

Article 4

**Women's Political Education: Developing Political
Leadership in Canada and India**

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Abstract

This article reports on a recently completed study of women who are involved in formal and informal political roles in Canada and India (2008-2009). Our study is a partnership between the [University of Victoria](#) and the [Society for Participatory Research in Asia](#). The intersections between feminist forms of adult education and the learning needs of women in political leadership in India and Canada are explored. The educational needs of each group are categorized and narratives analyzed to illustrate the complexity of the discourses that act to shape women's political leadership identities and practices. We consider the similarities and differences between the countries, noting the persistence of gender based norms

and expectations in both democracies and how these act as barriers to women's participation in political life. Emerging from the idea of a politics of presence (Puwar, 2004), we offer political cross-dressing as a metaphor for feminist adult education practices that will enable a break through the civic ceiling women encounter in political spheres.

Key Words: gender and politics, political leadership, international political leadership, political cross-dressing, feminist adult education, discourse analysis

Despite decades of efforts to achieve gender equity in political life, an ideal espoused by many democracies, women remain under represented in nearly all governments; women constitute less than 20% of elected representative in the majority of countries (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). Current statistics in many minority world countries such as Canada are showing a decline in the participation of women in formal political roles (Heard, 2008; Norris, 2000). Some majority world countries, such as India, have taken formal affirmative action strategies in order to guarantee greater inclusion of women and other oppressed classes (Krook, 2008). In these cases the numbers of women elected into formal positions of power are increasing. Yet structural solutions do not necessarily afford the only means by which women's participation in politics can be enhanced. Indeed the decline of women's participation in politics following the collapse of the Soviet Union would attest otherwise (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). Moreover, the long acknowledged gendered nature of politics (Fraser, 1996; Okin, 1992; Pateman, 1995) and the way in which everyday and formal

discourses of political activism, leadership and education may reinforce dominant and/or status quo roles and shape the political, social and cultural identities of women cannot be underestimated (Butler, 1993; Mohanty, 2006).

Puwar (2004) contends that until we engage in research practices that ethnographically investigate and interrogate how the differences between men and women's participation in politics is produced and reproduced, we cannot expect to move beyond the 'banal' in understanding how such differences are maintained, reinforced and naturalized. We take her argument to be one that argues for exploring the particularities of women's experiences in political life, rather than studying socio-political structural efforts to address continued levels of inequality between men and women in the political sphere. It is only in the effort to deconstruct and reveal the persistence of particular practices, discourses, and beliefs that the social, political, cultural and historical complexity that maintains political inequality can be understood.

In this paper we set out to take up this challenge by offering an analysis of the narratives of women and the dominant discourses that situate and shape those who are either engaged in or considering roles in political life in both Canada and India. Particular emphasis is given to exploring the relationship and interaction between the discourse of women's involvement in political life and their educative desires, needs and experiences. Although often ignored in studies on women and politics, adult education has proven to be a primary means through which issues of equity and empowerment, liberation and emancipation as well as social, political and cultural agency can be achieved (Clover, Stalker, & McGauley, 2004; Ryan, 2001). Drawing upon Puwar's (2004) concept of a 'politics of presence' and the more provocative notion of 'political cross dressing', we offer evidence of the ways in which educational tools can be deconstructively conceived of as practices of power, than may be able to address gendered norms in politics.

This paper is a product of research conducted over a two-year period (2007-2009) and funded by the Shastri Foundation, an organization that seeks to support knowledge building and joint investigations between researchers in Canada and India. While the study has focused on issues of political training and education using a number of methodologies (content analysis, artifact gathering, surveys), most data was collected in individual or group interviews.

The focus of this paper is the stories or narratives told by women in both Canada and India and how these reveal the processes and products of their political learning. The paper then goes onto tracing the ways in which these women's experiences offer a window into better understanding how women become political change agents or political leaders and in particular, how gendered norms were alternatively articulated, assumed, naturalized, or deconstructed. Discursive and narrative analyses are used to consider how discourses both enabled and constrained their developing political subjectivities and agency. The paper concludes by considering how the processes of adult education should be considered a vital component of political educational experiences as a tool for breaking through the civic ceiling.

The research sites

In this study, the Canadian researchers have worked with two scholars and practitioners from the [Society for Participatory Research in Asia](#) [PRIA] who have been working with women in four Indian states: Haryana, Rajasthan, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh. The interviews with women in political leadership roles come from these four states, and are all participants in a recently launched adult education project designed to enhance these women's political knowledge, skills, capacity, and empowerment in order to transform unequal gender relations in governance (Farrell & Pant, 2008).

In Canada, our participants come from several sources: first, we recruited current and former participants from the [Vancouver Women's Campaign School](#). This program, sponsored by the [Canadian Women's Voter Congress](#), a nonpartisan

group, have had in place a West Coast school in Vancouver for the past ten years. In addition, we sought to interview women who had been elected to local levels of government in British Columbia, including municipal, regional and school district governance. These women were recruited during the annual convention of the BC Union of Municipalities during 2008. In the case of both groups, we asked them to tell us their stories about what had prompted them to become involved in politics, to identify gender issues or barriers (if any), and to describe for us their educational processes in learning to become politicians.

Differing contexts and discourses

Before reviewing the conceptual terrain that situates this study, it is important to offer a brief description of the differing and similar contexts in which women take up roles as political leaders in Canada and India. Canada, like most industrialized countries in the world, has no prohibition on women becoming political leaders but also has no formal mechanism for ensuring gender equity amongst candidates or elected leaders. By contrast, India introduced amendments to the Panchayat Raj Act in 1993 in order to reserve at least one third of all elected seats at the local level for women, tribal peoples or other scheduled castes. The goal of having at least one-third women elected into leadership reflects the United Nations research that suggests 30% as a tipping point where the political culture will begin to represent the multi-gendered populations they serve.

In Canada political readiness is deemed a matter of personal choice, although a number of political parties, notably the [New Democratic Party](#) [NDP], seek to actively recruit women and other identified groups (such as persons of colour, gay/lesbian/ transsexual, and persons with exceptionalities) as candidates at the provincial and federal level. Formal political parties are far less common at the local level, although women are often encouraged to begin in political life at the local level (either in municipal or school board governance, both of which are locally managed) by their colleagues, spouses, or friends. The local level is seen as a 'stepping stone' into the provincial or national arena. In India, women are

actively recruited, most often by their male husbands or fathers (sometimes fathers-in-law) to participate in political life at the local level, where the Panchayat Raj Act operates. Some go on to take up political candidacy at the state and national level, however there are no quotas for these levels of governance.

The very structure of the Panchayat system needs to be understood to realize the significant challenge the recruitment of women plays in India. The Panchayat was specifically designed for rural populations and governance in villages, with “the basic objective of democratic decentralization and devolution of power” (Bhagwati, 2007, para. 3). There are three levels of the Panchayat: *Gram Panchayat* [the Village], *Panchayat Samiti* [Block], and *Zilla Parishad* [District level], each with elected representatives. Approximately 250,000 Panchayats have been constitutional mandated by Indian states. The powers held in the *Zilla* (district level, one for every five to ten villages) are significant as well: they approve all development plans, control all institutions in the social sector, manage water bodies, natural resources, own minor forest products, manage lands, village markets and resolve disputes (para. 21).

The role of education in politics: The study’s context

As noted earlier in this paper, education plays a key role in both preparing women for taking up roles of leadership in the public sphere, but also for those women who have been elected as local representatives. In this sense, education is a cultural tool (Vygotsky; 1978; Wertsch, 1998) that mediates how we engage intersubjectively with others. In other words, education is the means by which we come to understand and make sense of life (in this case, political life) and to understand the specific nature of how political systems operate. At the same time, the educative process enables us to take up roles on the basis of how we understand ourselves within the political system; that is to say, it concurrently shapes our political or civic subjectivities (McGregor, 2007). As such, education can be considered co-constitutive, as its structure, processes and outcomes effect and construct identities. However, as Wenger (1998) has suggested, our

subjectivities emerge in particular contexts—what he calls communities of practice—and these contexts determine the extent to which particular educational discourses can be enacted, reproduced, or altered. This type of ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ could be used to explain why some people become active participants in public life, as they act on their knowledge about political systems. However, this description is too simplistic: it needs to consider the ways in which some discourses/knowledges come to dominate.

Language or discourses are key resources through which social and political capital operate, as language and discourses have symbolic power. In describing symbolic power, Bourdieu (1999) links the authoritative position that the individual or group holds as a primary means by which the power of the language is able to “bring into existence the thing named” (p. 223).

Of importance to this study, Bourdieu (1999) goes on to describe the links between language, power and particular fields of activity, such as politics. In other words language can “sanction and consecrate a relation of power between agents with respect to the names of professions and occupations, an essential component of social identity...The symbolic power of agents, understood as a power of making people see...and believe, of producing and imposing the legitimate or legal classification depends...on the position they occupy in the space” (pp. 240-243). Symbolic knowledge production then, is an outcome of managing social and political spaces and the control of particular discourses and practices.

This brief discussion illustrates why feminists and feminist educators need to be discursive analysts: to understand how discourses re-create or reproduce power relations, particularly the ways in which patriarchy and other oppressive discourses continue to operate socially, politically or culturally, becomes key to disrupting their ongoing operation. Feminists have used forms of consciousness-raising for many years in an effort to engage in this type of activity; the goal has been to name power structures, to challenge their operation, and to replace them

systematically with altered regimes or persons in an attempt to break their hold on social sites. However, even with systemic change, such as those introduced in India through amendments to the Panchayat Raj Act, such power dynamics continue to operate. This is because discourses are persistent, circulate and re-circulate in multiple spheres (social and political sites) where issues of influence and power, are continually activated using differing forms of social, cultural, and political capital. It is this more nuanced understanding of the power of discourses and symbolic capital that needs to become the center of feminist educational practice if we are to permanently disrupt hegemonic regimes of male centered power in political worlds.

Competing discourses

In this paper, discourses are understood as those metanarratives or frames of meaning that circulate broadly in the public sphere as well as those more locally constructed discourses, which also draw upon and re-circulate situated and intersubjectively created meanings. Different discourses are taken up by different discursive communities: in the case of this paper, some discourses are common to both the political discourses of women in Canada and India, although others are markedly different. For example, in India the discourses associated with *Purdah* are important to recognize and unpack. These discourses reinforce religious and cultural norms of respect, honour, and decency: some of the documented acts of physical violence taken against women in India are rooted in such beliefs. Another important discourse that was evidenced in some of the training materials used by Indian animators (adult educators and facilitators) reflected Gandhian philosophies and the values of truth, self reliance, service to others, peaceful resolution, human dignity and respect for all. Discourses related to caste were also part of our Indian participants' lives; while having been formally abolished by government, we saw considerable evidence that it continued to shape political status and access to power and authority.

One discourse that was unique to the Canadian women's discourse was the notion of gender neutrality or gender invisibility. Relying on liberal feminist discourses of women as having achieved equity, conceptions of people as "neutral", usually universalizable and genderless, sees humans as driven by choices where privilege or oppression do not operate. In fact, differentiated treatment on the basis of gender was seen to be itself discriminatory and unnecessary, given the equal capabilities of men and women. Merit, not gender, was seen as the primary vehicle for determining one's suitability for political leadership. A discourse common to both the Canadian and Indian participants included the socialization of care and family life as a part of the work of women, and in particular, the moral orientation that care work provided women.

Contesting politics and the politics of contestation

Puwar's (2004) conception of space invaders and presence is important because it offers up a illustrating the agentic potential of discursive disruption; by taking up what are typically male spaces, attention can be drawn to the ways in which power is sedimented in male bodies. Her work reflects the particular case of women of colour among typically white, male, British MP's; yet her call for an embodied and physical response to the naturalized site of male Members, creates a way of thinking about how disruption works visibly in its ability to contrast and evoke the potential for change.

We see evidence of a politics of presence at work in the political spheres of India and Canada. Yet as this paper will argue, while presence can and does draw attention to differences, such forms of disruption are insufficient to dismantle systems of patriarchy and to disrupt the knowledge-power paradigms. Instead, we argue for a stance that is captured by the metaphor of *political cross-dressing*. We use this term deliberately: its language frame draws upon the semiotics and meanings of the gender matrix (lesbian, gay, transgendered, bisexual, intersexed, queer, and straight) as well as the notion of dress or appearance, and how mixing these stances draws attention to the ways in which

both dress and gender are normatively constructed. In this way it capitalizes on the politics of presence, that is, the visual differences that can draw attention to a need for change, but also suggests that it operates across and within gendered discourses, moving addressing a potentially broader matrix of differences. As a signifier, cross-dressing also simultaneously disrupts the more typical boundaries of identity politics, that is, men versus women. Both men and women can be political cross dressers: for example, men who take up discourses of care through the visual metaphor of the sweater vest (a much commented upon strategy employed by Steven Harper, leader of the Canadian Conservative Party in the last Federal Election) or women who dress in particular colours or styles, such as the Pink Sari Gang, or Gulabi (pink) Gang in India, who seek to disrupt the social norms of corruption in public life and the injustice of particular social and cultural practices perpetrated against women.

Political cross-dressing however, can be evoked in more than just outward dress: it can emerge from the activities, practices or actions that are taken by women (or men) which in some way challenge the typical norms represented in these moments. This needs to be more than a mimicking or reproduction of the stance taken by the more powerful political 'other', but needs to be considered as a conscious stance, one that deliberately provokes challenges or unsettles the normative.

In the next section of the paper we detail how the women in this study described their own political learning, identified outstanding political learning needs, and how their political efforts have been influenced by particular forms of educational practice. Several stories are shared to demonstrate how particular discourses enable or constrain political activity, illustrating the ongoing discursive effects of power and political capital and how it operates in different social and cultural fields. Throughout this section we will also consider how a politics of presence and political cross-dressing are used as tools for unpacking or disrupting gendered political norms.

Women's experiences drove their educational needs and interests: India

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the complexity of the new work that women were asked to participate in as they became members of local government, immediate experiences drove their political learning and educational needs. This ranged from stop gap measures—that is strategies and pieces of information—that enabled them to simply survive their initial forays into political life, to more about the day to day operational knowledge of the rural community, and finally to more strategic and influence style activities. An important distinction between these two levels of educational need is how the practical is focused almost solely on the individual woman as Panchayat member and her specific personal political challenges while the tactical was more often focused on political influence processes. The tactical is also closely related to the strategic: here, the tactic of local action might also have implications for broader application, that is, the issue having effect for larger groups of women, families or issues which affected the community at large. A third type of educational need emerged over time, often in more reflective settings, or as a part of a woman's involvement in the networking events or as a part of their participation in training were issues of broader social and cultural significance, such as gender stereotyping and gender mainstreaming, violence against women, female child infanticide, rape, and sexual harassment. These types of educational needs were of most interest to our research group, as we saw these as the primary means through which women could effect change in a patriarchal society. We classified these as transformational or emancipatory learning needs. Like other NGOs and civil society organizations our goal was to break down gender barriers and enhance the equality rights of women. During our time in India we saw significant evidence of these multiply focused educational needs, and in particular, how women came to understand the centrality of power relations and how these were maintained, reinforced and enacted.

Women learned in a variety of ways and sites. For example, we heard about government and NGO sponsored training sessions that talked about rights and

responsibilities: in particular, the Panchayat Raj act, how it operated and what individual Panchayat members duties were. We also heard “Training [like this] is very important, especially as the government doesn’t always hare all information with you. This is their way of maintaining the power. We also learned about a number of government schemes”. As noted earlier, this comment illustrates the dual focus of practical, useful knowledge (such as what schemes or programs were government sponsored); however, it also illustrates an important barrier at the local level: bureaucrats who work for government. On more than one occasion we heard women describing their need to take on the power brokers at this level. One woman described her situation:

I was trying to shut down bootleggers. I wasn’t having a lot of success, and was attacked as a result of my efforts. I also worked on accessing information. I was asked for a bribe by [that] public official; I refused, an filed a case against the man who did so. As a result of a lot of these actions, he was publicly embarrassed. He was suspended and then transferred to another district.

While the almost absolute power of bureaucrats was difficult for the Western scholars to understand, we learned that in India such powers are typical and emerged from the colonial legacy of Britain’s occupancy.

A key point in this example is the need for developing tactical and strategic knowledge: this was often emergent; that is, it was a form of knowledge that arose in-practice. What made such knowledge even more useful however, was when it could be shared in networking sessions at the local/village level (through citizen leaders or women’s collectives) or at formal training sessions that were offered to women throughout the region.

Other women’s comments illustrate the ways in which women’s empowerment arose over time and built on the successes of the designated seats. We met

quite a young woman in the city of Mahendragarh who told us about her election from the general seats, not the reserve seats.

After my marriage, I decided to run in my husband's village. I deliberately campaigned among women, saying "I am a woman. If you vote for me, I will help you with your problems." And I was elected, even though nine other men and two women ran for the same seat. Asking women to vote for her was the reason. Men said to me "You are young; you should go home and look after your children.

We found this a powerful story, one that illustrated the kind of gender-based consciousness raising that was succeeding. However, the complexity of power dynamics cannot be underestimated: later, she told us that she had many problems following her election because of her caste. She replaced a person in the Panchayat who had been of higher caste, and people would say to her "How can you have this power?" This example illustrates the functioning of symbolic capital described earlier in this paper; overcoming this cultural/political capital will be a struggle for this woman and for others like her as long as caste remains a system through which power is exercised.

This brings us to consideration of how we saw *networking* used as a strategy for political engagement, learning, and as a tool to disrupt existing social and political capital. Networking is a strategy often described in western political contexts among liberal feminists: in particular it is offered as an alternative to what has been described as 'the old boy's network'. Women have been urged to mimic/take up this practice, to meet and develop contacts among one another; this strategy is essentially understood to operate as a formal and informal social structure through which power might operate in parallel to other male dominated networks. However networking in the Indian context was envisioned and practiced somewhat differently. First, it operated to fulfill the function of social and/or political connection as outlined above. However, it was also a means of

creating new forms of political capital. Women who are described as Citizen leaders (Pant & Satpathy, 2008) have been recruited in urban and rural settings to take up roles of mentors, political coaches or resources for the newly elected Panchayat members. These citizen leaders provide regionally and locally based support mechanisms that added a new layer of educationally framed supports to the central training or educational programs offered by PRIA. In this sense the network is designed to provide immediate support to assist in technical and practical needs, but also to assist in more strategic initiatives; that is, influence activities. One strategy that works as a new site for exercising political capital is the creation of a critical mass of mutually supportive women who can be mobilized to attend a meeting so that a woman elected representative who would otherwise be ignored at a formal village or block level meeting. Pant and Farrell (2007) also found that such networks were tools for building confidence which in turn enabled vocalization of concerns for women, children, or other disempowered groups. This responds to the earlier point about the ways in which empowerment strategies must respond to local political and historical conditions. While it might be easy to suggest that taking up such networks *should* restructure or replace existing power structures, its operation is more complex than this, as such strategies must operate around, within, and across discourses of gendered norms, the operation of power, and existing sites of political and cultural capital. For example, we heard of such networks also being used to spread information about postponing a meeting because a critical mass of women was not available at a given time. In this case, power operated within the constraints of the local situation and a political strategy emerged that protected women from being subjected to culturally constructed political constraints. This form of networking could also be characterized as a practice of political cross dressing, drawing from and across more typically gendered networking practices.

Women in local government in Canada: Educational needs

Like their Indian counterparts, experience and need drove much of how locally elected women in Canada characterized their learning. We found that the women

we interviewed who were participants in local government identified practical and tactical forms of knowledge as centrally important to them; in particular, the legal and structural systems which frame decision making for local government were seen as priority learning needs. Some forms of strategic knowledge were also identified by Canadian women politicians as important, particularly when describing how they struggled with being able to achieve their goals for action on particular issues. Several women described mentorship as a form of learning in-action, and another identified the learning-in-action motif as a useful way of engaging in more consistent, ongoing education that could respond to the 'just-in-time' political learning needs of women. Finally, there were only nuanced references to emancipatory or transformational learning, generally described as incidental to their primary tasks of managing resources and serving the community. In the next section, we provide more detail to support these observations.

Education as 'knowledge based training': Canadian women politicians

While desire to effect change might very well have motivated someone's entry into political life—and certainly we heard this description from most of the women we interviewed—the predominant educational frame theme articulated by the women we interviewed and observed during their training seminars were the need for practical knowledge. In particular, this included information about roles, duties and responsibilities. In order to achieve such goals, knowledge and education directed to understanding systems, policies, programs and laws were the essential learning needs of elected persons. Phrases like "I learned how to follow the rules" or that training is important because "you really need to know the processes"; you need to "teach yourself, like reading the Municipal Act", or learn "basic financial training" were common among the women participants we interviewed.

Having a grounding in this sort of information was important because it gave a frame of reference for understanding the processes and procedures that would

be followed in decision making. Processes for making decisions around enhancing economic development and the appropriate processes/rules for discussing matters in public spaces to ensure mandated transparency features of the Municipal Act/Community Charter were referenced. The goal, as Penny said, to be able to make “defensible” decisions. In saying this, she implies that decisions need to be made on the basis of rational analysis rather than those made on the basis of influence tactics. Others made similar statements about the need to be able to “debate rationally”, or the need to know the municipal rules because

some of the things they suggest are actually illegal, forbidden by the Charter. They don’t have any idea what you have authority over and not. Some think all you need to do is lobby... You have to know what you can do and where your limits are.

Other ways in which knowledge was acquired was through mentoring. While none of the women offered the suggestion that such learning models be formalized, they did describe how frequently mentors supported them in learning how to do the everyday work of being a local politician. In all cases, the mentors they named were veteran politicians, either leaving political life, or with long service as politicians. Both men and women were named as mentors, although they were predominantly men. The priority learning needs identified when talking about the roles that mentors played was an emphasis on strategic learning. Women often described themselves as ‘rookies’ ‘neophytes’ or ‘naive’: mentors were seen as personal and political supporters. Some spoke of the way in which a mentor was able to provide more nuanced lessons in the culture of local government, for example by “help you hone your answers... you need to learn how to answer questions on the fly, speak clearly and succinctly”. Others characterized mentors as offering personal support in order to build confidence or encourage efforts, such as trusting their existing levels of knowledge about “their people, their communities, the issues and their effects”. Mentors are in some ways similar to the Indian women’s Citizen leaders in that they provided

strategic advice and support, but they are quite different in that these relationships were incidental rather than planned. The other critical difference is that the mentors here remained focused on political strategies or implications that were assumed to be without gendered effects. In other words, there was a naturalized assumption that barriers to political success were a product of lack of experience, not from any formed of gendered practice.

Networking was also described as a strategic learning tool: like their Indian counterparts, these elected politicians understood the value of networking in building support for their work and ensuring that their work was focused on the priorities of community or groups. Networks enabled you to have “a real sense of how policies affect people on the ground... It is also very important for the essence of democracy that you are still one of the people even when people put you in power”. In this case, networks are two-way communication tools, informing politician and enabling action on mutually important fronts of political interest.

Networks could also provide important strategic support when challenged:

If you are the lone voice you need to be able to meet with other women who are facing the challenges you are. I have even [been aware of] women who have had information withheld from them, things like that. In cases like this you seriously need a network—someone you can call and talk to because these types of actions really undermine you.

An important observation is that there seemed to be little emphasis on the need for transformative or emancipatory forms of learning as had been evidenced among the Indian politicians. As noted above, such naturalized assumptions about political success rely on individual experience as the key factor, rather than any openly articulated effects of gender.

However we did hear some women acknowledge a need to change or challenge the ways that decisions were made: as Sharon bluntly puts it “old time politics is

control and secrecy—the guy with the most information wins. That is not going away anytime soon and it is not something any training tackles to any effect”. This statement provoked our interest on several levels: first because it implied a long time gendered political culture, but also because it argued that training can’t dismantle such normalized ways of knowing/seeing the world. We saw this statement as illustrative of an apparent tension between two competing discourses. Most often, we heard the naturalized discourse of political experience (and sometimes political skills/abilities) being paramount. This we argue is a product of the liberal-feminist discourse of women having achieved gendered equality, with women having access to the same legal rights as their male counterparts (Chappel, 2002; Squires, 1999). As women have achieved gender-equality as a result of legal measures, then there can only be other, individualistic reasons for “her” lack of success or ability to take up political roles. For example, Judy expressed what we heard quite frequently during discussions with women about the need for formal structures to create a gender-balanced political field: “I don’t want women to have a quota. I want to level the playing field.” This was echoed by Alice, who said “just because they are women?... just women candidates, that’s not good. It doesn’t do women any favour, its affirmative action. Need to be the best candidate, not just the best women. Or as Becky said, “Who’s the best man for the job? That’s my thinking”.

However, the description above also illustrates there is a second, less prevalent discourse in which women are disadvantaged by gender historically and the dominance of men as political decision makers continues to operate. We heard, particularly from women in regional district governance roles, that men continued to hold particular beliefs about women’s appropriate social and cultural roles. But gender specific strategies act to disadvantage women—as Alice’s statement above made clear—and so by implication, women should simply ignore or overlook this history. This sentiment was echoed during the Women’s Campaign School training program: on two separate occasions, experienced women in provincial politics reported examples of explicit gender bias and/or inappropriate

language from men, but both brushed these aside as either anomalies or lacking in broader significance. “We’ve come a long way baby” remains the operationalized mantra despite evidence to the contrary.

Competing discourses and their constraining effects

The descriptions from the Canadian women politicians give us insights into two predominant discourses which have shaped their responses to educational needs: first, that politicians need to have a focus on the rational, the instrumental, the efficient and affordable, and following procedural rules helps achieve these values/goals. Often described as Managerialism, this discourse that has emerged from the globalization of corporate rationality situated in market based values (Bottery, 2000) and neoliberalism (Ball, 2006). Secondly however, is the liberal feminist argument that gender equality has been achieved through legal measures, with women having access to the same rights as their male counterparts (Chappel, 2002; Squires, 1999). The result is that women enjoy the same personal freedoms to choose to participate in public life. Such discourses lead to policy or practice approaches that characterize politicians as “neutral”, usually universalizable and genderless, and sees humans as driven by choices where privilege or oppression do not operate. In fact, differentiated treatment on the basis of gender was seen to be itself discriminatory and unnecessary, given the equal capabilities of men and women. Merit, not gender, becomes the primary vehicle for determining one’s suitability for political leadership or elected office.

Common to both sites: Discourses of care and family

One discourse that was common across the narratives offered by Canadian and Indian women was the discourse of care and caregiving. This discourse dominated in their descriptions of the primary limitation for women entering into politics (such as an unsupportive spouse, family member, or having children) as well as how they characterized the most important work they accomplished as

political leaders. Almost to a person, each woman we spoke with highlighted political work they had achieved that was linked to some theme of care for others. In India, this care orientation was expressed in a variety of ways, including supporting widowed women in India who were without any form of pension or financial support; girls schooling; violence against women; for getting a toilet installed at the Panchayat meeting room so that women could be a part of the meetings; or programs designed to end feticide. Among Canadian women this care orientation manifested itself in a focus on schools and school programming so that children could be successful; environmental degradation and the protection of natural landscapes; support for single parents with children; seniors care, and health care.

Care work was also highlighted as morally centered work: we heard women in Indian especially articulate this view, although some Canadian women also compared the importance of working with children as being much more significant than issues such as building roads or installing sewers. In India, the idea that women were more likely to be morally centered decision makers—putting others before self—was also seen as the key to transforming politics in their country, a place where corruption was ever present and that bribes were often the ways in which political work was accomplished. However, in both countries it could be argued that this gendered framing of political work is a product of discursive shaping, responding to cultural and social conditions that place those matters of private life (the family) ahead of the public sphere (political). It is likely possible that this orientation towards care in political life can then be understood as an outgrowth of their orientation to caring for others and long socialized practices.

Such a discussion might be thought to imply that women maintain their own subjugation through devotion to care work in the political sphere. This could be one reading of this discourse. However, this example might also illustrate how political capital might be a product of accessing normative social and cultural capital. As so-called “care experts”, women can take lead roles in political life on

those matters that are linked to the care discourse. The recent focus on protecting the environment provides one example of the discourse of care, providing a rich opportunity for women to take on leadership roles in local government for which they have already earned political capital. In the case of the Indian women we worked with in this project, their efforts to transform the political sphere away from one characterized by corruption also illustrates how women's social and cultural capital earn them credit as credible and effective local leaders. Here we might also consider women as "space invaders" in the ways in which they take up these value based issues as a part of their political work, drawing attention to their gender differences but in ways which reinforce their suitability for the work, simultaneously dismantling gender norms.

The complexity of how such power dynamics operate, should not however, be underestimated. We also heard the example from one Canadian woman of how she had become an "expert" in emergency service delivery, taking advantage of training and leadership opportunities. Yet once emergency services became a priority of the provincial government, this woman found herself without a portfolio and the work now the purview of a salaried, male, employee. Taking up issues that are in keeping with one's own social capital are important ways of making women visible/present in politics, yet other dynamics of power and authority can be a significant constraint when they continue to reinforce gender stereotypes.

As this discussion has illustrated, there remains an important unfulfilled educational need: that of shifting or altering dominant expectations and the dismantling of discourses that subjugate, dominate, or contain women's political opportunities. This is the power of the political cross-dressing metaphor and its transformative potential. When women are given the tools to deliberately draw upon and disrupt gendered norms, then there is learning not only for the women who are seeking political empowerment, but also for the broader social system, and make visible to all of those other men and women who may deliberately or unknowingly continue to reinforce gender norms.

In India, we saw the facilitators or animators deliberately take on gender and cultural norms in the workshops they planned for the Panchayat women leaders. How inheritance laws could operate to limit women's access to family resources, the importance of birth registration for female child rights, as well as the deconstruction of gender norms of both men and women were all topics that were integrated into the training workshops we attended. In each workshop, we heard women begin to articulate deeper understandings of how gender operated culturally and normatively and how their own actions could reinforce or dismantle such practices. We also saw that trainers sought out men in the local and regional communities who had been part of gender mainstreaming training programs or were sympathetic to the disadvantages women faced, and could therefore be allies and partners with the elected women. These practices create new forms of political and cultural capital that can then be used to unsettle and make visible the naturalized gender norms.

In Canada, we did not see as strong evidence of an open discussion of gender, discrimination, social or cultural expectations. All of the local government training was offered to men and women, and no women's caucus or other strategies designed to train women specifically were in evidence, although we did hear that at the Federal level the municipal organization did have a women's caucus. The Vancouver Campaign School was a deliberately targeted educational strategy for enhancing women's ability to enter into any level of government. Here the emphasis was on seeking and earning a nomination, and the training offered many important insights into issue development, team building, the importance of media and other election-specific skill sets. Issues of gender and gender discrimination were discussed only when experienced women politicians were asked to share their experiences: as was noted earlier however, these women tended to draw upon the liberal feminist discourse of women's rights; issues of discrimination or unfair treatment were treated as anomalies that should be ignored. While we are not sure what motivates such a response, it may be that these women are concerned that an emphasis on sexual harassment, gendered

language, or open discrimination on the basis of gender will discourage them from wanting to enter public life. However, we can say that the training opportunities stressed practical and strategic political knowledge, while transformative or emancipatory educational goals were not explicitly planned.

Conclusion: Implications and next steps

What are the implications of our work to date? First, we strongly believe that feminist forms of adult education are being successfully developed and implemented in India, and this approach to political education is providing strong parallel support mechanisms for achieving the goal of gender equity in political life. The complexity of achieving equity illustrates that while powerful, structural or systemic policy solutions are not enough. The power of discourses to operate in many sites and locations, and to work across, within and against equity goals speaks to the importance of practices of political cross dressing. We see the care work of women as an important opportunity for enabling access to new forms of political capital, although we are equally as cognizant of how such opportunities can also limit or constrain political agency. However, we believe women armed with emancipatory forms of political knowledge can, as political cross dressers, simultaneously enact and dismantle gendered assumptions and displace dominant beliefs about women's political capabilities. We hope to continue to explore these phenomena as we seek to expand our study to include a third international site.

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