

A Review of Hanna Pitkin's (1967) Conception of Women's Political Representation

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Abstract- This paper reviews Hanna Pitkin's (1967) four conceptions of representations. These are descriptive, substantive, formalistic and symbolic representation. The conceptions of representation and their implications for strategies concerning the engagement of women in formal politics are varied. There is a contrast on conceptions that focus on either what is being represented or who the representatives are, with conceptions of representation as an act (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1994), as "differentiated relationship among plural actors" (Young, 2000: 127) and Phillips (1995: 96) conception of a "politics of ideas and presence." Young's perspective emphasises the relational nature of representation. On the other hand, Phillips (1995) incorporates what is being represented and who the representatives are, thus reflecting inclusion and avoiding dichotomies which assume that one is more important than the other. The methodology used in this study was documentary research of Pitkin's work. The works of other scholars who have written on the theories are also reviewed.

I. INTRODUCTION

While Pitkin's multifaceted conception of representation is well known and widely cited, the connections among its dimensions are frequently ignored in practice. Many empirical studies treat different dimensions of representation as alternatives and equally valid conceptions among which scholars may pick and choose. Every research acknowledging the multidimensional nature of representation and focusing on more than one dimension typically treats those dimensions as separate and distinct (Mishler and Mughan, 1978; Mash and Norris, 1997). The components of representation cannot be treated separately because there is a strong causal connection that exists among them. Advocates of formal representation emphasise that free, fair and open elections are important not only because they are necessary for democracy but also because they facilitate descriptive representation, encourage policy responsiveness, and enhance the public's support for representative institutions. Similarly, descriptive representation is considered important for promoting symbolic representation and policy responsiveness, while policy responsiveness is believed to be a principal contributor to symbolic representation (Mishler and Rose, 1997). It is for both of these reasons that the concept of representation is considered integrated.

II. REPRESENTATION

The notion of representation may be regarded as an effort by the elected or other public officials "to build more inclusive,

deliberative and engaged relationships with the public" (Orr and McAteer, 2004: 133). Heywood (2002: 224) is of the opinion that "as a political principle, representation is a relationship through which an individual or group stands for, or acts on behalf of a larger group of people." Representation is said to have occurred if there is evidence of local consultation as well as engagement in decision-making and local policy formulation promoted by the elected councillors. Although some problems surrounding the issue of representation have been resolved in modern democracies and most developing countries through the principle of universal suffrage, this approach is too simplistic. Heywood (2002) posits that by equating representation with elections and voting would be tantamount to ignoring more difficult questions about how one person can be said to represent another, and what it is that he or she would be representing.

III. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

There is an extensive literature that offers many different definitions of political representation. Within this literature, authors are in agreement that political representation consists of the articulation and presentation of political agendas of given groups by various actors in decision-making arenas and key social forums in democratic societies (Penock and Chapman, 1968). A range of actors and agencies can speak for various interests and audiences such as political parties, members of parliament, social movements and groups, as well as specific organisations promoting particular interests such as national machineries for the advancement of women. Cotta (2007) defines political representation as an institutionalised system of political responsibility realised through the free electoral designation of certain fundamental political organisms.

Pitkin (1967) provides perhaps one of the most straightforward definitions of political representation. To represent is simply to "make present again." On this definition, political representation is the activity of making citizens' voices, opinions and perspectives "present" in the public policy making processes. Political representation occurs when political actors speak, advocate, symbolise, and act on behalf of others in the political arena. In other words, political representation is a form of political assistance. This seemingly straightforward definition, however, is not adequate as it stands. It leaves the concept of political representation underspecified. The concept of political representation has multiple and competing dimensions. The common understanding of the definition is one that contains different and conflicting conceptions of how political representatives should represent and hold representatives to standards that are mutually incompatible. In leaving these definitions

underspecified, it fails to capture the paradoxical character of the concept.

Despite the intrinsic, multidimensional and complex nature of the concept of political representation which does not provide for an ultimate and exhaustive definition, it is nonetheless true that most of the theoretical discussions carried out among social scientists has tended to depict the concept primarily in terms of its structural key elements that is as a relationship between a principal (representative) and an agent (represented), concerning an object (interests and opinions among other issues) and taking place in a particular setting (political context) (Cotta, 2002).

IV. THEORIES OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Pitkin (1967) offers one of the most comprehensive discussions on the concept of political representation in her book, *The Concept of Representation*. This classic discussion is one of the most influential and often cited works in the literature on political representation. She maintains that in order to understand the concept of political representation, one must consider the different ways in which the term is used. Each of these different uses of the term provides a different view of the concept. Pitkin compares the concept of representation to “a rather complicated, convoluted, three-dimensional structure in the middle of a dark enclosure.” She further notes that political theorists provide “flash-bulb photographs of the structure taken from different angles” (Pitkin, 1967: 10). Drawing from this metaphor, she argues that one must know the context in which the concept of representation is placed in order to determine its meaning. The views of representation can expand or unduly constrain the understanding of representation depending on the ways in which the term is used in contemporary politics.

Pitkin identifies at least four different dimensions of representation which are formalistic, symbolic, descriptive and substantive representation. Each view provides a different approach of examining representation. While there are important differences among the four, she maintains that the different dimensions are properly conceived as integral parts of a coherent whole. Unfortunately, according to Pitkin, political theorists have tended to overlook this conceptual unity and erroneously treating the different dimensions of representation as separate concepts. The different views of representation can also provide different standards for assessing representatives. Disagreements about what representatives ought to be doing are aggravated by the fact that people adopt the wrong view of representation or misapply the standards of representation. Despite the frequency and approval with which Pitkin’s theories are cited, most empirical work on representation ignores her integrated conception. Some scholars such as Phillips (1995) typically choose one or two aspects of representation while ignoring others that are not of interest or for which data are lacking. This not only contributes to “a blind man’s understanding of the elephant” – the equivalent of Pitkin’s above metaphor – but also fails to provide an adequate empirical test of the integrated structure of Pitkin’s theory.

4.1 Formalistic Representation

Formalistic representation refers to the institutional arrangements (rules and regulations) that precede and initiate representation. Interest groups are of paramount importance and

advocate various versions of qualified deliberative democratic models (Young, 1999; Mansbridge, 1999; and Squires, 2000). This theoretical work tends to emphasise women decision-makers’ ability to speak for other women as a matter of shared gendered identity, even when they concede that there are differences among women. These theorists envision a shared overarching identity among women, with sub-groups such as racial groups among women that also require presence and voices in decision-making bodies. In this framework, individual women from varied backgrounds can contribute different ideas and perspectives to debate and to decision-making. Writing specifically about women, these theorists often emphasise that women’s interests are not merely a matter of objective circumstances or material conditions. The formalistic approach has two variants which are authorisation and accountability.

(a) Authorisation: The authorisation variant refers to the means by which representatives obtain their status or position. The main issues of concern within this view are the process by which a representative gains power – for example through elections – and the ways in which a representative can enforce his or her decisions. In this view there is no standard for assessing how well a representative behaves. One can merely assess whether a representative legitimately holds his or her decisions.

(b) Accountability: The accountability variant refers to the ability of constituent members to sanction their representatives, *ex post* for failing to act in accordance with their wishes or desires, for example voting an elected official out of office or the responsiveness of the representative to the constituents. It questions whether there are sanctioning mechanisms available to constituents and also whether the representative responds towards his or her constituency preferences. There are no standards for assessing how well a representative behaves. One can merely determine whether a representative can be sanctioned or has been responsive. While the existence of free and fair elections are not a necessary condition for formal representation, in practice elections are considered critical and underlie most attempts to operationalise this dimension.

Theoretical discussions of political representation have focused mainly on the formal procedures of authorisation and accountability within nation-states. However, such a focus is no longer satisfactory due to international and domestic political transformations (Warren and Castiglione, 2004). International, transnational and non-governmental actors play an important role in advancing public policies on behalf of democratic citizens. That is they act as representatives for those citizens. Such actors “speak for”, “act for” and can even “stand for” individuals within a nation-state. It is no longer desirable to limit one’s understanding of political representation to elected officials within a nation-state. In most cases such officials do not necessarily possess “the capacity to act”, which is most often used to identify who is acting as a representative.

4.2 Symbolic Representation

Symbolic representation refers to the extent that representatives “stand for” the represented with an emphasis on symbols or symbolisation. Pitkin provides the example of a flag as a symbol representing a nation. What matters is not the symbol itself, but “its power to evoke feelings or attitudes”

(1967: 97). Symbolic representation is concerned not with who the representatives are or what they do, but how they are perceived and evaluated by those they represent. Wahlke (1971) embraces symbolic representation as the most realistic standard given the constraints he perceives on policy responsiveness. Most scholars disagree in their definitions of symbolic representation. Some scholars treat it as synonymous with descriptive representation, which is “standing for” something that is not present (Pitkin, 1967; Carroll, 2001; Barker, 2006). Two other definitions however, are more common. The first views symbolic representation in terms of what women’s presence reveals about the legitimacy of the legislature as a whole (Reingold, 2000; Childs, 2004; Lawless, 2004), and that both men and women respond positively to increased numbers of women in a decision-making body. The second frames it in relation to the effects that women’s presence has on the perceptions of voters in terms of the nature of politics as a “male” domain (Sapiro, 1981; Childs, 2004). Viewed more broadly, these two definitions refer to the cultural meanings and ramifications that stem from the representative process related to the public views regarding women in politics and the perceived efficacy of female voters due to the absence or presence of elected officials who are female.

Viewed as a whole, current studies of representation offer mixed results with regard to the symbolic role or importance of female representatives. For example, some scholars found that men and women respondents believe that a government is more democratic when more women are present. In contrast, others report that while women represented by women were generally more positive about their representatives, it did not lead them to be more positive about politics in general (Lawless, 2004). Similarly, many authors document shifts in the attitudes of constituents following the election of more women into political office. They argue that the inclusion of women sends important signals to female citizens that politics is a domain open to all, leading many women to become more politically involved, or at least, to feel more politically efficacious (Childs, 2004). Others find however, that the increased presence of women appears to have little or no impact on the political engagement of women constituency.

The symbolic importance attributed to women in positions of political leadership is routinely invoked as an explanation for the need to elect more women, regardless of whether men can represent women’s substantive interests. This logic suggests that the inclusion of women at the elite level confers some sort of benefit to constituencies beyond policy implications. While some researches investigate the ways in which being a woman affects the representative’s experience, there is a lack of empirical evidence exploring how these effects might play out for constituencies (Lawless, 2004). Symbolic representation has been shown to affect a number of important political attitudes and behaviours among minority populations. Feelings of political efficacy, interest in politics, confidence in government, and evaluations of government officials have all been shown to be higher under conditions of symbolic representation (Abramson, 1972). The conditions of symbolic representation have been shown to alleviate one of the most persistent attitudinal gaps in politics. That is the gap between the political trust levels among the representatives and minority citizens. The ‘trust gap’ has

been shown to diminish significantly when minority groups are descriptively represented (Hero and Tolbert, 1995).

4.3 Descriptive Representation

Descriptive representation refers to the manner in which an individual representative “stand for” the represented by virtue of sharing similar characteristics with the represented such as race, sex, age, class, occupation, gender, ethnicity or geographical area. Typically, this should mirror the composition of the represented in important respects. Women representing women can be seen as a form of direct participation in decision-making bodies. Varieties include *functional representation*, which focuses on the occupational correspondence between representatives and the represented and *social representation*, which concerns social characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Norris, 1993). The question of women achieving descriptive representation therefore is simply about counting the number of women in political office and not examining what women representatives are actually saying. Descriptive representation is a political resource along which social cleavages are stratified.

To reduce representational inequality, many governments, political leaders, social justice advocates, and researchers champion the concept of descriptive representation. Proponents of descriptive representation assert that those elected officials who share similar demographic and experiential characteristics of their constituencies have sufficient empathy to evaluate and construct representative policy (Young, 1990; Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). In this sense, political structures encourage representation by empathetic demographic insiders. In practice, descriptive representation attempts to ameliorate inequitable social conditions by providing historically marginalised groups such as women the opportunities to become political elites. In so doing, proponents assert that descriptive representation safeguards the interests of the disadvantaged.

Descriptive representation is more of a concept than a theory, designed to stimulate praxis rather than merely academic research. Addressing inequitable political representation, theoretical debates focus on the tenability and ‘philosophy and ethics’ of descriptive representation as a governance solution, especially in light of the current state of disadvantaged group representation (Mansbridge, 1999). It therefore refers to both an ideal and a reality – the ideal being the governance solution and the reality the degree to which legislative bodies represent the demographics and experiences of the citizenry. Descriptive representation has been criticised on various grounds (Mansbridge, 1999). Most common is that descriptive representation would not lead to substantive representation, such that demographic qualities bear little to or no relationship to deliberative capabilities. Others argue that by over-emphasising group differences through the claim of supra-representational abilities, descriptive representation erodes the bonds among legislators whose job is to produce policies for all rather than a demographic subset of their constituency (Phillips, 1995).

Many other complaints focus on the difficulties of implementing descriptive representation. Choosing which groups from a multiplicity of genders, races, ethnicities, religions, age groups, physical handicaps and social classes are worthy of descriptive representation. This could be so complex that random or arbitrary assignment to legislative bodies is the only

reasonable way. Some fear that implementation of this form of representation would lead to a selection of less qualified representatives drawn from, among other places, the bottom of the talent pool. Akin to this is the argument that descriptive representatives vary as much within their group (Kymlicka, 2002). Counter to these criticisms, most proponents assert that descriptive representation is not a call for an exact microcosm of the citizenry such that “children represent children, lunatics represent lunatics” (Dovi, 2002). Instead, the goal is that substantive representation should make the legislative body demographically closer to the citizenry specific situation in that selection of groups in need of representation should be made after careful, rational deliberation and under particular conditions (Mansbridge, 1999; Dovi, 2002).

Perhaps the most convincing counter to these criticisms, and to demonstrate the importance of studying the subject is by assessing whether the demographics of the representative make a measurable difference in the representation of the disadvantaged (Mansbridge, 2004). Any impact of descriptive representation can be felt in two ways. That is raising the constituency political engagement and/or descriptive representative’s impact on legislative processes. While some find that descriptive representation make little difference in either of these areas, others show that descriptive representatives do have a measurable impact (Swain, 1993; Lawless, 2004). In terms of raising constituency political engagement, for example whites and blacks are more likely to contact representatives of the same race and women are more likely to become politically active in decision-making bodies with competitive and visible women candidates (Atkinson, 2002). Some authors explain this phenomenon in terms of legitimacy, in that “constituencies are more likely to identify with the legislature and to defer to its decisions to the extent that they perceive a significant percentage of ‘people like themselves’ in the legislature” (Mishler and Rose, 1997).

4.4 Substantive Representation

Substantive representation is defined as “acting in the interests of the represented in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin, 1967: 209). Although Eulau and Karps (1977) identify a variety of ways that representatives may act on behalf of the represented, the most common interpretation is that substantive representation refers to policy responsiveness or the extent to which representatives enact laws and implement policies that are responsive to the needs or demands of citizens. While Pitkin considers substantive representation to be the most important dimension of representation and the heart of the representational nexus, others question its priority. For example (Wahlke, 1971), observes that policy responsiveness receives too much emphasis given the evidence that citizens possess few coherent policy beliefs and that representatives are poorly informed about the policy preferences of citizens except in exceptional cases. Nevertheless, policy responsiveness continues to be considered the central aspect of representation by numerous scholars. A variety of them have attempted to measure policy responsiveness both to overall public interests and to race- and gender-based interests (Bullock, 1995; Reingold, 2000).

Most studies making use of the term ‘women’s substantive representation’ take as their point of departure in Pitkin’s concept

of representing as an ‘act for’ and ‘in the interest of’ (Pitkin, 1967:111). By substantive representation, it is understood that ‘the representative, independent of physical or other characteristics, serves the interests of the community that he or she represents’ (Diaz, 2005: 14). Women’s substantive representation is embedded in feminist theory about women’s underrepresentation, male dominance and male prerogatives in defining what is political. The concept was born out of feminist scholarship dealing with how to change male dominance. This also implies that a term like “men’s substantive representation”, in contrast is meaningless. The concept of women’s substantive representation only makes sense when embedded in feminist theory about changing male dominance. With the global focus on increasing women’s political representation, for example, through the use of gender quotas, the subject of women’s substantive representation has become even more salient.

Arguments for women’s political presence based on substantive representation, rather than on symbolic or formalistic representation, claim that elected women in decision-making bodies are more likely to act for women than men. But this claim, especially when crudely portrayed, seems to be both reductive and essentialist in that it assumes that the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation is straightforward. The difficulty of conceptualising the substantive representation of women has been a central feature of feminist conceptions of representation in the 1990s. In her book, *The Politics of Presence*, Phillips (1995) acknowledges that there is no “empirical or theoretical plausibility” to the idea that women share experiences or that women’s shared experiences translate into shared beliefs or goals. Neither does she consider it likely that women will organise themselves into a group with group opinions and goals that can be represented. At the same time, she further maintains that women have particular concerns that derive from their gendered experiences and that these would be inadequately addressed in political forums dominated by men. Women should therefore be present in politics to ensure that their concerns are included especially if they are “varied, unstable and in the process of formation” (Phillips, 1998: 233-5). She continues by arguing that women representatives are likely, if not guaranteed, to act for women even after they have turned away from a strong sense of women’s politics of presence in favour of women’s gender parity through the quota system (Phillips, 1995). The above arguments for women’s presence, even when premised on gender rather than sex, still need to contend with the theoretical problems thrown up by contemporary feminist understandings of women’s differences. To do otherwise, would be to risk assuming ‘direct and uncomplicated links between sex and gender’ (Squires, 1999; Reingold, 2000 and Sawer, 2002). Even if it is accepted that women’s group identity is “real”, women’s identities are multiple, differentiated in terms of class, ethnicity and sexuality. Mansbridge (1999) holds on to the belief that women representatives can act for women notwithstanding their differences. She argues in a similar way to Phillips (1995), that descriptive representation denotes “shared experiences” (gender) and “not only visible characteristics” (sex) and aims to sidestep the essentialist trap (Mansbridge, 1999: 637). Moreover, her understanding of women’s “shared experiences” enables women’s representatives to act for other women because while they may not have shared the same particular experiences, they

share “the outward signs” of having lived through the same experiences. This gives women representatives “communicative and informational advantages” and enables them to “forge bonds of trust” with the women they represent based on their gendered experiences (Mansbridge, 1999: 641).

What is needed for women’s substantive representation to occur is not the presence of just any women because some of them may not see themselves as part of, or with obligations to the group. What is needed is the presence of “preferable descriptive representatives” (Dovi, 2002: 729-34). Preferably women representatives experience a sense of belonging to, and have strong mutual relationships, with women. They share aims with women that is they would want to see women’s “social, economic and political status improved” and also experience a “reciprocated sense of having their fate linked with women” (Dovi, 2002: 736). Sensitive to essentialist and difference arguments, Dovi (2002) also further argues that preferable women representatives also recognise differences that women may have “different conceptions of what is necessary” to achieve women’s aims. She also argues that there are limits to this in that, a woman representative who does not share either “policy preferences” or “values” with women could not be said to share their aims (Dovi, 2002: 737).

Phillips (1995), in her book *Politics of Presence*, indicates that descriptive and substantive representation cannot be separated because women have “groupness.” She contrasts two distinct modes of politics: a “politics of ideas” and a “politics of presence.” Although these two modes are juxtaposed against one another, both are necessary, and overlap. The first mode corresponds to the more formalistic models of representation, where what decision-makers do is aggregate and transmits constituents’ interests. By contrast, the second mode emphasises identity. It is not just interests that are transmitted by a representative, but there is also a broader symbolism of the group that has those interests, because the presence of a group member encourages recognition and respect for that group. Phillips ultimately endorses a mix of her two modes of politics, noting that “it is in the relationship between ideas and presence that we can best hope to find a fairer system of representation, not in a false opposition between one and the other” (1995:25). She emphasises that ideas (interests) cannot be fully separated from people who share those interests.

Williams (1998) and Mansbridge (1999) similarly argue for a link between women’s descriptive and substantive representation on the basis of two broad categories of argument. Firstly, they suggest that women (or other minorities) can be expected to legislate and behave in ways different from non-minority legislators, either by approaching problems differently or by invoking their personal experiences to motivate distinct kinds of legislation that would otherwise be absent or ignored. Secondly, they argue that historically marginalised groups must be descriptively included in political representative bodies in order to build trust and communication between those groups and their governments. Dovi (2002) refines Williams (1998) and Mansbridge (1999) claims to focus on the requirements that descriptive representatives have ‘strong *mutual* relationships with *dispossessed* subgroups’ for example by using their membership in historically disadvantaged groups to promote empowering social networks and greater communication.

Although both substantive and symbolic representation might influence women’s societal status and attitudes about government and politics, empirical studies tend to focus almost exclusively on the manner in which women in positions of political power affect the kinds of issues brought to the forefront of the legislative agenda, the manner in which these issues are discussed and debated, and the policy outcomes that ensue as a result of that discussion. Fox (1997) and Reingold (2000) suggest that women’s presence incorporates new values and ideas into the political system, leaving men to respond to women’s candidacies and agendas. In an attempt to appeal to women voters, men often change the dynamics of their own campaigns, as well as their legislative priorities and styles. In terms of substantive representation, therefore, women’s groups and feminists are often satisfied with male candidates and legislators (Mezey, 1994). This is not to suggest, however, that there are no benefits that only women can bring to their constituents. Scholars who emphasise substantive representation also mention the “role model” or “symbolic” benefits women political elites bring to their constituents, benefits that cannot be conferred by men, regardless of their policy perspectives.

Burrell (1996: 151) notes: “Women in public office stand as symbols for other women, both enhancing their identification with the system and their ability to have influence within it. This subjective sense of being involved and heard for women, in general, alone makes the election of women to public office important because, for so many years, they were excluded from power.” Despite references to the heightened legitimacy that women in politics bring to the political process, and the manner in which they affect constituents’ political attitudes and behaviour, little empirical evidence exists regarding actual politically-related benefits of symbolic representation (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001). Do women who are represented by women feel better about government officials? If so, do these attitudes transcend the dyadic representational experience and affect women constituents’ feelings about the political system in general? Are women who are represented by women more likely to participate politically? If women in politics serve as symbols and provide cues pertaining to the political system’s legitimacy, there should be quantifiable differences between women represented by women and women represented by men.

V. REPRESENTATION AS MEDIATION

Williams (1998: 8) identifies three different dimensions of political life that representatives must “mediate.” These are the dynamics of legislative decision-making, the nature of legislator-constituency relations, and the basis for aggregating citizens into representable constituencies. She explains each aspect by adding a corresponding theme (voice, trust, and memory) and by drawing on the experiences of marginalised groups in the United States of America. For example drawing on the experiences of American women trying to gain equal citizenship, Williams argues that historically disadvantaged groups need a “voice” in legislative decision-making bodies. The “heavily deliberative” quality of legislative institutions requires the presence of individuals who have direct access to historically excluded perspectives.

In addition, Williams (1998) explains how representatives need to mediate the representative-constituency relationship in order to build 'trust'. For her, trust is the cornerstone for democratic accountability. Relying on the experiences of African-Americans, she shows the consistent patterns of betrayal of African-Americans by privileged white citizens that give them good reason for distrusting white representatives and the institutions themselves. The relationships of distrusts can be "at least partially mended if the disadvantaged group is represented by its own members" (1998: 14). Finally, representation involves mediating how groups are defined. The boundaries of groups are partially established by past experiences – what she calls "memory." Having certain shared patterns of marginalisation justifies certain institutional mechanisms to guarantee presence. Williams expands accounts of political representation beyond the question of institutional design and thus, in effect challenges those who understand representation as simply a matter of formal procedures of authorisation and accountability.

5.1 Representation as Advocacy

Another recent way of re-envisioning representation was offered by Urbinati (2000). She argues for understanding representation as advocacy. For her, the point of representation should not be the aggregation of interests, but the preservation of disagreements necessary for preserving liberty. She identifies two main features of advocacy: the representative's passionate link to the constituent's cause and their relative autonomy of judgment. She goes on to emphasise the importance of the former for motivating representatives to deliberate with each other and their constituency. For Urbinati, the benefit of conceptualising representation as advocacy is that it improves the understanding of deliberative democracy. In particular it avoids a common mistake made by many contemporary deliberative democrats who focus on the formal procedures of deliberation at the expense of examining the sources of inequality within civil society such as the family.

The benefit of Urbinati's understanding of representation is that it emphasises the importance of the domain of opinion and consent formation. In particular this contemporary addition to theoretical literature poses an agonistic conception of representation, one that emphasises the importance of disagreements and rhetoric to the procedures, practices, and ethos of democracy. Her account expands the scope of theoretical discussions of representation away from formal procedures of authorisation to the deliberative and expressive dimensions of representative institutions. In this way, those who recommend adopting an understanding of representation as advocacy provides a theoretical tool to those who wish to explain how non-state actors 'represent others' (Urbinati, 2000).

Squires (1999) argue that elected representatives represent beliefs, constituencies, interests, perspectives and identities. Marsh and Norris (1997), describe these as ideological, geographic, functional and social representation respectively. Representation of beliefs suggests a conception of representation as ideological, reflected in membership of political parties and support for contrasting political platforms through electoral campaigns. Marsh and Norris (1997: 154) also refer to this as "representation from above." They contrast this with geographical representation of constituencies, where

representatives 'act in ways consistent with the opinions of their citizens' with "low levels of party discipline and minimal ideological manifestos", which they describe as "representation from below" (Norris, 1997: 156). Political scholars and feminist theorists have also given extensive attention to the question of whether or not women's political presence in decision-making bodies is necessary for advancing policies favourable to women (Mansbridge, 1999). Recent research and theorising have sought to identify the conditions under which women-friendly policies might be advanced and the explanatory links between women's presence in decision-making bodies and public policy outcomes. A key potential explanatory model has been partially constructed on the concept of the 'critical mass.'

If, as Mansbridge (1999) asserts, women's descriptive representation improves women's substantive representation, a number of questions have to be asked. Do increasing numbers of women in decision-making bodies result in more and better public policies for women? Is there a critical mass of elected women that once achieved accelerates their policymaking opportunities? If so what mechanisms explain such a transformation? Should women activists target a specific critical mass as a political strategy for advancing favourable policies? These questions can only be answered by taking a critical perspective on the concept of the critical mass theory. Despite their relatively low presence as elected representatives in most governments, this research sought to demonstrate that once elected, women do make a difference either in perspectives, priorities or communication styles. Nevertheless, the significance of that difference is contested and the influence of other factors will be highlighted.

VI. CRITIQUE OF PITKIN'S CONCEPTIONS OF REPRESENTATION

Regarding Pitkin's (1967: 42) understanding of "political representation dictates the need for objective criteria for identifying who counts as constituents as well as the objective criteria for identifying the objective interests of constituents", it can be argued that while Pitkin's analysis of political representation is certainly helpful in identifying different approaches to representing women; the extent to which women are a heterogeneous group and the extent to which the concept of gender can expand or constrict, Pitkin's concept of representation is less helpful for determining whether women are being properly represented in democracies (Dovi, 2006: 7).

In order to understand the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation, it may be helpful to introduce the concept of relational representation. This concept engages with the processes by which representation occurs (Williams, 1998). This suggestion is not entirely new. Reflecting on the usefulness of the concept of critical mass, Childs and Krook (2005: 20) stated "The likelihood that female representatives act for women depends on a range of different factors. Scholars of gender and politics would do better to investigate not "when" women make a difference but "how" the substantive representation of women occurs." This concept focuses on 'how' the process of representation takes place, paying particular attention to the quality of communication between representatives and their constituency. Williams recommended re-envisioning the activity

of representation in the light of the experiences of the historically disadvantaged groups.

VII. PERSPECTIVES OF REPRESENTATION

Representation as revealed by the various models and theories is complex, ambiguous and sometimes seemingly contradictory. It is multi-layered and contextual, defying dichotomous classification and exposing the limitations of theories based on Western ideas and an assumption of politics as a national practice (Irwin, 2009).

7.1 Representation of Communities

In a study carried out by Irwin (2009) in five countries, women leaders in local government perceive themselves as representing their communities regardless of gender although they expressed this in different ways. This suggests an orthodox conception of constituency representation or representation from below as women leaders are elected by voters within specific geographic constituencies. However, while local governments tend to project a view of a single community within a local government area, there is no single community but a diverse range of sub-communities comprised of different social and functional groups with different and competing interests, needs and priorities. The question thus arises as to how representatives might represent the diverse communities within their constituencies (Beck, 2001).

7.2 Representation of Interests

Representation of interests generates a conception of functional representation, where representatives are “members of, and act as spokespeople for interest groups and social movements whose membership is distinct from those of political parties and constituency dwellers” (Squires, 1999: 203). These conceptions create an image of representation as detached and almost impersonal, with representatives involved in the political processes of developing and implementing policies and programmes and making objective decisions in the best interests of those they represent. They reflect an orthodox and predominantly liberal ideology which assumes that gender and other factors such as race, colour, and class are, or should be, irrelevant, thus ignoring the question of who the representatives are.

The multidimensional concept of representation can be extended into a language of interests. Jonasdottir (1985) points out that the term ‘interest’ comes from the Latin expression *interesse*, meaning “to be among.” This indicates an understanding of representation, not as giving voice to fixed and well-defined interests or identities, but as a demand to be included in a dynamic process and interaction between the represented and the representatives. Drawing upon the work of Jonasdottir (1985), the researcher divides the concept of interests into two connected aspects: form and content. The form aspect refers to the demand for participation in society’s public affairs and spaces, while the content aspect deals with the substantive values emerging from political activity. Broadening the definition of interests in this way would allow the researcher to go beyond the narrowly understood concept of “women’s interests”, which tend to confine women to issues of reproduction, marriage and sexuality. Although the above three issues have validity and relevance to nearly all rural women in Zimbabwe, such a limited sense of

interests is problematic for at least three reasons. First, it constructs women as generic beings and reduces them to biological traits, thereby denying the important roles that cultural context, religion, socio-economic status and education play in determining interests. These narrow understandings deny the diversity and complexity of women. Secondly, by limiting women to issues of reproduction, marriage and sexuality, women are not viewed as being unable to put other ‘non-gendered’ issues on the political agenda, such as employment, land and housing, nor are rural women offered space to articulate their larger visions of development. Thirdly, by calling these women’s interests, it deepens the already large chasm between men and women. The researcher would also be failing to see the role that men play in these areas and therefore prevent constructive action by men (Jonasdottir, 1985).

The notion of interests in many ways lies at the heart of feminist debate on representation. Young (2000), challenges orthodox conceptions of representing interests, including those of women, as she claims that interests are “self-referring”, frequently conflict and are formed by a commitment to beliefs and values which are contestable and varied. For her, representatives should not be treated as a substitute for the represented. She recommends reconceptualising representation as a “differentiated relationship” (Young, 2000: 125). There are two main benefits of Young’s understanding of representation. Firstly, her understanding of representation encourages the recognition of the diversity of those being represented. Secondly, her analysis of representation emphasises the importance of recognising how representative institutions include as well as they exclude. Democratic citizens need to remain vigilant about the ways in which providing representation for some groups comes at the expense of excluding others.

The above situation raises questions about whose interests are likely to be represented in systems that are never value-free. Furthermore, Phillips (1998) argues that interests are fluid and always in the process of forming and re-forming, and thus not necessarily easy to identify and address. From a slightly different perspective, Sapiro (1998) affirms Phillips’s (1998) point about the difficulty of identifying interests in political practice by pointing out that in regard to women’s interests, laws and policies need not have ‘women’ in the title or text. What may not seem to be in the interest of women at first glance is seen to be with a deeper and more informed reading of the issue.

From the existing literature we are made to understand that women are often integrated in the legislatures on the account of representing women interests. Women are presumed to be specialists in their own interests based on their social experiences and knowledge. It is theorised that women have special needs and interests they would like to be represented including such issues as gender, social relations and children, welfare, community health services, and production and environment. Anne Phillips observes that male and female politicians often reveal distinctly gendered political interests with women expressing concerns about education, welfare, and environment while men claim affinity to economy, industry, energy and foreign affairs (Phillips 1996:112). We earlier noted similar arguments of scholars like Raaum (1995) related to gender division of labour suggesting distinct knowledge and experiences of women in political representation. Virginia Sapiro, in

agreement with the above assertions, regards “women issues” as “public concerns that impinge primarily on the private (especially domestic) sphere of social life and particularly those values associated with children and nurturance” (Sapiro 1981: 703). Such theoretical views suggest that women representatives are considered to be experienced and supportive to issues that affect women. In respect to this, Anne Phillips observes;

“Women have distinct interests in relation to child bearing . . . and as society is currently constituted they also have particular interests arising from their exposure to sexual harassment and violence, their unequal position in the division of paid and unpaid labour, and their exclusion from most arenas of economic or political power” (Phillips, 1995: 67).

Women interests may originate from moral development and socialisation experiences; hormonal and physiological differences that dictate on some behaviour and abilities; or like any politician may, they emerge from circumstances of environment including the legal system, and the existing political structures, social and economic status, and training and experiences (Prewitt 1970; Diamond and Hartsock 1981; Norris 1996). They may be similar in some instances, but these interests may also diverge due to a multiplicity of overlapping characteristics among women sub-groups, between women and men and between women and other social categories. It is unlikely therefore women will entirely act for their fellow women when elected into political legislatures on the account of their nature and experiences. It is on the other hand possible to have women representing interests beyond their own in response to wishes of the represented who may not necessarily be their fellow women.

7.3 Representation of Social Identities

In contrast to the above conceptions, representation of social identities generates a conception of social representation, where representatives represent social groups, such as those based on gender, race and sexuality, with which they share common experiences, common commitments and values (Squires, 1999). Such a conception draws attention to the composition of representative bodies. Pitkin (1967) argues that focusing on the composition of elected bodies is irrelevant and gives undue weight to orthodox conceptions of representation. She conceives representation as meaning that representatives act in the interests of the represented and in a manner responsive to them. Thus it is what the representatives’ do that is more important. This idea of representation means that the processes of determining policy and decision-making reflect the interests of the represented.

Phillips (1995) does not agree with Pitkin’s (1967) argument that ‘who’ the representatives are is irrelevant. However, she supports the argument that ‘what’ representatives do is important. Actions are important and Pitkin’s conception of representation fails to acknowledge the complexity of political representation as it ignores questions about who determines the interests of the represented and how, and to which of the many competing interests, the representatives should respond. She therefore fails to address crucial issues about structures of power and the way they shape political life. Pitkin (1967) also disregards questions of inequality as pointed out by Phillips (1995).

Guttman (2003: 9) defines identity groups as “politically significant associations of people who are identified with one or more shared social markers, such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability and sexual orientation.” These social markers serve both to unite people with one another and potentially galvanise them into action. They are politically significant because they shape people’s needs, interests and interactions with the state. He continues to argue that what distinguishes social markers of group identity is that they carry social expectations about how a person of that particular group is expected to think, act and even appear. When these people work together in an organised fashion in politics on the basis of their group identities, they are part of identity group politics. The question of how identity functions in the process of political representation alongside other influences persists. Many previous studies of the representation of women’s interests (women’s substantive representation) have focused on demonstrating that female representatives (the presence of whom constitutes women’s descriptive representation) are better advocates of women’s interests than male representatives, with the implication that it is group membership and shared interests and perspectives-identity that facilitates this outcome.

The argument that identity shapes individual legislators receives serious attention in political theory accounts of representation. However, empirical studies of legislative behaviour tend to focus on party affiliation, re-election incentives, constituency characteristics, majority (or government) party status, and other factors. These approaches to studying legislative behaviour often emphasise the role of interest groups. They do not address identity groups which do rely upon “mutual identification” (Guttman, 2003). Moreover, the principles of democratic liberalism tend to focus on individuals, embracing the idea that interest groups might aggregate individual interests but resisting the idea that identity groups might play a legitimate role in shaping policy outcomes.

Other scholars pointedly emphasise identity over interests in talking about women as a group. They argue that members of an identity group such as women share more than just a list of preferences in common, especially if a group has been historically marginalised from political participation. There is also need for respect and recognition, not merely for the space to make demands. Squires (2000) describes Young (1990), for example as advocating a representative process that includes as many voices and perspectives as possible. This process has the goal not of aggregating interests in an antagonistic way, but rather of actively recognising and respecting different perspectives. According to this argument, women’s interests are still rooted in their experiences. However, these interests are nonetheless more diffuse than a discrete list of demands could accommodate. An identity group has interests, as well as claims on respect and recognition and also an interest group does not necessarily share a sense of identity (Young, 2000).

Nearly all work on women’s substantive representation addresses individual features that facilitate and undermine cooperation among women in political office. While many political theorists aim to discern or define a shared perspective among women as a group in order to justify calls for their increased political presence, most empirical studies stress divisions among women – like race, class, age, and party

affiliation – that prevent the formulation of a collective legislative agenda (Dodson and Carrol, 1991). Some scholars argue that identity categories like ‘women’ are inherently exclusionary and serve to reify on difference while erasing and obscuring others (Mishler and Rose, 1997; Carrol, 2001). Furthermore, gender is not a pre-political and fixed identity that women bring with them when they enter politics, but one that is partially produced and reproduced within the context of particular decision-making bodies. Others question the elision of women’s bodies with feminist minds, on the grounds that being female may matter less than ‘gender consciousness’ does for achieving feminist outcomes (Reingold, 2000 and Childs, 2004). Interest and identity groups are closely related to one another, but several important distinctions require considering them separately. Guttman (2003) distinguishes between identity and interest groups by observing that in paradigmatic form, identity group politics is bound up with a sense of which people are, while interest group politics is bound with a sense of what people want. Guttman nonetheless emphasises that there is likely to be a close connection between these two kinds of groups by indicating that since mutual identification and shared membership in identity and collective interests are often mutually reinforcing in democratic politics. In terms of collective action based upon identity such as identity politics, other theorists point out that this action will only happen when group members recognise their common membership (De Beauvoir, 1949). The politics of identity thus involves recognition of and advocacy for identity groups, by group members. This is importantly different from actions surrounding interest groups, where the person or agent who advocates for specific interests is irrelevant.

7.4 Representation of needs

Diamond and Hartsock (1998: 196) seeks to replace the notion of interests with needs. They argue that the language of interests implicitly supports the “right of the strong to prevail in every contest” and fails to recognise that human beings have wants and needs, not necessarily interests, with women and men having many different wants and needs. They consider that representative institutions cannot include women’s needs and therefore reject a strategy of inclusion, advocating instead involvement within informal organisations and participatory, rather than representative processes. This assumes that representative institutions are incapable of change and also ignores the way in which some voices are louder and others are silenced, even in participatory processes. However, the rejection of interests reflects a one-sided picture.

The notion of interests is also about agency and the striving of individuals and groups in a community to ensure that their voices are present in decisions that shape their communities. Needs are about preferences, desires and wants that give strength and meaning to agency. Others have argued that need has a stronger moral basis than interest or opinions, it has paternalistic overtones and “lends itself more readily to decision by experts on behalf of the need group” (Phillips, 1995: 73). Rather than focusing on needs or interests, the researcher considers the two as different layers of social existence and that needs should be mediated by interests in a participatory democracy. Needs and interests are not dichotomous but different layers of social existence. Ideally, needs should be mediated by interests.

Nevertheless, both are problematic if seen as the only basis for representation, as neither addresses adequately the crucial question of “who decides?” which needs or interests should be represented.

7.5 Ideological and Functional Representation

Ideological and functional representation comprises what Phillips (1995: 142) describes as “the politics of ideas” where the focus is on what people represent, reflected in the articulation and representation of specific policies, with accountability being paramount through regular elections. Phillips (1995) refers to social representation as “the politics of presence” where the focus is on the representatives themselves, their identities and the degree of shared experience with the social groups they represent. Authenticity rather than accountability is privileged under this conception. She argues that conceptions of representation as based on either ideas or presence are not only dichotomous but also subordinate to one another and assume that ideas and interests are “relatively unproblematic.” Rather than seeing them separately, Phillips (1995) argues that representation contains elements of both, thus constituting a politics of ideas and presence that acknowledges the importance of both accountability and authenticity, rather than privileging one over the other.

Young (2000: 127) argues that representation is more properly understood if it is conceived in terms of “the character of the relationships between representatives and their constituency, with representatives being connected to constituency in determinate ways.” She maintains that there is always a separation between representatives and those they represent, so no person can “stand for and speak as a plurality of other persons.” Phillips (1998: 142) also argues that a presumption that one has to be a member of a social group “to understand or represent the group’s interests” is false, as is any assumption that all members of a group think the same. As she points out, representative systems sometimes fail to be sufficiently democratic not because the representatives fail to stand for the will of the constituency, but because they have lost connection with them. In modern mass democracies, it is indeed easy to sever relations between representatives and their constituency and difficult to maintain them (Young, 2000).

The above argument by Young is that representatives, through maintaining connection with constituencies, of necessity communicate with people with different perspectives and experiences from their own. This experience of difference, maintained over time, can lead to a transformation from “an initial self-regarding stance to a more objective appeal to justice” (Young, 2000: 108). In other words, sustained contact facilitates understanding, empathy and inclusive political decision-making. This conception emphasises the relational nature of representation and also offers the potential for change that transformational feminists see as essential.

7.6 Representation as a Maternal Role

In a research carried out in Philippines by Roces in 1998, women perceive their representation as a maternal role. She argues that many women have been able to “transform the traditional patriarchal characteristics of governance” in that country by treating their constituencies as part of their extended

families (Roces, 1998: 89). She further states that the success of women in local politics could well be attributed to their “application of particular gendered practices of cleanliness, orderliness, attention to detail, meticulous concern for the budget (all housekeeping skills) and extending a personal, motherly concern for their constituency” (Roces, 1998: 90).

The perception of representation as a maternal role would worry some Western feminists as reflecting what might be seen as essentialist maternal qualities. These feminists believe that using difference from men as the basis for an argument for women’s presence in politics leads to counter-arguments that “women are biologically unsuited to the bellicosity of political life” (Allwood and Wadia, 2004: 388). Nevertheless, the notion of care which includes the care women provide for their families, is gaining support in contemporary feminist political theory and debate. Tronto (1996) asserts that the idea of care as a political concept has been excluded from orthodox politics because it is seen as “above” politics, thus reflecting “gendered assumptions that profoundly shape our political views” (Tronto, 1996: 140). She argues that including care as a political concept would emphasise the importance of activities that have been seen traditionally as women’s duties. Doing so would have the potential to “change our sense of political goals and provide us with additional ways to think politically”, as it starts from a local concern and allows “a more open approach to the problem of otherness” (Tronto, 1996: 146). Indeed, the focus of all women on responding to needs can be perceived as one, although not the only aspect of care, elucidating Tronto’s argument. A perception of representation as a maternal role would lend qualified weight to an argument for increased representation of women in local government. However, the idea of care as a political concept is complex, requiring more than a focus on needs and women’s traditional duties. Such a focus could simply reflect women accepting the gendered structures within which they are embedded. As Porter (1999: 19) points out, “care may be merely dutiful rather than care in an ethically positive sense.”

VIII. CONCLUSION

The exploration of the “what” and “who” of representation has generated a conceptual distinction between substantive and descriptive representation, whereby substantive representation engages with ‘what’ is represented, while descriptive representation deals with “who” is representing “who” (Pitkin, 1967). Much of the recent literature on gender and political representation has attempted to explore the relationship between these two conceptions of representation, frequently making appeal to the notion of “critical mass” to suggest that higher levels of descriptive representation (more women in decision-making bodies) will generate better levels of substantive representation (greater decision-making attention to women’s issues). The focus on “who” represents ‘what’ has generated thoughtful studies about the complicated relationship between descriptive and substantive representation, but it has also tended to downplay the important issue of ‘how’ representation takes place (Childs, 2001; Mackay, 2004 and Krook, 2005).

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