1 Introduction: state feminism and the political representation of women

Joni Lovenduski

The representation of women in a political system is a good test of its claims to democracy. The claims that women make for representation are claims for their citizenship and at the heart of their engagement with politics. Political representation is therefore a fundamental feminist concern, although its importance has not always been acknowledged. The women's liberation movements that began in the 1970s were, in many countries, ambivalent about formal political representation. However, by the end of the twentieth century women's movements were active to secure equality of representation throughout the world. From the moment that women's movements were making demands on the state the issue of their political representation was in play. Whilst suffrage campaigns were explicit movements for political participation and representation, campaigns over rights to education, to paid work, to equal pay, to personal dignity and security, to sexual autonomy were also in part about the inclusion of women's interests in policy-making. Later movements for representation in legislatures and assemblies were movements for presence that challenged political arrangements and sought to insert women's interests into policy-making by ensuring they were amongst the policy-makers.

The connection between agenda status for women's interests and the claim for equal political representation continues. Since the nineteenth century women's movement activists have demanded state action on a range of issues that includes anti-discrimination policies, anti-violence policies, reproductive rights, childcare and political equality. In the late twentieth century governments responded, some more slowly than others, by developing a set of agencies to take responsibility for such demands. These women's policy agencies (WPAs) vary in scope, size, resources, stability and location. They appeared at different times in different countries but are now part of the political landscape. Their existence is, at least in symbolic terms, an acknowledgement of women's demands for representation.

Assessing women's political representation

How should women's representation be assessed? What factors, in a world of rapid and massive change, might enable us to assess the impact of women's movement claims for representation? Have democracies become more representative in the sense that they have incorporated women in ways which ensure that their interests are advocated and considered? What mechanisms exist to facilitate gender-balanced policies and how effective are those mechanisms? How, if at all, do women's movements participate in processes of decision-making? Have states responded to demands to incorporate women as political actors? Anne Phillips (1995) points out that post-industrial democracies are deficient because they fail to represent women's interests and needs adequately. They neither include women in positions of power nor routinely incorporate gender perspectives in the policy process. Her observations are supported by feminist analysts in Europe and North America who show that the absence of women in positions of power may explain the extent to which public policies in many post-industrial democracies are gender-biased and therefore discriminate against women (Hernes 1987; Lewis 1993; Sainsbury 1994; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Meehan and Sevenhuijsen 1991; Haavio-Mannila et al. 1985; Lovenduski 1986; Bergqvist et al. 1999; Abrar et al. 1999). For these analysts, the democratic deficit may be addressed by ensuring that an appreciation of gender differences informs government policy.

Women's political representation as a subject for comparison

Research on state institutions shows considerable variation in the presence of women in elected office, even amongst otherwise similar countries. In the democracies considered in this volume the proportion of women legislators in 2003 ranged from 12.3 per cent in France to 45 per cent in Sweden (Appendix 1). These differences invite comparative analysis to determine the circumstances under which women achieve higher or lower shares of political office. In addition, comparative research shows that there is generally a pattern of decreasing numbers of women as decision-making hierarchies are ascended. There are exceptions: in Sweden there have been no differences since the 1970s and in the 1980s more women were elected to parliament than to local councils. Other exceptions are the Netherlands, Finland and Norway. Finally, this research shows that there is a functional division of labour between women and men representatives whereby women are more likely to specialise in 'soft' and less prestigious policy areas such as health, cultural affairs, education and social welfare while

men dominate the traditionally more prestigious areas of economic management, foreign affairs and home affairs. Paradoxically the 'soft' policy areas in which women are more likely to be found constitute the major part of state activity and absorb the bulk of government budgets. The patterns raise the important question of what if any influence women representatives have and where and how they are able to exercise it. They also raise questions about the nature of political representation.

What is political representation?

Political representation has many definitions and takes many forms. A standard and widely cited definition by Hannah Pitkin (1967) identifies four types of political representation: *authorised*, where a representative is legally empowered to act for another; *descriptive*, where the representative stands for a group by virtue of sharing similar characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity or residence; *symbolic*, where a leader stands for national ideas; and *substantive*, where the representative seeks to advance a group's policy preferences and interests. In this volume we are interested in women's access to political institutions and the effects of that access on policy. Accordingly, we investigate the descriptive and substantive representation of women as concepts that enable us to compare the extent to which policy processes in democratic regimes are inclusive of women.

Political representation underpins the legitimacy of democratic states. Ideas about political representation shape institutional arrangements and definitions of citizenship. The requirements of political representation are matters for negotiation, and subject to change. Therefore debates on political representation are part of the process by which democracies evolve. Such debates include concerns about the nature of political institutions, the processes of decision-making and the quality of policy implementation. Frequently they are constitutional debates directly aimed at institutional reorganisation. In representation debates definitions of citizenship are invoked and decisions are made about who is and is not a citizen, and who may and may not be a representative. Debates about the implementation of representation policy highlight the inclusion and exclusion of social groups and individuals. In short, claims for representation are part of the process of claiming membership of a polity; hence the debates they generate illuminate the way political actors understand democracy.

Women's policy agencies and state feminism

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century there has been a proliferation of (state) agencies established to promote women's status and rights, often

called women's policy agencies. WPAs are sometimes termed *state feminist*. State feminism is a contested term. To some it is an oxymoron. It has been variously defined as the activities of feminists or femocrats in government and administration (Hernes 1987; Sawer 1990), institutionalised feminism in public agencies (Eisenstein 1990; Outshoorn 1994), and the capacity of the state to contribute to the fulfilment of a feminist agenda (Sawer 1990; Stetson 1987). In this book we define state feminism as the advocacy of women's movement demands inside the state. The establishment of WPAs changed the setting in which the women's movement and other feminists could advance their aims, as they offered, in principle, the possibility to influence the agenda and to further feminist goals through public policies *from inside the state apparatus*. WPAs could increase women's access to the state by furthering women's participation in political decision-making, and by inserting feminist goals into public policy. Thus WPAs may enhance the political representation of women. WPAs vary considerably in their capacity, resources and effectiveness, raising questions about the circumstances under which they are most likely to enhance women's political representation. To understand them we need to consider in detail the part they play in processes of incorporating women's interests (substantive representation) into policy-making, a requirement that is particularly important when the decisions are about political representation itself.

Accordingly, the part played by women's policy agencies in securing women's political representation is the subject of this book. We can expect WPAs to provide the strongest evidence of the impact of women on the political agenda because they ostensibly build women into the policy process. The comparison of WPAs' activities in different countries over time makes possible an assessment of their effects on women's political representation in both its procedural and substantive senses. The research that is described in chapters 2 to 12 addresses the roles of women's policy agencies in eleven post-industrial democracies. The research question is: how, and under what circumstances, have WPAs furthered the impact of women's movements on arrangements for political representation?

In addressing this question the book raises issues about the nature of political representation in different countries. Do the variations in arrangements for political representation suggest different ways of thinking about democratic representation? Do those differences impact on women's representation? How do conventions about representation affect the capacity and mandate of women's policy agencies? Are women's policy agencies able to represent feminist movements? What happens to women's movement agendas when activists collaborate with the state? These are issues that studies of women's movements have

attempted to address (Hernes 1987; Franzway et al. 1989; Watson 1990; Sawer 1990; Eisenstein 1990, 1996; Outshoorn 1994, 1998).

Such questions invite consideration of method, of how to assess impacts in policy-making. Feminist political scientists have developed a common method for assessing such impacts in the collaborative project on which this book is based. In the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS) scholars met to formulate such a methodology from the early 1990s. The resulting framework was developed by a network of scholars who participated in an extended series of international meetings. The starting point was the volume edited by Amy Mazur and Dorothy Stetson, *Comparative State Feminism*, published in 1995. The collection generated a series of debates about what explains the success or otherwise of state policy machinery. The debates addressed fundamental questions about the comparative method, case selection, policy analysis and the nature of democracy. Contributors to the original volume were soon joined by others in a collaborative effort that makes it difficult to separate the contributions of any one individual (though Mazur and Stetson have been central to the project's leadership). One of the outcomes of the co-operation is the model on which this book is based. The model, which draws on current approaches to the study of politics to combine the intellectual concerns of feminist and democratic theory, is embedded in theories of political representation, the study of social movements and of public policy. In order to explain the model and hence the approach of this book, it is necessary first to develop the ideas presented so far in more detail.

Women and policy-making

Making women more central to government concerns is partly about electing and appointing more women to public office, that is, descriptive representation. It is also about incorporating women's concerns into the policy process, that is, substantive representation. Whilst increasing women's descriptive representation may lead to the inclusion of women's concerns, it is only one of the several ways of enhancing women's representation. Hence, in this study, while we *take note* of women's representation in terms of how many women are in public office, we *focus* on the question of whether women are included in day-to-day processes of decision-making. To do this we have elected to study patterns of debates about policy decisions over time. So, instead of concentrating on the state and its institutions as a whole, we are looking at particular decisions and the policy debates that lead up to them. We identify core activities in the process of policy-making that we classify according to the inclusion of

women and women's concerns. We address the question of the roles of WPAs in debates to determine whether agencies are active or whether they are symbolic bystanders. We ask whether WPAs participate in debates, advocate women's movement goals and contribute to successful outcomes for women. To capture agency variations, for each debate we gather information on the activities of agencies and on their characteristics.

Our case studies are drawn from eleven countries: Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the UK and the USA. The countries included in this volume are all post-industrial democracies. They represent about half of the twenty-three countries that fall into this category of systems. They have relatively similar and large levels of national wealth and, with the exception of Spain, have had relatively stable democratic political systems since 1949. All the countries have had stable democratic systems since the 1970s. Within this category they differ by type of democratic regime, a variation that is reflected in the selection of countries that we consider. For each debate we identify the women's movement's goals and characteristics. The debate outcome is assessed as a success or failure for the movement, enabling us to classify women's movement impacts. From the literature on social movement impact we developed a set of variables that might explain women's movement success or failure.

Gender and framing

We start by considering the way in which policy debates are or become gendered, an exercise that requires working definitions of the terms gender, gendering and framing. *Gender* is a concept that has acquired several different meanings (Harding 1986). As originally adapted for social science, it provided a way to distinguish between biological sexual differences and the cultural and social meanings attached to those differences (Nelson 1989). In this study, we define gender as the meaning or ideas people attach to biological and demographic differences between men and women. Gender is not a synonym for sex, which is also a contested term. Most simply, sex is a biological category that separates men and women, while gender is the set of social meanings attached to the categories 'male' and 'female'. Another way of conceptualising gender is to think of it as a scale of attributes ranging from masculinity to femininity. Women are more likely than men to possess feminine attributes but such attributes do not belong exclusively to women. Gender also expresses the effects of relationships between and among women and men. These relationships are manifested in differences of political power, social roles, images and expectations resulting in recognised characteristics of masculinity and

femininity that differ over time and across cultures. Thus gender is not only a set of attributes, it is also a process, *gendering*, that should be thought of as a changing contextualised social, psychological and political phenomenon that affects the way groups of women and men define and express their interests. *Gendering* therefore refers to the way in which debates are framed in terms of gender. It is the process whereby phenomena, such as identities, observations, entities and processes, acquire symbols based on ideas about men and women. *Framing*, in this context, refers to the order, logic and structure in which an idea is enclosed. Framing may be more or less contrived and deliberate, but it always affects how we understand phenomena, ideas or events. A strong version of its meaning is found in the slang term 'frame up' which is the false establishment of blame through a particular description of events. The frames that are used to express an idea or event play an important part in the meaning that is conveyed. For example, to paraphrase Carol Bacchi (1999, p. 5) women's political under-representation may be described by equality advocates as a problem of discrimination but by traditionalists as a matter of women's choices. Framing occurs in policy debates as competing actors offer competing issue definitions and policy goals. The way a policy is framed or a problem is defined favours some interests over others: 'the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power; the antagonists can rarely agree on what the issues are because power is involved in the definitions' (Schattschneider 1975: 66). The dominant frame of a policy debate has implications for decisions because it establishes the nature of the problem to be solved. Thus gendered debates are those policy debates framed in terms of ideas about how the problem and proposed solutions will affect women in comparison with men.

Gender is therefore an important component of the way in which issues are framed in policy debates. Policy-making can be construed as a set of arguments among policy actors about what problems deserve attention, how those problems are defined and what the solutions are (John 1998; Mazur 2002). In this conflict of ideas only a few issues are taken up for action. The problem for women's advocates therefore is twofold: first, they must gain attention for their issues and the ideas they promote, and second, they must ensure that the problem is defined in terms that are compatible with movement goals. The public definition of a problem is amongst other things a frame that affects how an issue is considered and treated.

Paradoxically gender issues are often framed in gender-blind terms. Historically the gendering of debates about political representation has been 'invisible', built on the unspoken assumption that the political actor

(the voter, the citizen) is male. Feminist theorists have unmasked this convention (Pateman 1988; Lister 1997) pointing out not only that women are citizens, voters and activists, but also that women in traditional gender roles have made possible the functioning and dominance of the male political actor. Historically, when issues of political representation were discussed, traditional gendering went unnoticed until the suffrage movements claimed votes for women.

Gendering policy debates therefore consists of inserting ideas about women and men into the discussion. This does not necessarily mean the debates become feminist, or that their participants support women's movement goals. Rather, this is a form of process change that, by making gender differences explicit, provides the basis for a second form of process change: increased participation by groups of women in the policy-making process. One women's movement strategy therefore is to insert its frame into the debate in order to affect policy content and outcome. The purpose is to frame debates in terms that will highlight the status of women in order to bring about its improvement. Once successful the movement then acts to maintain their frames so that the debate is conducted in feminist terms.

Consideration of the gendering of policy debates illuminates how policy debates are influenced by the women's movement. Do WPAs insert ideas of gender into the definition of policy problems? And if they do, are the ideas congruent with those of the women's movement? Adapting a line of reasoning established by Schattschneider and others (Przeworski 1991; Schneider and Ingram 1993; Cobb and Elder 1983; Jenson 1988; Schattschneider 1975), we propose that WPAs may facilitate the goals of the women's movement within the state, not only by advocating its agenda, but also by *changing the terms of debate*. In other words, the WPAs may attempt to reframe the debate to accommodate the problem definitions made by women's movement actors.

Analysing debates: the model and the cases

To summarise so far, our comparative approach to the study of the impact of women's movements on debates about political representation contains a number of elements or variables. For each we expect to find variation across countries, over time and across debates within countries. Our model is the product of a cross-national research project in which authors developed the design collectively, and then individually, as experts, made assessments of a selected country. The efforts of WPAs are examined in each country to determine how they behave in relation to women's movement attempts to affect state action. Each author has selected, described and classified three debates on political representation, making

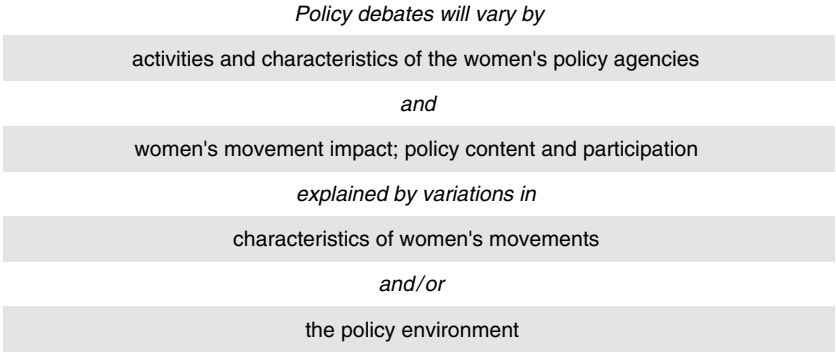

Figure 1.1 The elements of the research problem

an assessment of the impact of the women's movement on the decision and the role of the WPAs in achieving that decision.

From the literature on social movement impact we developed a set of variables that might explain women's movement success or failure. To do this we drew on resource mobilisation theory, which highlights the characteristics of women's movements, and on political opportunity structure theory, which addresses the policy environment in which the movement operates. Accordingly each author has also gathered information about the characteristics of the women's movements and the policy environment at the time of each of three selected debates.

In all of the countries discussed in this volume, debates on political representation have led to explicit policies to increase the political representation of women. In most cases, however, the policies did not fully incorporate women's movement goals. The meeting of women's movement goals is only one of the criteria that we use to assess the policy impact of the women's movements. We also consider whether movements affected policy processes to make them more inclusive of movement concerns and to provide for the inclusion of women. Finally we consider the extent to which policy frames have become gendered, the relationships between frames and movement perspectives, and the extent to which processes include women and women's movements.

The elements of the research problem are shown in figure 1.1.

A theory of state feminism

The state feminist framework presented here incorporates the variables we have discussed so far into a theory in which the units of analysis

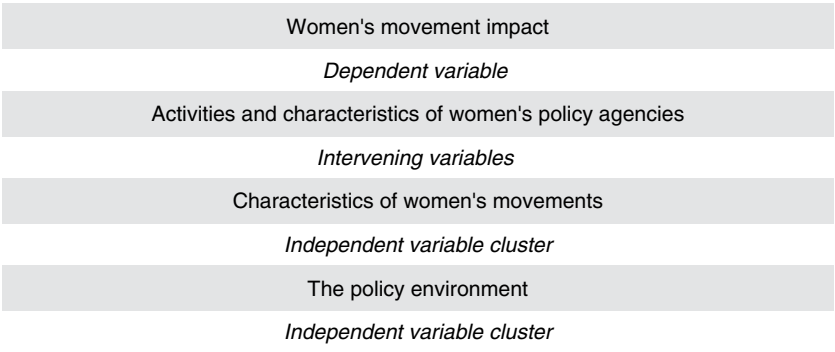

Figure 1.2 The RNGS framework

are political representation policy debates. We use the language of variables to give precision to our model, which is structured on relationships between dependent, independent and intervening variables. To construct the theory it is necessary, first, to establish the extent of variation in the success of women's movements in achieving substantive and descriptive representation in the state at the end of these debates. Thus the *dependent* variable, what we are trying to explain, is women's movement impact. The next step is to examine patterns of activities of women's policy agencies in changing the policy-making process on behalf of women's movements. At this stage the women's policy agency characteristics are *independent* variables that explain differences in movement impact. The third and most important step in our theory building is to assess the state feminist explanation in terms of alternative explanations for movement success in political representation policy debates. When the association between these variables, women's policy agency activities and movement impacts are examined, women's policy agency activities become an *intervening* variable. These associations are depicted in figure 1.2.

The model is built on a set of classifications. Categories from democratic representation and social movement impact theories are synthesised into typologies to measure the intervening and dependent variables: women's policy agency activities and women's movement impact. At the same time, these typologies analytically separate the variations in agency activities from the state's policy and procedural responses to permit examination of the effects of one on the other. They also separate substantive representation from descriptive representation.