper for a couple of hours . . . and if he did not assist me I would not be doing a lot of this.

One key informant discussed the combined challenges of transportation and childcare:

> I'm very interested in transportation because that's the one that keeps falling off the table. It's like we've privatized transportation to such a degree that if you don't own a car and can't put the gas in it, we don't want to talk to you. And fine to say, take the bus in Halifax. Try that with four kids.

Public transit, particularly in rural areas (which is most of Nova Scotia), is often poorly networked, time consuming, expensive to access if you are on a limited budget, and difficult to use if you have a disability or young children coming with you.

Financial resources also impact citizenship participation, for as one key informant noted:

> Although women have achieved more with respect to salary . . . poverty is still a very critical issue for women. Women are still in the helping professions . . . predominantly in roles where they're not paid as highly. Yes, there have been breakthroughs in some professions: medicine, law; but . . . they're still within jobs that don't pay as high . . . whether in medicine and family practice rather than some of the higher-end specialties . . . or in law, they're working in government rather than private practice, so there's still that barrier there of not having as much money.

When talking about the plight of many single mothers, another key informant said:

> It's real hard . . . to be involved as active citizens when you're just trying to keep your head above water . . . when you're run ragged, working two jobs, you're going out to be an active citizen? The last thing you're going to do is spend your time dealing with community issues.

In addition, for women who run for political office, there is often more risk around financial insecurity. As Yvonne Atwell noted:

Women don't often get those benefits that some of the men get who are in politics. The men all found work. Somebody called them up and said, "I got a job for you." Where several of the women who lost their seats . . . ended up in real trouble because they didn't have a job [or] any money because when it ends, it ends . . . It's really a temporary, part-time job.

Citizenship is also linked with employment, often a particular concern for new Canadians. Dyck and McLaren (2004) discuss challenges for women emigrating from non-Western countries in a study on Canadian immigrants. Despite trying to learn English, find jobs, and make Canadian friends, they frequently experienced isolation and discrimination. The researchers note that "the women sought to have us recognise their claims about themselves as 'good' citizens, denied the work opportunities that would help them become 'Canadians'" (p. 528).

Thus, one can see why Ruth Goldbloom discussed with a sense of pride the immigrants employed at Pier 21: "We take in new Canadians . . . We keep them . . . for six months. Then we help them write their résumé and help them find a job. We give them time off to perfect their English. They come from every country in the world." In this context, Pier 21 becomes a living museum, embodying the everyday experiences and challenges of individuals learning their way into citizenship in a new country. At the same time it provides practical supports for newcomers in obtaining Canadian work experience while refining new language skills.

### *Caregiving Activities*

One challenge named by both key informants and active citizens was around caregiving responsibilities, for which women continue to be primarily responsible. A key informant said:

The bulk of family responsibility falls to women; and I know it's changed [but] . . . women still carry more . . . that is a real challenge because . . . when you are dealing with children and . . . household responsibilities, that's another job . . . so to . . . participate more in the workforce or . . . [on] volunteer boards . . . takes more effort and time.

Similarly, Jean d'Entremont noted, "As my son grew there were certain things that I left because we couldn't both be gone at the same time and babysitters do become expensive."

For individuals who go into political life, a key informant discussed the expectations around time commitments:

The whole way the House operates needs to be rethought . . . especially recognizing that societal roles still exist, we have very unfriendly rules. We sit on Monday nights, for example, from seven to ten . . . if you've got a family at home, that's difficult . . . if you're a single parent, it's very difficult. But even if you are in a relationship where you have two active people, it's difficult if you have kids.

Yet while a lack of childcare, family-unfriendly hours in politics, and time constraints may deter political participation, concern for loved ones may also motivate women to initiate social change. Debbie Ouellette had the misfortune to live on the infamous Frederick Street in Sydney, Cape Breton, which became an environmental disaster when the government started to dig up contaminated dirt buried in the Coke Oven site beside the quiet residential street. A mother of three children, Debbie described the nightmare that her family found themselves living in:

> When they disturbed the site and the chemicals that were coming off that site were making my family and my children sick . . . my headaches were so bad I thought I had a brain tumour . . . we had eight dogs on Frederick Street that died of cancer in three years.

It was Debbie's driving concern for her family that motivated her to become an outspoken environmental activist, determined to make the government accountable for its actions. Today, she continues her work because "I believe that what happened to me shouldn't happen to anybody." No other family, no other mother, should have to live through what she went through.

### Identity Issues

The same characteristics that may be a basis for discrimination, such as racial or cultural background, can also be an important aspect of one's identity. Despite having faced discrimination, Krista Hanscomb said she feels "proud that people recognize me as an Aboriginal." She regards her work as an Aboriginal student advisor—supporting students to succeed in higher education while acknowledging and validating their identities as members of First Nations—as an important contribution to her Mi'kmaw community. Although the numbers of Aboriginal students attending universities in Canada have increased in the last couple of decades, First Nations students are still "50% less likely to have completed postsecondary education than their non-Aboriginal counterparts" (Ball, 2004, p. 457). Krista explained:

> When you grow up in the same community all your life, and you've known everybody there since you were two years old, it's hard to come to university . . . you may feel like today's the day that I just can't do anymore . . . if it's negative comments or maybe the work is just piling on . . . "Just remember that you've come this far . . . you've done more than everybody ever said . . . people make up the statistics. You've already beaten most of those statistics. So you've already accomplished something really great . . . take it and run with it."

Similarly, Ruth Goldbloom experienced anti-Semitism during her life, but instead of allowing negative experiences to subdue her, she frequently assumed a leadership role. Using contacts developed over years of volunteer work with various boards and foundations, and drawing on the support of family and friends, she demonstrated tireless energy in raising millions of dollars for the Pier 21 Foundation. She shared a story that inspires her work and connects to her own sense of identity as the granddaughter of Jewish immigrants who left Russia to escape the pogroms:

> Many years ago a shipload of Sikhs landed at a small fishing village in
> Nova Scotia. Out of the fog appeared about 20 men with turbans and
> there was . . . a fisherman, who was so eloquent. He said, "We welcome
> these people into our homes" . . . and I thought about my grandfather . .
> . to arrive in a strange land with no money and no language, and what it
> would be like.

This museum provides rich educational opportunities for the public to learn about experiences of immigrants whose first entry point to Canada was when they debarked at Pier 21 of Halifax Harbour, often before taking the long train journey to other parts of the country. Ruth's beliefs around Canadian citizenship and identity are shaped by her commitment to welcoming newcomers and providing them with supports to make new lives for themselves and their families, regardless of their religious beliefs or cultural backgrounds.

### Political Literacies

Certain skills are required to advocate for change successfully, and knowledge—or political literacies—are needed to know whom to target. For example, Debbie Ouellette made the following statement to the Nova Scotia government panel hearings about the environmental disasters in Sydney:

> Why do we have a Department of Health, a Department of Environment,
> a Department of Fisheries and Oceans? Why are they allowing the
> owners of the coke ovens and tar ponds who contaminated our fish and
> water in Sydney Harbour daily and for years—why are the owners not
> being charged heavy fines for doing so? Who do they protect?

Although Debbie has limited formal education, she learned from other activists to articulate her concerns by condensing her points into hard-hitting bullets to demand accountability. When she names a list of government departments and questions the power relations that enable exploitative behaviour to continue, Debbie demonstrates Freire's (1992) understanding of the power of literacy to provide people with tools to challenge unfair relations of power and question existing authorities.

> At the same hearing, a key informant noted:

> Most Canadians . . . do not know . . . what's in the provincial jurisdiction
> and what's in the federal jurisdiction. What does the Department of
> Health in Nova Scotia do and what does Health Canada do? Why is
> there a Department of Environment and Labour in Nova Scotia, and
> there is a Department of Environment at the federal level? What's the
> difference? Many Canadians are impaired in their ability to function as
> citizens because they do not know how their government is organized or
> what role it plays.

The responsibility for this is difficult to assess. While citizens may not always be proactive, information is not always clear or easily accessible. By making it difficult for citizens to know which departments are responsible, government officials may sometimes

shift responsibility by claiming other departments or levels of government are to be held accountable.

For women who choose to make the transition from community activism to political office, there are multiple challenges around gaining political literacies. Participants noted that men may have better mentorship opportunities and more informal networks to help fund campaigns. A key informant reflected, "Ministers, particularly, they all have executive assistants, and they tend to be young people—mostly young men, to be honest. I can only think of a few women that are there." A number of participants pointed out that one of the more successful strategies implemented in recent years to encourage the political participation of women in Nova Scotia is the non-partisan Campaign School for Women run out of my university, Mount Saint Vincent. At this short-term school, women have the opportunity to learn the many practical considerations and skills needed to run for political office. A key informant explained:

> And what we do there is tell women more about the steps you have to take . . . what do you have to do under the *Elections Act* to become a candidate? How do you join a party? . . . How do you do a three-minute speech? What about a television and a radio interview?

### Attitudinal Differences

Confidence and self-esteem issues can also hinder women's abilities to participate actively as citizens. As a key informant stated, "One of the great barriers is the lack of confidence in some people that they have anything to say." Interestingly, a number of the participants, even though they might be highly accomplished, noted they had had times of self-doubt. Senator Jane Cordy, reflecting on her own experiences from high school, said:

> I wasn't a president of a club or anything like that. I was always anxious to be involved, but I was very shy at that time so I would never think that I could be president of anything . . . and as you gain more confidence in your own abilities as you get older, you realize, yes, I can do that.

Thinking about what this means for women who consider political office, she shared a story:

> I remember in 1990, Paul Martin speaking . . . before he was leader or prime minister . . . just speaking from a political perspective, and he said that he had never gone to a man and asked, "Would you like to run for us in the next election?" and have the man say back to him, "Do you think I can do the job?" . . . But most women would say, "Do you think I can do the job?"

As she explained, women are more likely to second-guess themselves, to question whether they have training and expertise, whereas men are usually confident that they can assume political leadership regardless of their skills or background. Another key informant said, "I don't think I've ever had a woman I've interviewed say, 'Will I be in cabinet?' . . . I've had lots of men ask that."

### Critical Feminist Analysis

A critical feminist analysis draws on both critical Habermasian and feminist theories to explore how power shapes learning contexts. Critical theorists who draw on Habermas's (1987) work often point to the opportunities for dialogical and democratic strategies in learning that challenge the dominance of the marketplace in shaping educational agendas. A feminist lens draws attention to the masculinized world view, encompassed even within many critical discourses, that overlooks or marginalizes women's contributions as citizens and workers.

Critical theorists point to the importance of recognizing the significance of learning that occurs within community and civil society. Welton (2005) argues that "civil society must become more conscious of itself as a social learning infrastructure" (p. 214). He draws on Putnam's (2000) work to discuss how strong civil society organizations enhance the development of active citizenship, since they "permit individuals to express their interests and demands on government" and "associations multiply or amplify citizen voices" (Welton, 2005, p. 214). In addition, citizens develop useful skills, like public speaking, that are helpful for participation in democratic contexts. This was true for many of the participants, who found that their involvement in local grassroots organizations provided opportunities for them to gain the skills required to be successful advocates for the causes they were committed to.

Critical theorists also point to challenges posed in a neo-liberal context where learning about all matters, including citizenship, is increasingly treated as an individual responsibility. This approach often marginalizes disadvantaged individuals. Ian Martin (2003) argues that "our starting point should be that we cannot speak of citizenship without speaking of democracy, and we cannot speak of democracy without speaking of social justice and equality" (p. 570). Some groups of citizens are structurally situated so that their concerns are likely to be taken up, while others are more disadvantaged. As Preece (2002) explains:

> From a gender perspective the issue of who governs citizens and what mechanisms of governance are in place, directly impacts on women in terms of representation, voice and methodology, and what kinds of space women are given in which to act as individual or collective citizens. Terms such as "dialogue" and "partnership" are irrelevant for marginalised groups if institutional systems and practices do not create opportunities for these voices to be heard. (p. 24)

The life experiences of the participants in this study reveal the importance of the learning that occurs within community-based and civil society contexts. As my previous research around the significance of the homeplace (Gouthro, 2005) indicates, women's relationships and responsibilities in the home continue to shape women's life and learning decisions. Practical constraints and carework may sometimes limit women's civic participation. At the same time, as one key informant pointed out, if "it's close to home, they [women] worry about the health or the impact on the future for their families, and they speak out. That's a great way to get politicized."

Lanoix (2007) notes that "feminist analyses of social policies highlight the fact that they use the 'male breadwinner' or 'wage earner' model of citizenship, which obscures unpaid caring labour and their importance to social welfare" (p. 116). When women continue to assume domestic and caregiving responsibilities, even if they take on other responsibilities in the community or in government, it is a reflection of gendered differences in social expectations. Anthony McMahon (1999) notes that a strong indicator of inequality in the sexual division of labour is that the "women whose public lives resemble those of highly successful men are still usually responsible for domestic management and child-rearing" (p. 154).

In her well-known feminist critique, Fraser (1995) argues that for Habermas (1987), an essential component of citizenship is the capacity to participate in public debate.

> This means that citizenship, in his view, depends crucially on the capacities for consent and speech, the ability to participate on par with others in dialogue. But these are capacities connected with masculinity in male-dominated, classical capitalism; they are capacities that are in myriad ways denied to women and at odds with femininity. (Fraser, 1995, p. 35)

Many women feel constrained to participate vocally as citizens in public spaces as they are not comfortable with garnering attention to themselves and to their work. Some women, such as Debbie Ouellette, may overcome this hesitation because they are motivated so strongly that they are willing to take risks. Others gain confidence over the years from being successful in their chosen professions, such as Senator Jane Cordy and Yvonne Atwell. But for many women, as one of the key informants noted, if you are struggling just to "keep your head above water," full participation is often difficult.

Generally, feminists (Fraser, 1997; Landes, 1995) have noted that men have greater access to the public sphere. As a number of the participants noted, few men will question their right or their capacity to speak out or to be involved in politics. Preece (2002) argues that women may not have the same sense of privilege or entitlement as men do about taking on leadership roles. One key informant also noted:

> A man . . . [can] seek the nomination in this riding, and they will make that decision . . . and can seem to clear everything out of the way in a month and proceed . . . my perception [is] that women take much longer in terms of arranging . . . their lives, so you really have to nurture women candidates for a longer period of time.

This is not only because women often have to be encouraged more than men to run for office, but also because they have more commitments that they feel obligated to rearrange or complete before they can step into the formal political arena.

Fraser (1997) argues that "too often feminists have associated gender equality with either equality or difference, where 'equality' means treating women exactly like men, and where 'difference' means treating women differently insofar as they differ from men" (p. 44). There needs to be an acknowledgement that women have different social and cultural

identities/experiences to be valued and recognized at the same time as there are social and political inequalities that need to be addressed to ensure democratic representation. "Redressing gender injustice, therefore, requires changing both political economy and culture" (Fraser, 1997, p. 21).

### *Learning Pathways and Active Citizenship*

Within a neo-liberal context, individuals are expected to assume full responsibility for determining their own learning pathways. Yet as Antikainen (1998) notes, "*gender* differences in life-stories are somewhat evident" (p. 223). In my SSHRC study, it became clear that women's decisions around learning trajectories often prioritized the needs and expectations of their children, partners, and parents. Frequently, these decisions had detrimental impacts, such as leaving them more financially vulnerable when a marriage broke up, even though they helped finance their husband's education or modified their own work aspirations to accommodate a partner's career move. In addition, although higher education institutions and policies tended to be gender-neutral, they often had gendered impacts—for example, awarding graduate scholarships only to full-time students presupposes that women who choose to attend school part-time have another income, whereas it may be unpaid carework that prevents them from committing to full-time status.

There needs to be an acknowledgement that women's learning pathways, whether around continuing in higher education or learning for citizenship, are often influenced by responsibilities and commitments to the homeplace. Without attending to practical necessities such as access to transportation, financial supports, and assistance in caregiving and domestic responsibilities, women and/or minorities will be disadvantaged in their attempts to participate actively as citizens. In addition, opportunities to learn practical skills and gain confidence and political literacies through mentorship are needed to develop the talents that many women have to contribute as active citizens, recognizing there are gendered differences in life experiences that need to be addressed.

This study provides insights into the experiences of a handful of women, but there are many more stories that reveal the complicated picture of what constitutes citizenship in the Canadian context. Building upon this research, I am currently working on another CCL-funded grant to explore connections between active citizenship, community-based organizations, and opportunities for a more networked approach toward governance in Canada.[2] Preliminary results indicate that there is a complicated meshwork of factors that link personal decisions around citizenship participation with social, economic, and cultural influences. Further research needs to be conducted that builds on our understanding of grassroots, community-based groups, differing notions of governance, and the role of lifelong learning in fostering citizenship over the lifespan.

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2    *Grassroots and Governance: Exploring Connections Between Active Citizenship, Community-Based Organizations, and Governance* (title of current research grant funded through CCL)

### Implications for Policies and Learning Around Active Citizenship

In looking at the effects of a small-scale research study such as this, Burke and Jackson (2007) point out:

> Critical researchers who might challenge positivist assumptions are less likely to have an influence on policy making, partly because the results produced through this kind of research is often localised, contextualised, and tentative, resisting the tendency in much large-scale research to make universal claims that might simply be applied to educational policy and practice. (p. 27)

While the results of this study are not conclusive enough to argue for substantive policy changes on their own, these findings contribute to a critical body of research addressing considerations to create more inclusive opportunities for fostering active citizenship.

Michael Welton (1998) draws on the well-known historical figure, Eduard Lindeman, who was concerned with connections between education and democracy, to point out that "Lindeman believed that the organisation of politics could be evaluated in terms of whether policymaking transactions enabled citizens to develop political knowledge, enhance political competence, and deepen their ability to act prudently" (pp. 208-209). To build this knowledge, policy needs to be developed to enhance learning opportunities in a wide range of contexts and at different levels. This includes the need for non-formal learning programs, such as the Campaign School for Women, as well as supports for informal learning that may occur in grassroots, civil society organizations.

Formal education also has a role to play in fostering learning for citizenship. A number of the participants argued that education provides confidence, knowledge, and skills that help women to become active citizens. Leighann Wichman gratefully credited her parents for providing her with support to obtain a university education, which has enabled her to dedicate time and energy to her interest in supporting GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer) youth. One key informant went so far as to say, "If you haven't got access to education, you cannot be an active citizen." Krista Hanscomb argued that "the more education . . . and the more experiences you have, you just make all these different connections and it builds your confidence and makes you feel you could be involved in more things."

Jarvis (2002) critically notes that initial education often "remains a reproductive process" (p. 5), and "is gradually becoming more vocationally oriented" (p. 13) in response to the demands of the global economy. At the same time, he argues that adult education's "teaching styles and methods tend to be more democratic, so that participants actually experience the democratic processes" (p. 16). This practical experience of participating in democratic decision-making helps to build the skills that Habermas (1987) articulates about learning for communicative forms of action, or developing the capacity for "a more just learning society" (Welton, 2005).

In a neo-liberal context increasingly shaped by globalized capitalism, a critical framework for thinking about and assessing decisions connected to learning and citizenship is essential. The effects of globalization also mean that citizenship can no longer be

understood within an isolationist framework. The notion of cosmopolitanism, discussed by Ulrech Beck (2004), points to the need for citizens to bridge national boundaries when attempting to resolve problems that cannot be addressed by isolated individuals or nation-states. Many of the important issues in society today, such as environmental concerns or terrorism, cannot be resolved by individualistic strategies.

Learning around citizenship should take into consideration a much broader mandate than the needs of the marketplace. Jackson (2003) points out that within current discourses around the learning society, "structural barriers to participation in lifelong (l)earning are ignored in a debate that has nothing to say about the gendered, raced and classed divisions of labour" (p. 367). As this study shows, gender and other variables shape people's experiences and impact on their participation as learners and citizens. To foster contexts for democratic learning, adult educators need to consider the diverse backgrounds of participants and the globalized context in which they will be working.

The concept of "deliberative democracy" may help us consider how we might work with students to assess their roles as learners and citizens (Welton, 2005). Gutmann and Thompson (2004) explain that "the general aim of deliberative democracy is to provide the most justifiable conception for dealing with moral disagreement in politics" (p. 10). Recognizing there will always be different interests between groups within society, a deliberative approach toward democracy addresses how one can foster the requisite communicative skills, strategies, and moral grounding to resolve conflict and work toward a more just approach of governance. These are invaluable ideas, approaches, and concepts to foster among our learners.

As the results of this study demonstrate, there are many ways that individuals, working with others, can contribute as active citizens to their communities and the broader society. It is necessary to realize that women still face many barriers and challenges that hinder their full participation as active citizens and that need to be addressed to create a more democratic and equitable society (Gouthro, 2007b). At the same time, Paulo Freire (1992) challenges the idea that critical theory is necessarily pessimistic, arguing that "hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice" (p. 2). Using a critical feminist approach reveals the multiple small and not-so-small ways in which women from all different backgrounds strive to make their communities, whether on a local or global scale, better places to live. We need to recognize, learn from, and celebrate the contributions that these caring women have made.

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