

Interests, Issues, and Preferences: Women's Interests and Epiphenomena of Activism

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What do we mean by “women’s interests?” To consider *interests* requires us to consider the “real interests” of women, which “[rest] on empirically supportable and refutable hypotheses” and to examine women, “exercising choice under conditions of relative autonomy and, in particular, independently of [the constraining] power [of others] – e.g. through democratic participation” (Lukes 1984, 25, 33). Identification of interests is always a normative concern, resting on an appreciation of citizens’ autonomy and deliberation – or lack thereof.

In this essay, I distinguish among *interests*, which are fundamental to women’s life chances and their options for action; *issues*, which are strategic choices that emphasize components of interest as points of mobilization; and *preferences*, which position actors to select among discrete and limited alternatives. Interests are not part of an essentialist understanding of “women” as a group but, rather, a recognition of constant contexts of women’s life circumstances, and an appreciation of women’s opportunities for advancing their human capabilities and options for action and improving their life chances.

Power shapes the recognition of interests and the individual’s understanding of her interests. Identification of *interests* is grounded in deliberative democracy, where interests are articulated by participating citizens in a context of inclusion, where “all those [likely to be] affected by [decision making] are included in the process,” and where those participants would be affected by the resulting “decisions and policies [that would] significantly condition [their] options for action.” Inclusion in deliberative democracy must be “on equal terms,” free “from domination” in the deliberative process (Young 2000: 23; see also Dovi 2009). In contexts where women are not present, where the power dynamic silences women or requires them to refrain from full expression and articulation, differences in political power are evident and the identification of women’s interests is difficult at best, if not ultimately impossible.

Identifying interests requires that we take into account the *context in which interests are developed and expressed* – or *fail to develop or are repressed*. Nearly all political offices are held by men, in almost every

political system; and because the presence of women in public office enhances women's mass-level political participation and involvement (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001), the *absence* of women in public office functions to suppress women's political participation and the factors that inform and enrich it. That is, the dominance of men in political institutions constitutes a context of *political drag* on the identification of women's interests. Moreover, because women also differ along class lines, and because women are present in all racial and ethnic groups, we need to consider the context of race and class in terms of those who govern, and how exclusion of some women in governments might also depress women's autonomous discussion of interests outside formal institutions. Finally, as Vickers (2006, 22) writes, "We can make it a rule of methodology to assume that women will have *both* interests in common and interests in conflict unless there is persuasive evidence to the contrary."

One persistent, shared political interest among women emerges from women's self-organizing: access to political power to articulate women's interests.¹ Women in different time periods, in different nations and localities, have asserted their desire for political voice, even as "women as a group have remained excluded from public authority" (Diamond and Hartsock 1981, 719). As a result, women share an interest, *as women*, in access to political power and voice. This is a *meta-interest*: It constitutes an interest in and of itself; that is, women organizing autonomously and with full agency have repeatedly asserted such an interest. Moreover, this meta-interest is, in fact, an assertion of the necessity of access to the context within which articulation of women's interests becomes fully possible.²

Interests, Issues, and Preferences

Most of the scholarship on women's substantive representation turns not on women's interests but on women's *issues*. Issues are strategic choices that emphasize components of interest as a point of mobilization. Derived from interests, issues are more specific, immediate, and limited. For example, women have an interest in being free from violence, in not being subjected to beatings by husbands, fathers, mothers-in-law, and

1. To date, seven countries have not yet ratified CEDAW: Iran, Nauru, Palau, Sudan, Somalia, Tonga, and the United States.

2. The text of CEDAW is available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>.

vigilantes. How women organize around this interest is by *identifying an issue* derived from this interest, such as legislation criminalizing spousal assault. The selection of this particular issue, from among a range of possible issues, is a strategic choice made in the context of political opportunity and women's autonomous organizing and strategic deliberations. In addition, lack of political opportunity — in contexts of political threat, the oppression of women and their inability to organize, state hostility to women and women's interests — also means that absence of women's organizing around women's issues cannot serve as evidence of lack of interest.

Finally, *preferences* constitute a range of discrete and limited alternatives in relation to a specific issue. Once an issue is identified (and advanced and promoted), the range of possible positions on the issue will both diminish and consolidate. In regard to wife beating, preference alternatives will be constructed in regard to, for example, the role of the state, level of criminalization, establishment of safe houses for women and children, and funding. Activists, officials, voters, and others involved in the issue will focus debate on their preferences (including opposition). Debate on the issue is more likely to turn on possible preferences and less on the fundamental interest from which the issue has emerged (although this is an empirical question).

Taking Women's Interests Seriously: Epiphenomena of Activism

In studying working-class women's participation in mining strikes and other campaigns involving deep coal mining and miners' unions, I have faced the question of what constitutes *women's* interests in such contexts. I suggest that we can identify women's interests in political movements by focusing, among other things, on the epiphenomena of women's activism and on the ways in which mechanisms of their marginalization create pathologies of participation.

Miners' campaigns are distinctive in terms of identifying women's interests: 1) Women are structurally excluded from membership (insofar as union membership turns on employment in a unionized workplace, mining firms have not hired women, and miners' unions have been slow at best to insist on equal-opportunity employment); 2) women are hence excluded from formal leadership (because they are not union members); and 3) women are excluded from formal decision making (they cannot vote on contracts or participate in a vote to end a strike).

How, in such a context, can women's interests be identified? First, we need to identify locations where women have organized on their own, in "their own, autonomous organizations" (Vickers 2006, 24). Groups such as Women Against Pit Closures and the Coal Employment Project constitute potentially fruitful venues for identifying *some of* women's interests. Such organizations are most likely to meet the criteria of "relative autonomy and [independence of the constraining] power [of others] – e.g. through democratic participation" (Lukes 1984, 33).

Second, research will require deep interviewing and participant observation to identify actual interests – and *lack of recognition of interests* – and to distinguish among interests, issues, and preferences. For example, the desire to have one's husband return to work during the course of a mining strike is better understood as a preference; the desire to have safe, well-paid, fulfilling work for oneself, one's husband, and one's children in a healthy environment in a region whose economy is dominated by mining corporations is better understood as recognition of an interest – as is painful admission that fulfillment of this interest is unlikely. Understanding difference among interests, issues, and preferences requires extended discussion of the kind possible only in field research and multiple interview encounters in a context of mutual trust and respect.

Third, it is hard to identify interests in methodological terms, and it is difficult to assess interests directly, in contexts where women's autonomous organizing and deliberation are constrained. In such contexts, interests may be more likely to reveal themselves indirectly, as political and personal epiphenomena related to political conflict. Hence, we need to be attentive to those matters that appear inexplicable, peripheral, and/or trivial, which may constitute the epiphenomena that evidence women's interests in securing voice and political power.

One piece of evidence of women's fundamental interest as women in access to political power may be conflicts among them in the same political campaign. We often see political struggles among women within campaigns: for example, the battle among French feminists over the ownership of the phrase "*mouvement de libération des femmes*," or conflict among female activists in the Pittston Coal Strike over ownership of the title "Daughters of Mother Jones." Such internal struggles are rarely the focus of political science research, and I suspect they often go unreported by feminist scholars, and underanalyzed by those scholars who do report such conflict. These intracampaign struggles may, in fact, take place in contexts of exclusion where women

are nonetheless “exercising choice under conditions of relative autonomy and, in particular, independently of [the constraining] power [of others]” (Lukes 1984, 25).

From 1992 to 1995, I undertook interviews, participant observation, and general field research in Britain concerning the anti-pit closure campaign of the National Union of Mineworkers. Activism in Women against Pit Closures, nationally and even locally, produced substantial intragroup competition and conflict among activist women, specifically in terms of positioning for power within the campaign. This competition and hostility, and the accompanying charges and countercharges over strategy, leadership, and finances during the 1992–1994 anti-pit closure campaign, were the product of the strong desire among women for a voice *as women* and as respected political actors.

Similar conflicts occurred among women who were active during the Pittston Coal Strike. In my June 1995 interview with him, Cecil Roberts, vice president of the United Mine Workers of America and former field director of the Pittston strike, observed, in the context of a strike:

It’s hard, it’s really hard. For a period of time — well, all through the strike, you had one group of women who thought everybody ought to be on the picket line, being arrested, and another group of women that didn’t think that. And there was always that conflict there, and we had a really difficult time keeping both of those groups working together.

These brief and incomplete accounts of intragroup conflict among women in a political movement, where issues of class and gender intersect, indirectly evidence women’s interests in having voice and standing. Although they may appear as epiphenomena that require no explanation, such pathologies of participation signal a persistent interest of women: to achieve power and have a voice as women.

Conclusion

What women’s interests mean, and our interest in them, depends upon the questions we ask. An identification of women’s interests, the issues that derive from them as a result of women’s organizing, and the preferences that organized women identify and negotiate will be context specific. To the extent that a context of women’s political marginalization and gendered inequalities in law and political power persists, these constants will produce at least one universal women’s interest: their full inclusion in political power and governance. As women organize to advance

specific women's issues, even as these vary along intersections of class and race, we are likely to see epiphenomena of activism that suggest their continuing struggle for full political incorporation and voice. As women move from political exclusion to self-determination, they both express this fundamental interest and seek the means by which to advance all women's interests in extending their life chances, their options for action, and the full development of their human capabilities.

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An Endogenous Approach to Women's Interests: When Interests Are Interesting in and of Themselves

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As Sapiro (1981) pointed out many years ago, recognizing that women's interests are interesting is the vital first step in establishing the significance of women's political representation (or the lack thereof) — both in the "real" world and in the scholarly world. Indeed, the assumption that women's interests exist, that women have political interests that can be defined and measured, is central to much of the subsequent research and discussion of women in politics. It is central to our own research on the relationship between women's descriptive and