An international study of women’s nonformal and informal political education and learning in Canada and India

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Introduction
When it comes to women’s representation in formal politics, things are not equal. India has introduced a quota system of 33% female representation at the local level and recently extended that to federal and state levels. Canada has no such system and the highest rate of elected women is at the municipal level, 23.4% (Heard, 2008). Yet with or without a quota system, gender inequities remain. Feminist scholars have explored the enigma of women in politics from a number of angles but few have focused on education and learning although these have global relevance to women’s empowerment, political participation and socio-political change. Through a feminist theoretical lens and methodological approach, this international study explored how women learned and were taught to be or become politicians in Canada and India. This paper shares our findings and offers insights that can inform debates about how women become (or not) more empowered, active and able politicians.

Literature review
The increased use of gender-neutral language in political theorising aims to be more inclusive. Yet Okin (1998) cautions this can mask how social and political capital work and undermine the symbolic power of language to bring ‘into existence the thing named’ (Bourdieu, 1999, 223) and filter experience (Ryan, 2001). Gender neutrality also ignores past and current ‘positioning of the sexes in the distribution of political power’ (Phillips, 1998, 11). Although the ‘criteria of equality between sexes afford women the right to participate and represent in formal decision-making without discrimination… the private-public divide has hindered women in the public domain’ (Pant & Farrell: 2007, 108-109). Neutrality also mutes discussions of difference. Phillips (1998) argues that ‘women are different from men and if these differences are not explicitly acknowledged, political analysis will continue as an analysis of men’ (11). Women also bring alternative visions to politics grounded in their diverse reproductive roles and experiences and raise questions that expand policy (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). But we must also be cognisant of the pluralities of subject positions within the category of women (Pringle & Watson 1998). Moreover, although we often speak as if we want to make politics more women-centred, we may reinforce our own marginality. As Phillips (1998) notes, ‘in sentimentalised visions of women’s place or role… women are usually subordinate’ (11). The nurturing, caring ‘mother image’ can mire women in the particularities of family— the private - rather than the generalities of the public sphere.
MacKeracker (2001) describes problematic male-centred approaches based on logic and rationality that permeate society. In education these manifest in an emphasis on mastering content, learning and abiding by the rules, individual achievement and growth, detachment, and a preference for self-directed, individual learning. Yet Thompson (1997) argues that knowledge devoted solely to individual self-fulfillment is devoid of the socially contextual understanding needed for substantive change. Additionally, Pant and Farrell (2007, 110) suggest strategies for women’s education that include feminist, targeted interventions on empowerment, defined as ‘a process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in...activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly’ (Rai, 2008, 113). Women’s participation in society and politics needs to be understood as ‘a continual and complex theoretical and practical process of learning about and within relations and practices of power’ (Pessoa de Carvalho and Rabay, 1999, 1). There is a need to develop critical ‘political subjectivities’ (Walters and Manicom, 1996, 17) through engaged, collective processes that challenge and uncover embedded, pervasive discursive practices in society that marginalise and exclude.

**Contexts**

In Canada political parties select women candidates and ‘put them forward to the public for election’ (Matland, 1998, 77). This process is relatively informal and current rates of 25% female representation make clear the limitations of such strategies. Worse yet, those numbers are steadily dropping as more women turn their backs on formal politics (Heard, 2008; Young, 2000). As the political arena remains the primary locus of power, women rejecting politics is detrimental to, among other things, social and political change. Also discouraging is the fact that women in Canada have access to but a few organised spaces of nonformal education and only one of which focuses specifically on women.

India, by contrast, leaves nothing to chance. As noted above, in 1993 the Indian government through the Panchayat Raj Act legislation reserved 33% of the seats for women and oppressed castes at the local level followed recently (March 2010) by federal and state levels (Dhanda, 2008; The Times of India, 2010). In response to the 1993 Act, the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) developed a series of training activities that focus on everything from basic literacy skills to laws to prominent social issues. It is important to note however, that cultural and gender practices, particularly in rural areas of India, have not necessarily kept pace with progressive legislation and women who seek office often face control by cultural norms, families and men (Mohanty, 2007; Rai, 2007). Newspapers carry articles of women politicians being shot or set on fire as well as other political abuses. In Canada harassment and bullying also exist although often in muted or subtle ways. Our point is that differences of political control, situation and culture contribute to the nuanced differences between Canada and India but entrenched patriarchal structures account for the many similarities.

**Methodology and Design**

We used a feminist approach in this international study because it is connected to the principles of feminist struggle, aims to illuminate gender bias, challenges the basic structures and ideologies that oppress women, fosters empowerment and applies the findings to promoting social change (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). The question that guided this research was: What are the potentials and challenges of
women’s nonformal and informal political education and learning? Secondary questions explored connections between learning, education and empowerment, identity and agency and socio-political change.

One hundred and fifty-five women took part in this study. In Canada interviewees were women municipal and trustee-level politicians or participants in the Local Government Leadership Academy and the Women’s Campaign School (WCS). Interviewees in India were elected politicians at the Panchayat level and participants in training workshops organised by PRIA. We also interviewed six trainers, three in each country. We used five data collection strategies: individual interviews; group or pair interviews; a survey (WCS only); and observations at training sessions and two International Women’s Day (IWD) learning-celebratory events in British Columbia and Rajasthan. Eighteen women were taped for a video, the fifth data collection strategy. We used diverse processes for data interpretation and analysis: group meetings to de-brief after workshops and interviews; individual perusal of interview transcriptions and workshop reports; group research meetings to collectively identify thematic areas. We turn now to a few themes, kept to a minimum due to the length of this paper.

Findings
Similar to Rogers (2004) we found the most pervasive form of learning was experiential. Every woman interviewed spoke of learning on the job, through mentors but primarily, ‘just trying to figure it all of out without much help’ (Lorna). Building on this, knowledge of the political system was seen by all women interviewed to be the most essential ingredient to becoming an effective politician. Participants identified strategies such as ‘reading the bylaws so I would understand them’ (Lynnette). They suggested information needed to be at the heart of all educational activities and this was reflected in the training and education politicians and/or aspiring politicians received. One trainer described the philosophy like this:

The key goals are real foundational training, the basics, the law, the procedures, how to function in the meeting, the real core skill building. We want to communicate information. You cannot generate knowledge about the Charter you need to absorb it (Andrea).

We call this practical and tactical learning. It aims to provide information to build confidence because ‘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’ (Meena).

Having knowledge, however, can be problematic. Leslie shared an experience where she was ‘told to ‘shut the f**k up’ by a male member when she challenged his knowledge of a particular event. She was not alone in her lamentations of abuse at the hands of male colleagues. Women in both countries spoke of closed-door meetings where decisions were made by men without consultation. As Eileen noted, ‘politics is a game of information and knowledge and the one with the most wins.’ Women in India suffered continual non-confidence motions (which had to eventually be legislated against) and public humiliation: ‘he said [in front of everyone] I could not read and did not know what I was talking about and shouldn’t even be there’ (Shulita). Problematically, this belief was echoed by a woman politician who stated ‘if a woman ‘could not read and write she should not be in politics’ (Suman). It goes further. One Dalit woman (untouchable caste) was elected Sarpanche (Mayor) but
not allowed to sit in the head chair until/unless invited. She spoke of standing for an entire meeting. In Canada women were also publicly belittled by women colleagues. Pant and Farrell (2008) refer to this as ‘character assassination’ to gain and/or maintain power in a bureaucracy (and world) that holds women and or diverse castes ‘in lower esteem than male or higher caste elected representatives’ (p.116). It also speaks to how women politicians can be indoctrinated into a system and act in ways that enable a power position (Philips, 1998; Dhanda, 2008).

One difference in the study as alluded to above was literacy. The Indian quota system ensures women must be elected but in the rural areas, many women are non-literate. Along with their political training, PRIA has organised literacy classes taught by citizen leaders and we will return to a discussion of this shortly. The politicians in the literacy classes speak with pride about what this learning has meant to them such as: understanding now why education for girls is important or being able to read documents without being tricked into signing a document as ‘happened to me before’ (Namrata). This is not the case in Canada where at least 70% of the interviewees have college or university education (often only secondary school or less in rural areas) so basic literacy teaching is not a feature in political education. There is, however, a literacy problem in Canada and we would suggest there would be more alignment if Canada had a mandatory system that gave more women a chance. This raises, however, an important question: Can women learn to be politicians or are there innate traits and abilities that separate leaders? According to many of the Canadian interviewees, it is the latter. Although the vast majority of interviewees were well aware of male-centred bias in politics, they shunned notions of positive discrimination. Sheila stated emphatically, as did numerous others, ‘I don’t agree with quotas, you should elect the best person for the job.’ When asked of the qualities this ‘person’ would need to have to be a politician, it became clear there was little room for ‘feminine’ traits in the rational and aggressive game of politics. ‘Communication’ styles, strategies and practices taught in the training programmes echoed the need for rationality and aggression.

Another difference was around public participation and engagement. A panel of politicians at the LGLA in Canada was devoted to strategies to limit public involvement; the public characterised as ‘needy’ or ‘demanding’. The term special interest group was invoked frequently and used in a derogatory manner. Others spoke of how mayors refused to allow councillors to have email addresses because ‘it would mean the public could more easily contact you and he saw that as a problem’ (Dora). This lies in sharp contrast to the Canadian women participants' strong past connections with their communities. Many spoke of their previous activist work and how it had brought them to formal politics. And yet as politicians, the difference in responses to questions about their activist work and their political work was sometimes disturbing. Fiery words that demanded attention to the ‘big picture’ and ‘taking them on’ disappeared into a discourse of servitude. Many suggested their ability to manage a household was the attribute most applicable to their political role. While there is nothing wrong with linking home and politics - feminists argue it is imperative to break down boundaries of public-private (Philips, 1998) - or the notion of service, discussions felt more subdued. This may be due to ingrained assumptions of femininity that are continually reinforced or the lack of a critical mass of women politicians to give the courage to take up unpopular causes or political stances once elected (Dhanda, 2008). By contrast, in India, the majority of women politicians were not activists. Saswati describes the reason thusly: ‘What we also
need is training or education on how to be a citizen. As we are very isolated in our homes and have less access to education and the world outside, we need to know how to be active in society, how to speak out, how to demand rights.' Similar to Canada, the Indian participants talked of 'serving' their communities and, quite naturally, drew on their domestic skills. However, woven in with the politicians at the PRIA training programmes were citizen leaders. These women are activists who understand local community issues and brief the women politicians. The link between civil society, the public and the politicians is seen by the trainers as 'the best way to strengthen all worlds' (Sonia). The issue of caste, as noted above is problematic in India, but the issue of elitism in politics in Canada - politicians as separate and above the public – is part of the hidden curriculum in training Canadians receive.

An extraordinary but constant theme in the study was clothing. In a group conversation around a particular woman leader, Jane sarcastically drew the parallel between political identity and dress: ‘she is weak, indecisive - she wears pink.’ Other participants talked about what to wear, what not to wear and this was often linked to the media: ‘Clothing is important for women – if you look at pictures taken of Kim Campbell (a politician) the media often took pictures of her butt in slacks and you would not [see] that with a man.’ In India, the women discussed the importance of saris: ‘if you go [to a meeting] dressed like me (tunic) you will be dismissed as not being serious a politician. No matter you don’t have money [for saris], its image that counts’ (Karishna). In rural communities in India young women are expected to keep their heads covered at all times in public. This is a constant reminder of the social and cultural restraints on them; a visible, embodied symbol of their subservience to men who have no such restraints. These examples illustrate the semiotics of leadership as a powerful force to shape how women are perceived and constructed as leaders. While the training in India focussed as less on clothing, the WCS paid particular attention to how women should dress to succeed or the appropriate public dress to avoid the media spotlight.

Children were used to find common ground and connect women in all the training, the assumption being that all would be married to men and have children. Another prevalent and linked assumption was that all women would be concerned with women’s issues. PRIA did have a strong feminist framework and dared to raise issues of violence against women and other controversial women’s issues. Despite this effort, and the commitment we heard expressed about taking on this issue at the local level, in one interview following the session on violence, Meena stated ‘Well, if the woman is home all day and does not have her husband’s dinner ready when he gets home then it is fine for him to slap her. I mean, what was she doing all day?’ In Canada, the non-partisan framework of the WCS and mixed male female environment of the LGLA muted feminist stances. At the LGLA we heard a number of sexist remarks and one trainer in the WCS even suggested that sexist remarks were ‘just the way it is.’ Social conditioning and normative relations run deep into educational practice.

Discussion and Conclusions
Politics is discursive, a game of power and knowledge. Women’s self-directed learning focused heavily on the practicalities of politics, as did the educational programmes in both countries. Women were taught ‘a sense of intimacy with and control over governance processes’ as the key strategy to become equal to men
(Pant and Farrell, 2007, 127). This practical and tactical learning is important; women politicians need 'as much information and control as possible into [their] hands' (Ryan, 2001, 114). But practical knowledge of the rules is not what Thompson (1997, 145) defines as “really useful knowledge”. Really useful knowledge helps women more fully ‘understand the nature of their present condition and get out of it…and political knowledge which [can] be used to challenge the relations of oppression and inequality from which they suffer’ (145). This strong feminist approach was visible in India but not in Canada.

Challenging the political system is not as easy when undertaken alone. PRIA’s feminist emphasis on collective agency and empowerment coupled with bringing together women in civil society with the politicians is a powerful form of networking and support. The women are learning to be both decision-makers and lobbyists for change. They ‘are’ the structure but through their training, they are learning how to be a ‘nuisance’ to the structure. Change is slow given the strong, traditional cultural dimension in which they work, but change is apparent. The women politicians in Canada had strong activist backgrounds and they came together with citizens at women’s celebratory events. But this connection is not a part of the education and training they receive. It appears to us that Canadian women need to be reminded that gender matters, given issues such as poverty and violence that affect so many women ‘can only be fought against effectively if women form a critical mass in all decision-making bodies’ (Pande, 2000, 33).

Hetero-normativity in the education of women in politics is complex. On the one hand, most participants were married and/or have children. Importantly, they raise issues of child-care, girl’s education and other ‘women’s’ issues never before on the agenda so no one would wish to discourage this. However, this practice maintains stereotypes and is exclusionary of lesbians and childless women. In addition, all issues – environment, employment, et cetera – are central to political decision-making and women need to be at the forefront of these, making the connections between the ‘productive’ and ‘reproductive’ issues. Linked to this is the issue of servitude. While no one would disagree that an aim of politicians is to respond to and serve community needs, the concept of ‘serving’ is also complex and has gendered implications; while we need more nurturing and caring in the political world we want to avoid simply extending women’s role as primary care-giver in the home to the political realm.

While the interviewees and trainers in India stood firmly behind the quota system and the opportunity it had afforded them, Canadians believed a quota system diminished women in the eyes of male politicians and the electorate and none of the training addressed the issue. To leave this canvas bare save the critique is to misunderstand the impact women politicians under a quota system have on local politics in India and the ways in which it has assured the betterment of people’s lives. Women, even non-literate women, can learn and be taught to be politicians, as India’s efforts attest, and this is a message that needs to be heard to combat notions of bias and unseat the gender-neutral discourse of equality. Because of the quota system, India’s educational process can be more feminist, and works with a critical mass of women ‘in power’. Canada’s only woman-only educational space is mired in non-partisanship with only the ability to encourage women to run. India has not legislated equality; that human right existed. India has legislated equity, which did not. The
potential of systematic educational work combined with legislative measures are powerful tools of empowerment and change. Wake up Canada.

**Selected References**


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