

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Parting with ‘interests of women’: how feminist scholarship on substantive representation could replace ‘women’s interests’ with ‘gender equality interests’

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The concept of ‘women’s interests’ has received a large amount of scholarly attention. In particular, the problematic assumption underpinning this concept – that women share interests – has been an object of much consideration. Yet, while scholarship on the substantive representation of women has today moved free of this assumption, three other assumptions have not been scrutinised to the same degree. These are: (1) that political interests are attached to social groups; (2) that women and men have different interests; and (3) that there are only two genders. This article argues that these three assumptions are problematic for feminist scholarship on substantive representation, which warrants replacing *the attached* ‘women’s interests’ with an alternative interest: *the unattached* ‘gender equality interests’. In addition, the article sets forth three distinct ways for future studies to operationalise the substantive representation of gender equality.

Key words substantive representation • identity • gender equality • men • social groups • non-binary

Key messages

- The term ‘women’s interests’ sets up gender as a binary and frames male actors as less important.
- Researchers may study how the interests of political groups are substantively represented without setting off from identity.
- We should think of political interests as unattached from social attributes.
- ‘Women’ should be replaced with ‘gender equality’ when studying substantive representation.

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Introduction

The extent to which elected representatives represent the interests of women has been a central area of focus for feminist political scientists over the last three decades. Today, an extensive and well-integrated literature has analysed the degree to which women's interests are substantively represented in parliaments,¹ including their representation in legislative committees (Grace and Sawyer, 2016; Harder, 2017), at party group meetings and in women's caucuses (Johnson and Josefsson, 2016), as well as in legislative bills (Thomas and Welch, 1991; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008) and parliamentary debates (Childs, 2002; Celis, 2008). Of all social groups, women have been the object of the bulk of scholarly interest within studies of substantive representation (see Erzeel and Rashkova, 2022), and the literature has been characterised as one 'of great innovation in its dealings with theories and practices of representation' (Severs, 2012: 169).

In particular, this innovation has been driven by the need to move past the idea embedded in the concept of 'women's interests' that women share interests (see Baldez, 2011). Today, the literature has navigated beyond this problematic assumption (Squires, 2008; Severs, 2010). Most notably, this has been done through ambitious research designs that emphasise intersectionality and the dynamic character of interest formation and representation (see, for example, Celis et al, 2014; Severs, 2010; Celis and Mügge, 2018). However, in this article, I argue that despite these noteworthy advances, the literature has accepted three other assumptions that are likewise logically embedded within the concept of women's interests. These are: (1) that political interests belong to social groups (or, in the words of Hanna Pitkin [1967: 190–208], 'that interests "are attached" to groups'); (2) that women and men have different interests; and (3) that there are only two genders.

The word 'interest' may sound odd to the reader. As I have illustrated elsewhere, in Pitkin's (1967) classic book, 'interest' is a dual concept, as an interest exists in one of two forms: either an interest is thought of as attached to a particular group of people (a so-called 'attached interest'), or it is pictured as existing in a form that is not attached to any particular group of people (a so-called 'unattached interest') (Harder, 2020). To stress the dual character of interests, I here define this concept as: 'that which furthers *either* the well-being of an individual *or* the promotion of an abstraction as these are defined in objective, subjective or constructivist terms'. The article shows how moving from thinking of interests as attached towards thinking of these as unattached (and thus moving beyond the first of the three assumptions examined in this article) will assist feminist scholarship on substantive representation and gender² to also move free of the problematic assumptions that women and men have different interests, and that there are only two genders.

Before discussing the research on women's interests, attached and unattached interests, and the problematic assumptions further, it is important to express admiration for the decades of feminist research that have generated essential knowledge of representation and gender. This research has provided insights and arguments for practical political action in societies all over the world, and made it possible to address fundamental problems of gender-based inequality. Yet, concepts that seem straightforward in one temporal area may appear highly problematic in another (Goertz and Mazur, 2008: 22). Accordingly, in a time where identifying outside of the logic of a gender binary is becoming increasingly difficult, we – as feminist scholars – need to critically assess the terms we use and the genders these terms prescribe. In addition, we need to consider the potential critical actors that our academic terms construct. In

particular, we should consider how society is served by research that constructs political actions for greater gender equality as something that is primarily the responsibility of representatives who identify as women. By raising these considerations, this article aims to spur a conversation on the performative effects of the variable 'women's interests', while exploring alternative variables.

In the next section, I start by reviewing the literature on the substantive representation of women, with a focus on the dependent variable in this scholarship (that is, 'women's interests') and the innovative ways through which scholars have moved beyond the assumption that women share interests. Then, in the third section, I explain the first of the three unexamined assumptions of women's interests: that *interests are attached* to social groups. I describe how this conceptualisation of interests makes it difficult to conceive of substantive representation and gender outside the matrix of identity – an ambition that I have recently raised elsewhere (see [Harder, 2020](#)) but that was already envisioned by Young (2000: 126) two decades ago. Based on my reinterpretation of Pitkin's concept of substantive representation (on Pitkin [1967], see [Harder, 2020](#)), I outline an alternative conceptualisation of interests, that is, the notion of *unattached interests*, which will enable scholars to conceive of substantive representation outside the logic of identity.

Having discussed the first of the unexplored assumption in the third section, I move to discuss the second and third of these assumptions in the fourth. In the fifth section, I construct the unattached 'gender equality interests' as a practical alternative to the attached 'women's interests', and I present three ways for future scholarship to operationalise gender equality interests. Finally, in the last section, I discuss the change and concerns that moving from the interest of women to those of gender equality will have for research on substantive representation and gender.

As I hope the article conveys, I do not see changing the dependent variable from 'interests of women' to 'gender equality interests' as 'an easy fix'. For example, this substitution does not enable sudden gender-neutral research or diminish the difficult methodological (and political) choices scholars must make. In turn, since each study's results hinge on a combination of its theoretical approach and methodology – along with its concepts – it is not given that changing how we conceptualise the dependent variable will bring changes in the findings of our research. Yet, as I argue later, such changes may influence the ways in which political actors conceive of genders and political action.

The literature on the substantive representation of women

In this section, I review the literature that studies how the interests of women are substantively represented in legislative bodies.³ The review focuses on the literature's dependent variable and on how this literature has managed to move free of the assumption that women share interests.

After having been initially concerned with exploring 'when' and 'how women act for women', today, scholars in the field now widely follow the research agenda set forth by Childs and Krook in 2009. This agenda leads to research such questions as: 'How does the substantive representation of women occur and what do specific actors do?' ([Childs and Krook, 2009](#): 126). At first glance, these research questions appear open-ended concerning the gender of potential critical actors because the term 'women' has been replaced with 'actors'. Indeed, researchers following a precedent

like the one set by Childs and Krook are less likely to assume that only female representatives act on women's behalf (see, for example, Palmieri, 2013; Celis et al, 2014; Celis and Erzeel, 2015; Höhmann, 2020). Nevertheless, despite the change in the description of potential critical actors, the dependent variable has remained unchanged. Due to this, the literature contains an unspoken, uncontested and almost unanimous agreement that scholars are to apply the notion of 'women's interests' (or dynamic subgroups of women's interests) as the dependent variable. Hence, today, still only a few studies have investigated alternative dependent variables, and those that have are primarily analyses of the way in which key concepts (such as 'gender equality') are constructed in parliamentary settings (see, for example, Kantola and Lombardo, 2017).

Despite the implicit agreement on treating 'women's interests' as the dependent variable, this concept is heavily contested. Most notably, the assumption that women share interests – which is linguistically embedded in the concept – has been a point of great feminist concern. In particular, political activists and scholars of political representation have pointed to the fact that different groups of women live different lives, gain different perspectives and do, indeed, tend to hold different political ideas and opinions (see, for example, hooks, 1981; Mohanty, 1991; Crosby, 1992; Grant, 1993; Butler, 1999; Young, 2000).

Several solutions have been developed to overcome this issue. In particular, such solutions address how *the group of women* is perceived and often apply an intersectional approach to questions of identity formation (Crenshaw, 1991; Young, 1994; Hancock, 2007; Smooth, 2011; Weldon, 2011; Celis and Mügge, 2018). In a similar vein, different ways to approach the *concept of interests* have been formulated (Jónasdóttir, 1988; Beckwith, 2011; Reingold and Swers, 2011). For example, inspired by the definition of Jónasdóttir (1988), which she develops, Beckwith distinguishes 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' (Beckwith, 2011: 424). In a different vein, Reingold and Swers encourage scholars to cease treating the concept of interests as an exogenous variable. Rather, they argue, studies should focus on how political actors construct women's interests within political arenas of power (Reingold and Swers, 2011). Additionally, scholars of representation have set forth new ways to understand the *process of substantive representation* itself (Mansbridge, 2003; Squires, 2008; Saward, 2010; Severs, 2010), which have been cleverly applied within research on women's substantive representation as a means to break free of the assumption of shared interests (see, for example, Celis et al, 2014; Celis and Mügge, 2018).

In sum, because of these innovations within its key concepts, scholarship on the substantive representation of women has broken free of the assumption that women are a *homogeneous* group with similar interests. Yet, the 'interests of women', or, alternatively, the interests of smaller, more- or less-dynamic subgroups of women, still constitute its key dependent variable (for a similar evaluation of this scholarship, see Squires, 2008: 189; Kantola and Lombardo, 2017: 328–30).

Moving on from the thoroughly examined assumption of women's shared interests, I now turn to discuss how conceptualising of the dependent variable in a novel way will assist feminist scholars to move free of the three unexplored assumptions. Initially, this involves moving from thinking of the dependent variable as something that is

owned and defined by a particular social group to something in which everybody may participate, thus moving free of the first of the unexplored assumptions. This can be done by following Pitkin's second way of substantive representation (see [Harder, 2020](#)).

From attached to unattached interests

In her 1967 book, Pitkin uses the terms 'interests', 'welfare' and 'wishes' as synonyms. An important accomplishment of Pitkin is that she argues that interests may be thought of as either 'attached' or 'unattached', and as something that may be defined through subjective or objective means ([Pitkin, 1967](#): 146, 210). Hence, in Pitkin's view, interests are defined as a spectrum, where 'the political wishes of the citizen as this person sees it' constitutes one pole and 'the objective values in a nation' constitutes the other. Therefore, building on Pitkin's ([1967](#)) book, an overall definition of interests needs to capture both extremes, which is why more particular definitions of interests are preferable ([Pitkin, 1967](#): 209–11).

In this section, I will unpack Pitkin's distinction between 'attached' and 'unattached' interests. These adjectives concern the role played by those who are substantively represented in the 'interests' in question.⁴ When political scientists conceive of interests in an attached form, formulating the content of such interests is based on the people who are represented in these interests: if representative A represents attached interest X, the content of X is defined in terms of the specific characteristics or attributes⁵ (Y) of the people who 'own' X. Accordingly, in this case, social attributes (Y) define the content of interest (X) (as illustrated in [Figure 1](#)). Think, for example, of workers' interests, women's interests, the interests of Danish sailors or the dynamic and context-dependent interests of a young, queer Muslim who has recently immigrated to a large city in Holland.

Within the scholarship that deals with how interests related to gender are substantively represented in parliaments, the conceptualisation of interests as 'attached' is, by far, the most common way to think of these. However, according to Pitkin, there is another way to think of interests that involves thinking of them as unattached to particular individuals: just as abstractions or ideals may exist unattached to specific individuals, so may interests. For example, Pitkin ([1967](#): 154–5) lists union solidarity, truth and peace as examples of such abstractions.

Pitkin's idea of unattached interests makes it possible to understand the content of political interests without starting with the attributes of the people who participate in furthering such interests (see [Harder, 2020](#): 7–10). [Figure 2](#) illustrates the relationship between the content of unattached interest X and the important attributes⁶ of the people who are represented in it, which may be Y but could also simultaneously be Z, V, W and so on.

One may ask where unattached interests come from. Here, the answer is that the birth of interests does not have to be all that different from the birth of attached interests: they could arise as a response to new evidence of injustice in society or as a sudden collective feeling that 'something needs to be done'; or they could arise based on a rational analysis of the way power, capital or social privileges are divided in society – a division that no doubt benefits some social groups while disadvantaging others. Nevertheless, in its unattached form, interests are not defined by either of these groups.

Figure 1: Attached interests

Content of an interest	=	Specific attribute(s) of those represented in the interest, (interest owners)
X	=	Y

Note: Content of an interest = specific attribute(s) of those represented in the interest (interest owners): X = Y.

Figure 2: Unattached interests

Content of interest	≠	Specific attribute(s) of those represented in the interest, (interest participants)
X	≠	Y, Z, V, W, etc.

Note: Content of interest ≠ specific attribute(s) of those represented in the interest (interest participants): X ≠ Y, Z, V, W and so on.

From groups with attributes to groups with attitudes

Besides the theoretical possibility of separating the content of unattached interests from the attributes of the people who are represented in these, another difference between unattached interests and their attached counterparts is that from a linguistic perspective, the people who are represented in an unattached interest only participate in this; they do not own it. The abstract nature of unattached interests, coupled with the absence of ownership, creates a much-needed distance between the content of an interest and the attributes of those who participate in it.

It is important to point out that the existence of a distance between the content of an interest and its participants does not indicate ‘that there are no people represented in these interests’. As highlighted by Pitkin, substantively acting for someone involves being potentially responsible for that person (Pitkin, 1967: 155; Severs, 2010). This type of potential responsibility also applies to the representation of unattached interests. In other words, for us to conceive of an act as substantive representation, it must reflect potential responsibility for specific people. When interests are thought of as unattached, the people for whom the representative is potentially responsible are those who participate in the unattached interests being represented. Like others, these people have attributes that gain socially constructed meanings in relation to others. As such, scholars may still study the social attributes and the social group relations of the people who participate in an interest when an interest is conceived of as ‘unattached’. However, in contrast to the mainstream view of studies of substantive representation and gender, when we conceive of an interest as unattached, neither the social attributes of the interest participants nor their membership in social groups form the analytical point of departure; rather, the shared political beliefs or attitudes of these people do.

When we conceptualise politics through the matrix of unattached interests, we may find that people who participate in the same unattached interest do not have similar attributes and that they do, in fact, belong to very different social groups.⁷

Alternatively, we may find that they have similar attributes and belong to the same social group. In practice, whether or not the people who participate in an interest have similar attributes will typically depend on how narrowly we conceptualise the political interest in question (as well as, obviously, the participants' social attributes). Accordingly, if interests are defined in very broad terms – for example, gender equality interests or the interests of putting an end to human-caused climate change – we may find that the social attributes of the people who participate in the interest are less homogeneous than if we conceived of the interest in narrower terms, such as the interest of shared, fully publicly funded parental leave or the interest of using only carbon-neutral means for the transportation of building materials by 2030.

Revisiting the vision of Young

Thinking of interests as unattached bears similarities to Phillips' (1995) term 'politics of ideas' (which Phillips sets forth while describing her 'politics of presence'), as well as the phenomena that Young (2000: 133–41) terms 'opinions' (which is different from her concepts of 'perspectives' and 'interests'). The theoretical goal that I aim to reach is similar to Young's vision of being able 'to conceptualise representation outside the logic of identity'. Yet, Young (2000: 126) proposed that this would be possible by perceiving representation through 'the metaphysics of presence'. Accordingly, in *Inclusion and Democracy*, she suggested that thinking of political representation through Derrida's concept of *différance* 'as a process involving a mediated relation of constituents to one another and to a representative' might resolve the paradox of how the identities and opinions of a myriad of people are being made present through the actions and identity of a single representative (Young, 2000: 126). Hence, just as more recent scholars of representation, such as Celis et al (2014) and Saward (2010), Young suggested that scholars alter how they approach the act of representation. Instead, I propose that the concept of identity can be separated from the concept of substantive representation by altering how we approach interests.

Departing from the second and third assumptions

I now turn to discuss the problematic character of the second and third assumptions of women's interests, that is, that women and men have different interests, and that there are only two genders, which have not yet received much attention. My overall claim that the term 'women's interests' is problematic for feminist research rests on the idea that social research and political society are interlinked (Bourdieu, 1991; Butler, 1999; Brubaker, 2002). For example, Brubaker (2002: 177–84) has illustrated how scientific conceptualisations of ethnic groups produce exactly these kinds of ethnic tensions in a society, and he advises that researchers apply less constitutive ethnic categories. Similarly, in feminist political science, how this line of research influences society has recently become a topic of scholarly concern (Dahlerup, 2006; Murray, 2014). Given the fact that research may have performative effects, in the following, I discuss how the term 'women's interests' could indeed be counterproductive for a scholarship that aims for a more gender-diverse and gender-just society.

As pointed out earlier, when we conceive of interests as attached to specific people, we normally assume that the people who 'own' an interest will want to advance it and that others will not. Thus, 'women's interests' positions women as the owners of

these interests and thus as its implied agents. Scholars have pointed out that such a conceptual practice places an implicit burden on the shoulders of female representatives (see, for example, [Lovenduski, 2000](#): 154). An additional aspect of this assumption that has not received similar attention is that the combination of the binary term ‘women’ and the attached form of interest initially sets forth ‘women’s interests’ as *not* being in the interests of men (for similar accounts, see [Grant, 1993](#); [Baldez, 2011](#)).⁸ In other words, it is not necessarily expected for men to act on women’s interests. Given the performative effect of academic terms, such language could encourage suggestions like that of activist Michael Kaufmann (2001: 50) that men must ‘possess some inherent goodness’ to address issues⁹ of violence against women. In this way, according to Kaufmann, when acting to eliminate gender-based violence, men are doing something extraordinary.

My suggestion that political interests that are framed as belonging to women gain less support from male representatives has been illustrated in a Scandinavian context. For example, having controlled for political affiliation, Dahlerup et al (2021) find that male representatives who self-identify as feminists are not inclined to also endorse ‘acting for women’. Accordingly, ‘acting for women’ and ‘being a feminist’ are seen as two different things, and male representatives are more inclined to do the second, which does not apply a binary term or an attached interest. In addition, Erikson (2018) has shown that Swedish women representatives are aware of this tendency and plan their political strategies accordingly. Thus, seeking to engage their male colleagues, they deliberately frame prostitution as a problem that affects everyone, not as a ‘women’s issue’.¹⁰ Consistent with these observations is the circumstance that as the share of women representatives increases, male representatives in Swedish local councils indicate that they are less likely to ‘personally represent women’s issues and concerns’ but *not* less likely to ‘work toward a gender equality society’ ([Kokkonen and Wängnerud, 2007](#)). Accordingly, this finding could also illustrate that Swedish local, male representatives conceive of women’s interests and gender equality interests as two different things, and do not see the latter – non-binary and non-attached – interests as interests in which they are not to engage.

Finally, the term ‘women’ implies a binary, heteronormative view of gender, in which people are either male or female (see [Butler, 1999](#)). Of course, we could presume that this should not be a matter of much concern, as most people identify as either male or female. However, assenting to a discourse that indirectly muffles minorities should not be the first option for feminist scholars, especially not at a point in history when the rise of right-wing extremism and extreme conservatism has meant that ‘racial forms of intersectional inequality are legitimized’ ([Verloof and Kantola, 2018](#): 208) and the rights of people who do not identify as either a man or woman are currently being hampered to a degree that no one could have predicted only a decade ago ([Verloof and Paternotte, 2018](#); see also [Chiva, 2023](#)). Although not all feminist scholarship needs to focus on this concern, I believe that all feminist scholars should consider how their key variable feeds the anti-multiple-genders sentiment.

An alternative dependent variable: gender equality interests

As stated earlier, I propose ‘gender equality interests’ as a practical alternative to ‘women’s interests’.¹¹ In this section, I discuss the term ‘gender equality’ and

set forth three distinct ways in which future scholarship may operationalise this dependent variable.

As pointed out by Walby (2009: 48), 'gender equality is a "contested signifier," an "essentially contested concept"', and constructivist analysis, in particular, has illustrated how the meaning of gender equality is repeatedly stretched and bent (Lombardo et al, 2009: 4–5; Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). Accordingly, in this manner, the concept of gender equality is similar to that of 'women's interests', which has also been shown to be a hotly contested concept (Celis et al, 2014; Celis and Childs, 2014). In addition, the term 'gender equality' is probably more political than that of 'women's interests', as conservatives – who often support certain 'women's interests' – may not agree that gender equality should be advanced at all. Therefore, the concept of gender equality interests certainly does *not* embrace the views of all women, and scholarship on the substantive representation of gender equality needs also to study opposition to gender equality.

How could scholars of the substantive representation of gender equality operationalise gender equality interests? In the following, I set forth three distinct paths for future research of the substantive representation of gender equality to operationalise its dependent variable into measurable variables. All three paths draw on the scholarship on the substantive representation of 'women's interests'. Taking advantage of the breadth of this scholarship, the paths are epistemologically and ontologically very different. In particular, they vary according to their sensitiveness towards illustrating diversity within the variable in question, as well as the degree to which they approach the operationalisation of gender equality interests as exogenous to the actual study of their substantive representation. Moreover, they differ concerning the degree to which they apply qualitative and quantitative methods. To stress each path's different ontological starting point, I term these the 'objectivist', 'subjectivist' and 'constructivist' paths.

Objectivist path

Within the objectivist path, knowledge about the social world is approached as a matter of fact and of political priority. Scholars who apply this path could use exogenous parameters to operationalise the content of gender equality interests. First, scholars may look to knowledge on gender inequality as illustrated in analyses of the world. Based on this knowledge, gender equality interests may be operationalised as political actions meant to increase the level of gender equality in society. For example, Dahlerup (2014: 69–70) suggests that scholars look to global gender indexes like the Global Gender Gap (World Economic Forum). Second, following the example of Baldez (2011: 422), who advocates using the political goals of the 1979 UN Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to operationalise the content of 'women's interests', international conventions could be applied to operationalise the content and issues of 'gender equality interests' (for example, CEDAW Articles 3–16). Third, yet in a very different manner, scholars could operationalise the content of these interests based on rational argumentation and feminist theories. Accordingly, to break free of the political relativism that sometimes follows from constructivist approaches (I address this later), Walby (2009) advises that feminist scholars trust the power of everyday rationality and argumentation. Based on Habermas's idea of communication, she calls on feminist scholars to move out of

the shadow of 'the politics of location' and set forth feminist positions against which policies may be evaluated (Walby, 2009: 36–40). An example of such a position that could be agreed upon after rational deliberation is 'freedom outside of the binary' or 'paid parental leave for all parents'. Subsequently, scholars with the aim of studying the substantive representation of gender equality could investigate the degree to which policies that will advance these goals in society are legislated and scrutinised in parliament.

Each of the three objectivist designs raises different, yet related, concerns. First, as argued by Verloo and Kantola (2018: 213), it is important to acknowledge that the fact that specific measures of gender equality have been agreed upon by political actors does not render them politically neutral. In addition, scholars have rightly argued that when operationalising 'women's interests' by applying feminist and leftist measures, research smuggles feminism in through the back door (though not in these exact words) (see Celis et al, 2014; Celis and Childs, 2014; Celis and Erzeel, 2015). However, an analogous critique of the use of similar measures to operationalise 'gender equality interests' is not equally appropriate, as the term 'gender equality', unlike that of 'women's interests', indicates a political position, not membership of a social group. Thus, although such an operationalisation could be criticised on other grounds, it does – contrary to studies of the representation of 'women's interests' – invite feminism in through the front door.

Subjectivist path

Within this path, knowledge about the social world is viewed as something that is accessible through the eyes of social actors only. Thus, such knowledge is very much subjectivist, and to establish the content of gender equality interests, one must understand the perspectives of those who participate in these interests. One method could be to conduct qualitative interviews with interest participants to understand their subjectivist perspective of the content of gender equality. Alternatively, scholars could study this in more processual terms by analysing how groups agree on the content of interests through interpersonal processes of communication or how subjectivist perspectives are altered through such processes. Here, the research design proposed by Reingold and Swers (2011), which includes the concept of power,¹² could serve as inspiration. Accordingly, Reingold and Swers (2011) suggest that scholars determine the content of 'women's interests' by observing how these interests are negotiated at party group meetings, thus exploring how identity, institutions and power intersect in the process of finding common ground within the group.

An important benefit of the subjectivist research design – which may involve utilising various methods of observation and interviews at several points in time – is that it focuses the attention of the scholar towards diversity among interest participants and the processes of finding common ground. A focus on such phenomena could be especially important in studies of the substantive representation of gender equality, in which neither the attributes of individuals, the situated knowledge of social groups nor power are initially the focus. Indeed, feminist research has often illustrated how structures of power interact with the social attributes of people, thus making it easier for some people (and some groups of people) to speak their minds than others. In other words, although the alternative variable of gender equality involves ceasing to apply social attributes and social groups as the starting points of

the study of interest representation, this does not mean that scholars should ignore these facts altogether. At a practical level, feminist knowledge about structures of power could be integrated into studies of substantive representation and gender through methods that focus on power and the process through which common ground is found among interest participants.

Constructivist path

Finally, the third path views phenomena in the social world as constructed through the actions of social actors. Following this path to gain knowledge of the content of gender equality interests, scholars should analyse how – and with what effect – these interests are constructed. Inspiration for such analyses can be found in studies of the processes through which actors claim to act for women (Celis et al, 2014; Celis and Childs, 2018). Most notably, such scholars apply the theoretical framework developed in the writings of Saward (2010), Mansbridge (2003) and Squires (2008).

Thus far, constructivist-inspired studies of women's substantive representation, as well as studies of the way in which concepts are constructed and contested in political arenas, have proved extraordinarily effective in illustrating the diversity within views of social concepts (see, for example, Kantola and Lombardo, 2017: 328–30). Nevertheless, like studies that set out to explore 'who claims to act for women', scholars of the substantive representation of gender equality would need to focus more on the actual acts of substantive representation (Who acts for the various types of gender equality, when and how?), rather than primarily on the variety of the discourses presented, which is typically the aim of the excellent, constructivist-inspired literature. Additionally, in line with the claim-making approach as redefined by Severs (2010), such scholars could also address how such representative acts are received.

A potential problem with studies that solely focus on public claims made by political actors and the way in which groups mobilise for or against such claims is that only interests that are articulated within the social space are studied. Therefore, the interests in which people with little or no opportunity to articulate their views participate fall outside the scope of such studies. However, a possible means of dealing with the problem of 'only existing if articulated' has been proposed by Celis and Mügge's thorough methodological approach (see Celis and Mügge, 2018).

Another issue that relates to the constructivist approaches in particular – but that can also become a problem for studies applying a processual approach – is that advocates of these methods sometimes suggest that interests that are articulated by relevant actors should *not* primarily be evaluated in terms of their content; rather, scholars should evaluate the process through which these interests are represented. For example, to fully acknowledge the diversity embedded within the concept of women's issues, Celis and Childs (2018; 2020: 90–2) advise employing a procedural approach through which only the quality of the representative process – not the content of the represented interests – is evaluated.¹³ However, for feminist research, such an approach could constitute a political dead end (for a critique of constructivist representation theory more generally and Saward's theory in particular, see Lord and Pollak, 2013; Disch, 2015). Concerning this important debate, it should be mentioned that when envisioning a normative model for feminist democratic representation, Celis and Childs (2020: 183) have recently formulated so-called 'kitchen rules', or the existence of a feminist red line for the type of claims that cannot be accepted in a

Table 1: Three approaches to operationalising gender equality interests

	Objectivist path	Subjectivist path	Constructivist path
Interest operationalisation	Interests are operationalised as facts about the world or as normative feminist goals	Interests are operationalised as subjective matters	Interests are operationalised as constitutive acts
Input needed to operationalise the interest	Factual knowledge of the world or of normative feminist positions	Knowledge of relevant actors' views	Knowledge of the claims made by relevant actors

feminist democracy due to their content. The three ways of operationalising 'gender equality interests' are summarised in [Table 1](#).

In conclusion, each of the three paths has particular advantages and disadvantages. Yet, the severity of a particular issue may change when the interest in question changes its format from attached to unattached, and vice versa. Most notably, unlike the interest of women, objectivist paths for operationalising gender equality interests do not invite ideas of gender equality in through the back door; rather, they open the door in the front of the house for everyone to see. In a similar vein, substantive and constructive paths for operationalising gender equality interests should be particularly concerned with notions of power because no primary interest subject is automatically determined. How to ensure this in ways that go beyond the ideas briefly sketched earlier will hopefully be a topic for future consideration.

Conclusion

In this article, I have called attention to three unexplored assumptions of 'women's interests' that constitute the dependent variable in most studies of substantive representation and gender: the assumption that political interests are attached to groups with a certain identity; the idea of gender as a binary phenomenon; and the idea that the interests in question are of concern to women actors primarily. Considering current political developments in society and the political ambition of this research, these assumptions seem unfitting. Due to this, I have argued that feminist scholars of substantive representation and gender should consider conceptualising their dependent variable as the unattached 'gender equality interests', instead of the attached 'women's interests'. Finally, I have presented three distinct ways of operationalising this new dependent variable.

One may raise various concerns about applying gender equality as a dependent variable in future studies. It may be claimed that there are contexts in which it would be inappropriate to conceptualise an interest concerning gender as something in which women and men alike might participate, for example, when the political divide between men and women is so deep that this simply does not make sense, or that the political spearhead is lost when women are not made the explicit subject of gender equality. Yet, as pointed out by Brubaker, it is particularly in societies in which severe group cleavages exist that conceptualising interests as something that belongs to these groups risks further solidifying such divisions (see [Brubaker, 2002](#)).

From a political point of view, it has been claimed that concepts involving the term 'gender', such as 'gender-sensitive' and 'gender-friendly', are often applied by feminist political scientists for strategic reasons, for example, 'to avoid conflict over their exact meaning and even hiding more radical goals' ([Dahlerup, 2014](#): 60; see also [Childs and Dahlerup, 2018](#); [Kantola and Verloo, 2018](#): 211). There are certainly

contexts and episodes in which this is true. However, today, as has also been pointed out by several scholars, the concept of gender equality is contested and politically controversial (Verloo and Kantola, 2018: 206–7; Phillips, 2019).

In addition, scholars have argued that using the term 'gender equality' is not progressive enough, or that it implies the existence of a male standard (Walby [2009: 43] and Phillips [2019: 25–7] both point to this argument, which they do not promote themselves). Although it cannot be denied that this may be the case in specific circumstances, there does not seem to be any (inherent) reason why insisting on the equality of all genders should result in adopting a male standard. Nevertheless, just as when measuring the substantive representation of women's interests, scholars who study the substantive representation of gender equality should be attentive to this potential problem, which is to be prevented by incorporating intersectional knowledge on the needs and priorities of all genders.

In the end, formulating the dependent variable of any social science study is a political and normative choice. Although this article may not have convinced all readers that applying the concept of gender equality is the way to move forward for feminist research, it may have raised attention towards the political implications of 'women's interests', which have thus far not received much attention. Hopefully, it will spur norm-critical research on the concepts applied in feminist research more generally.

An important question – which is unfortunately outside of the scope of this article – is the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation. Accordingly, it seems evident that some of the arguments for women's descriptive representation will need to be reconsidered when one does not conceive of interests as belonging to the group(s) of women (Phillips, 1995; Young, 2000; Dovi, 2002; Celis and Childs, 2020). In particular, I believe that arguments for a better descriptive representation of social groups concerning how deliberation occurs will have to be readdressed because deliberating on unattached interests requires people with diverse testimonies, experiences or perspectives, not diverse interest owners. Hopefully, conceiving of interests as unattached will serve as inspiration for mapping out new arguments for increasing diverse descriptive representation.

Notes

- ¹ By applying the concept of substantive representation, the article follows the taxonomy of representation set forth by Pitkin; hence, substantive representation concerns acting for (somebody's) political interests, whereas descriptive representation concerns standing for somebody by resemblance (Pitkin, 1967).
- ² As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, there is currently no established academic field or literature on 'substantive representation and gender', only on the 'substantive representation of women'. Thus, when writing about research on substantive representation and gender, I envision a new academic focus and stress the transformative aim of this article.
- ³ Although scholars have recently highlighted the importance of studying representation as it occurs beyond legislative arenas (see, for example, Squires, 2008; Sward, 2010), I have chosen to focus on studies of legislatures because such studies are still most common.

- ⁴ It should be stressed that, in this section, the concepts of ‘attached’ and ‘unattached’ interests are applied in the way I have previously suggested. Thus, they are inspired by, but not identical to, the concepts exemplified by Pitkin in 1967 (Harder, 2020).
- ⁵ Here, I apply the term ‘attributes’ as it was defined by Young (2000: 90).
- ⁶ Since attributes only gain social meaning in social settings (Young, 2000: 90), the question of which attributes are important depends on the setting in question.
- ⁷ It should be noted that although Young applies the term ‘interest’ very differently compared to me, she too states that individuals with various interests may belong to the same social group (Young, 2000: 88, 122).
- ⁸ It should be noted that some activists, as well as scholars, state more explicitly that women and men have opposite interests. Accordingly, from this perspective, it is also explicitly assumed that men as a group have interests that are not in the interest of women (on radical feminism, see Dahlerup, 2018: 16–17).
- ⁹ I apply the term ‘issue’ in its everyday meaning. Hence, an issue is ‘a subject or problem that people are thinking and talking about’ (see: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/issue>).
- ¹⁰ Unlike in the study of Dahlerup et al (2021), who differentiate between women’s issues and feminist viewpoints, Erikson (2018) generally categorises feminist and women’s issues together, that is, as a category that differs from other (male) issues. Hence, even though the two studies apply the term ‘feminist’ in different ways, both studies present perceptions of policy interests that are framed as women’s interests (in which male representatives do not engage) and interests that are framed without the identity of women (in which male representatives do engage).
- ¹¹ Instead of ‘gender equality interests’, one could apply ‘feminist interests’; yet, since it may be difficult to conceive of feminism without also conceiving of specific groupings of (self-)identified feminists, thus coming close to conceiving of the interest in attached form (by grammatically implying an ownership), ‘gender equality interests’ are probably preferable.
- ¹² I define power as ‘the ability to influence the perceptions, wants or behaviours of others’. This definition is inspired by Lukes’ (2005) three dimensions of power.
- ¹³ Celis and Childs (2018) formulate three criteria for such evaluations: ‘Is the process responsive?’; ‘Is it inclusive?’; and ‘Does it treat all claims equally?’

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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