

Substantive Representation of Women (and improving it). What is and should it be about?

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Abstract

More and more countries implement quotas and install women’s policy agencies as an answer to the under-representation of women and gender-related interests in politics and policy. The main argument is that more women MPs and the structural presence of attention for women’s interests not only contribute to just and democratic politics, but also enhance the quality of democratic decision and policy-making on a substantive level. Women MPs and women’s policy agencies would foster the inclusion of women’s interests and gendered perspectives. However, it remains unclear what ‘substantive representation of women’ and improving it actually mean. This article first deals with the ‘what’ of substantive representation of women in terms of the acts and contents involved: what is it about? Next, it focuses on the improvement of the substantive representation of women: what is better substantive representation and how can it be reached? My answer to this question refers to quantitative improvements (e.g. more support for women’s interests) and qualitative improvements (e.g. support for more women). ‘Good’ substantive representation implies recognizing diversity and ideological conflict regarding women’s interests and gendered perspectives.

1. Introduction

Representativeness is a central concern in recent debates about the democratic level of our political institutions and processes. The under-representation of specific groups in political institutions, decision-making and policies is considered to be a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness (Phillips, 1995). Proof for this concern can be found in the implementation of quotas in progressively more countries as a cure for the under-representation of women in politics (Dahlerup, 2006) and the installation of women's policy agencies to foster gender equality policies (Outshoorn and Kantola, 2007). A more equal distribution of, for instance, parliamentary seats would not only contribute to a more just and democratic political system because it implies more equality in the formal and descriptive dimensions of political participation. It would also enhance the quality of democratic decision-making on a substantive level, i.e. by the inclusion of women's interests and perspectives (Phillips, 1995; Young, 1997). Substantive representation of women is also the very task of women's policy agencies.

Notwithstanding these practices and expectations, it remains unclear what 'substantive representation of women' actually is: what is it that is represented - 'women's interests' or 'feminist demands' - and what are they? Furthermore, it is also unclear what 'improving' the substantive representation of women implies: do we only need more attention for women's and/or feminist interests like gender equality, or does 'better' substantive representation of women also imply qualitative changes? If yes, what might these be?

The first part of this article deals with the 'what' of substantive representation of women in terms of the acts and contents involved. The next section focuses on improving the substantive representation of women. It discusses the content of substantive representation of women and its improvement by reviewing theoretical and empirical research on the political representation of women. It also uses extensive data from my own research on the substantive representation of women in the Belgian Lower House in the period 1900-1979. These findings lead to a normative reflection on 'good' substantive representation of women.

This article also aims at providing answers to questions regarding how to operationalize the concept of substantive representation of women for comparative research and how to compare and recognize 'better' or 'good' substantive representation. Answering the crucial question regarding the favorable and hindering contexts for the substantive representation of women requires comparative research across time and countries (see also Celis et al., 2008, Celis 2008a, b). A basic prerequisite lies in concept operationalization that allows them to be applied in different time periods, countries and sites. I argue that comparative research on the substantive representation of women benefits from operationalizing substantive representation of women in a formal manner (avoiding a thematic selection of women's issues) and that measuring improvement should not only focus on quantitative evolutions but also take qualitative dimensions into account such as the diversity of women's issues addressed and the politicizing of ideological conflict about women's interests and feminist demands.

2. Substantive representation of women: acts and interests

The most accepted definition of substantive representation is undoubtedly Hanna F. Pitkin's (1972, 209): substantive representation is "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them". This definition puts forward three criteria for substantive representation. Firstly, it is about representative acts as opposed to, for instance, intentions or attitudes. Secondly, the results of these representative acts should be in the interest of the represented. Thirdly, the representatives should be responsive towards the ones they represent. Applying this to the substantive representation of women, Pitkin's definition implies that women's interests and female citizens are central to the representative process.

Turning to the first criterion for substantive representation - i.e. substantive representation as '*acting for women*' - empirical research on parliamentary representation of women exemplifies what these representative acts might be (see Celis, 2008a). Approving legislation that deals with women's issues is a first important part of parliamentary activity for women. American research from the seventies, but also more recent research, generally interprets 'liberal' (left or progressive) votes as substantive

representation of women because they reflect better the existing gender gap regarding issues such as welfare, defense, the death penalty, environmental issues, foreign affairs or abortion (e.g. Burrell, 1994). A second interpretation of 'voting for women' is giving vote support to legislation that has a more direct relation to women, such as abortion or intra-marital violence (e.g. Swers, 1998).

The vote is only the final stage of the representative process. Chronologically, the first step is broadening the political agenda with women's issues. This can be done by submitting legislation favourable to women, but also through the introduction of women's issues during parliamentary debates. This 'speaking for women' and including the perspective of women in the legislative process can be seen as representative action in itself. Moreover, it is a crucial preparatory phase in the establishment of legislation for women. Introducing women's interests or perspectives into the debate are important acts for making certain subjects or positions politically acceptable (Cramer Walsh, 2002). Legislation that meets female needs, interests and demands is considered by many scholars as the key element of substantive representation of women. It is legislation more than any other parliamentary activity that influences the lives of female citizens directly or indirectly. It is, alongside that, also a more intensive form of substantive representation than, for instance, voting (Kathlene, 2001; Swers, 2002; Tamerius, 1995).

The representative acts discussed in the previous paragraphs all take place in parliaments. However, representation is surely not limited to parliaments and elected politicians; it takes place in different arenas and several actors claim to represent women (Celis et al., 2008). In particular, women's movements and women's policy agencies offer alternative – and perhaps more effective – sites of representation (Weldon, 2002). Women's movements formulate women's interests and lobby or work together with the state to represent women. Weldon (2002, 1156) argues that women's group perspective is best defined through collective processes of interest articulation: "Women's group perspective emerges only when members of the group come together, [when] they can compare...and each person gains a greater understanding of the larger puzzle". According to research on state feminism by the Research Network on Gender and the State (RNGS), crucial representative acts performed by women's policy agencies (and women's movements) with regard to the substantive representation of women are gendering policy debate

frames and policy decision content, and developing feminist policy feedback in policy implementation (e.g. McBride Stetson and Mazur, 2000; Mazur, 2002).

The second and third criteria implied in Pitkin's definition of substantive representation –‘acting in the interest of women, in a manner responsive to them’ - put the interests of female citizens centre stage. Here the thorny questions are: what are women's interests, and how should the representative process be responsive to women?

In the 1980s Sapiro, Diamond and Hartsock, and Jónasdóttir discussed what women's issues are. Sapiro (1981) stated that the ‘private distribution of labor’ (namely the tasks of giving birth to and care for children) makes women take up a different socio-economic position, in turn generating specific interests that are politically ‘representable’. Diamond and Hartsock (1981), on the contrary, have a broader view of what women's interests are. According to them, women's common interests are not the consequence of the division of tasks inside the household, but of the gendered division of productive labor (Diamond and Hartsock, 1981, 194-196). Jónasdóttir (1988) reconciled these two views; women's interests take their origins from the gendered reality that mainly coincides with the gendered division of labor, but this is not sufficient to contain all gender differences in interests. According to Jónasdóttir, what is in the interest of women is “*inter-esse*” (literally to “be amongst”) or being present in the decision-making process; it refers to control over the conditions of choice rather than to the consequences of the choice.

From the 1990s onwards, theorists on group representation also dealt with the question about what constitutes women's interests. An important voice in this debate is Anne Phillips (1995, 1998), who rejects universal women's interests and needs. Nevertheless, she states, women do have specific life experiences causing gendered interests that need to be represented. Other scholars stress that what is at stake is not only the inclusion of women's interests, but also the gendering of the general interest (Lovenduski, 2005, 19; Stokes, 2005, 20). In opposition to Phillips, Iris Marion Young (1997, 2000) suggests that representing women is not about interests and needs but about social perspectives, in particular the way in which people interpret things and events from within their structural social situation. Social groups are structured around differences such as gender, race, nationality and religion, but these groups cannot be defined through common interests or

through similar opinions. Therefore, women cannot be represented as a group based on these interests and opinions; representation of a social group means representing the social perspective of that group deriving from its structural position in society.

A similar argument is made by Melissa Williams (1998). The social position of women shows great similarities because of the cultural and structural obstacles causing the marginalization of women. Representing women is making women's point of view or women's 'voice' present in political decision-making. The presence of the voice of women can not only make it happen that a policy for the marginalized group is established (a general as well as a specific equality policy), but also that an evolution takes place in the minds of the dominant groups. Hence, in her approach to substantive representation, overcoming discrimination is a central concern. Also, Lena Wängnerud (2000) points to the fact that the substantive representation of women has a feminist 'direction'; the aim of substantive representation of women is an increase in women's autonomy. According to her, representing women is constituted by three elements: 1) the recognition of women as a social category; 2) the recognition of a power imbalance between men and women; 3) the wish to implement a policy that increases the autonomy of female citizens.

The empirical research that developed simultaneously with these theories reflects this broad threefold approach to what women's interests are. Firstly, women's interests are defined (or operationalized) as issues that are related to the private sphere; women's issues are linked to their bodies, sexuality, and the possibility of giving birth. Secondly, and of course firmly intertwined with the first, women's issues refer to the position of women in the public domain, and specifically in the labor force and the welfare state. Maxine Molyneux (1985, 233) labels these as 'practical' gender interests "arising from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender divisions of labor". Thirdly, women's issues might have a feminist aim to overcome discrimination and to achieve equality and autonomy, be it in the private or the public sphere. Molyneux (1985, 232) calls these 'strategic' gender interests "deriving from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative."

In empirical research on the substantive representation of women, practical and strategic interests are often combined. To give some examples: Dodson and Carroll (1995) operationalize substantive representation of women as dealing with ‘women’s rights bills’ that relate directly to women or that have a feminist undertone, and ‘laws concerning women’s traditional arenas of interest’ that relate to the role of women as ‘dispensers of care’ as much inside the family as in society and to themes such as health, care and education. Beth Reingold (2000) analyzes the voting behavior of female and male members of Congress for laws that exclusively related to women (such as abortion and discrimination of women) or nearly exclusively (such as household violence or breast cancer) and a couple of other feminist fighting points. The policy fields that O’Regan (2000) includes in her comparative research in 22 industrialized nations concern ‘salary protection’ (legislation for equal salaries, policy regarding maternity leave, policy on equal job opportunities and child care policy) and social policy (concerning marriage and divorce, guardianship over children, domestic violence, sexual abuse, abortion legislation and access to education).

The feminist conception of women’s interests is especially apparent –but, again not or scarcely discussed- in the works of scholars that exclusively focus on feminist or women’s group’s demands when investigating the representation of women. Swers (2002), for instance, based her analysis on a selection of women’s issues that was carried out by the five most important liberal and conservative women’s groups who claimed to represent women’s interests. RINGS scholars who focus on the role of women’s policy agencies and women’s movements in the substantive representation of women also use feminist demands to measure state response in policy debates on abortion, domestic violence and prostitution, job training, and political representation (Lovenduski et al, 2005; Mazur, 2001; Outshoorn, 2004; McBride Stetson, 2001). Regarding this feminist conception of women’s issues, the main and evident critique regards whether substantive representation of women can be reduced to the representation of feminist demands. In my view, representation of feminist issues is only a part of the substantive representation of women. Nevertheless, investigating the political response to feminist demands can establish an important indicator for the degree to which representatives and the state are responsive to the issues ‘women themselves’ indicate as being crucial for improving their

status and equality. But not all women back up the demands of the women's movement and therefore 'feminist demands' are not a synonym for 'women's issues'. But if, as in Swers' research, a plurality of feminist demands is taken into account, the researcher comes close to getting a grasp on the diverse demands stemming from different ideological perspectives. This plurality seems however to be missing in much research. Scholars tend to narrow feminism down to its leftist strand whereas, as Offen (2000) has clearly illustrated, European feminism features an individualist and a relational (or maternalist) feminist thread. Feminisms and left/liberal women's movements situated in the individualist strand focus on the autonomy of individual women and demand equality between men and women. For instance, Wängnerud's work focusing on autonomy operationalizes feminist demands as belonging to this kind of feminism. Relational feminism and conservative women's movements, on the contrary, stress the distinctiveness of men and women, complementarities between them, equal worth instead of equality, and partnership between men and women. This dichotomy echoes other divisions made in literature on welfare states between the individual and the breadwinner models (Sainsbury, 1996), and in literature on citizenship between liberal and maternalist forms of citizenship (Lister, 1997). Research on substantive representation investigating parliamentary representation or state response to feminist demands often neglects the diversity of demands of feminist movements and, in consequence, also undervalues contradiction and conflict between feminist demands. As I will elaborate in the next section, these are, in my view, crucial features of 'good' substantive representation of women.

3. Improving the substantive representation of women

Based on the concise overview of the theoretical and empirical literature on the substantive representation of women above, one can conclude that substantive representation of women is performing acts in favor of women (voting, introducing and supporting bills, speaking for women, broadening the political agenda, formulating women's interests, gendering debates and policy content, lobbying the state, feminist policy analysis and feedback) that deal with issues of specific importance to women

situated in the private and/or public sphere and/or aiming at feminist goals. As was mentioned in the introduction, increasingly more states implement quotas and install women's policy agencies in order to make their representative institutions and policy processes more representative on a descriptive level, as well as on a substantive level. More women MPs and more state agencies promoting gender equality would lead to an improvement in the substantive representation of women and gendered interests. But what is 'better' substantive representation? Looking at the existing research on substantive representation, one discerns two answers to this question: *more* support for women's interests and *different* approaches to women's interests.

3.1 *More acting* for women

In the decades-long, mainly Anglo-American, empirical research tradition testing the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation of women, improving substantive representation is often conceived of as *more* support for women's issues. The underlying rationale is that women are under-represented in numbers, and, in consequence, also substantively; their issues are not dealt with to the same extent as other groups and this deficit is caused by their numerical, descriptive under-representation. The key question is, therefore, whether women MPs actually represent women's issues in parliament and, subsequently, whether a higher number of women MPs actually leads to an increase in the substantive representation of women. The hypothesis is that *more* descriptive representation leads to *more* substantive representation. In research on state feminism, the parallel question is whether (and to what extent) the presence of women's policy agencies results in more and successful support for women's movements' descriptive and substantive claims and their implementation in political decisions. Indeed, RINGS studies reveal that in many instances there exist successful or partially successful alliances between the women's movement and women's policy agencies. The success and failure of such alliances are determined by women's movement actor characteristics, the policy environment, and the characteristics and activities of women's policy agencies.

Regarding substantive representation of women in parliaments, there are studies that can be referred to which confirm the quantitative relationship between female representatives

and the representation of women. Improving the substantive representation of women can be achieved through an increase in the number of women MPs. Swers (2002), for instance, shows that female members of Congress were more inclined than their fellow party members to support bills that were considered important for women by the women's movement, even though Republican women voted less in favor of these than Democratic men. Several pieces of research show that women representatives more often worked on a legislative initiative in favor of women, either in relation to feminist demands (for instance regarding rape or equal wages for equal labor), or in relation to more traditional subjects (for instance healthcare and children's welfare) (e.g. Dodson, 2006; Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003; Wolbrecht, 2002). In particular feminist women and women supported by the women's movement worked more often on a women's bill (Dodson, 2001). Valerie O'Regan (2000) concludes that the number of female policymakers had a solid effect on employment and social policies in favor of women. Kathleen Bratton and Leonard Ray (Bratton, 2005; Bratton and Ray, 2002) also found that increasing gender diversity led to an overall increase in the number of women's interests measures introduced.

However, several studies also reject the existence of a relationship between female representatives and representing women; women MPs do not vote more for women than men (e.g. Reingold, 2000), they do not introduce more women's interests than men during parliamentary debates (e.g. Tremblay, 1998), and a big proportion of female legislators were not active in introducing bills that concern women's rights, families and children (e.g. Htun and Jones, 2002). Furthermore, in situations where gender differences regarding the substantive representation of women did occur, they could rarely be explained exclusively by the gender of the representative. Institutional and broader political context elements such as the weight of party discipline (e.g. Swers, 2002), the positional power of women inside a parliament, seniority and prestige (e.g. Beckwith, 2002; Norton, 2002), the kind of voting district and the support of internal or external women's groups and networks (e.g. Burrell, 1994) also had a part in the will and the possibility to represent women.

Whether or not a 'critical mass' of women MPs influences women's substantive representation has been a main question in empirical research on the necessity and causal

relationship between descriptive and substantive representation of women (Childs and Krook, 2006). The expectation that women are likely to ‘make a difference’ once they constitute a ‘critical mass’ (Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup, 1988) is a key feature in this research (Childs and Krook, 2006). Although the theses of Drude Dahlerup were often misinterpreted, and although there exists only little proof for the critical mass effect on substantive representation (e.g. Grey, 2002; Trimble, 1997), it is a powerful argument for claiming more female representatives (Childs and Krook, 2006). Regarding the role of the number of elected women, I maintain that it is strongly questioned. Critical individuals more than once seemed of more importance than critical mass.

That was also the conclusion of my research on the substantive representation of women in Belgium (Celis, 2006). I mapped interventions that denounce a situation that is disadvantageous for women, that formulate a proposal to improve the situation of women or that claim a right for women during one of the most central political debates in the Belgian Parliament - the budget debates in the Belgian Lower House. Through this operationalization of substantive representation of women, I obtained a view on what the MPs themselves considered as women’s interests, which contained a wide variety of women’s interests as well as perspectives on what was in the interest of women. In contrast to the empirical researches briefly described above, my operationalization of women’s interests avoids a preselection of themes that is subsequently used to measure the impact of the presence of women. As I argue elsewhere (Celis 2008a) this type of ‘formal’ operationalization of the substantive representation of women increases the range of actors that can come to the fore and the content given to the substantive representation of women. A thematic preselection of themes, on the contrary, evidently is inapt for researching the variety of interests that are represented within the framework of the substantive representation of women. But it also limits the acts and actors the research can register; for example, focusing research about the substantive representation of women on left feminist demands (such as abortion) biases the research design towards overemphasizing the parliamentary activities of leftist feminist legislators.

Although the formal approach also has a number of disadvantages—mainly capturing only explicit claims that were considered appropriate in the specific context—, it avoids giving an essentialist content to the substantive representation of women and is open to

divers, context related, and evolving women's interests. Furthermore, applying a formal operationalization of the substantive representation of women will make the research question more apt for traveling and application in a wide range of political and cultural contexts (see also Celis 2008b). It goes without saying that this is a prerequisite for longitudinal and international comparative research about, for instance, favorable contexts for increasing the substantive representation of women.

My research on the substantive representation of women during the parliamentary budget debates spans three phases, featuring an increasing level of descriptive representation of women: a homogeneous male parliament and no female electorate (1900-1929); some women MPs, but still no female electorate (1930-1948); and a growing number of women MPs and a growing female electorate (1949-1979). Women MPs occupied an average of only 3.3 percent of the seats in the Lower House during the 1930-1979 period, and never exceeded 10 percent.

The analysis of the number of interventions in favor of women by MPs during budget debates did not show a positive relationship between the presence of women MPs and a female electorate on the one hand, and the number of interventions in favor of women in parliament on the other. First of all, the number of times that women's interests were addressed was not always proportional to the number of women MPs. Secondly, the observation that the number of interventions by male representatives in the period just before and just after the entry of women MPs remained stable also supports the conclusion that men MPs did not feel more strongly motivated to represent women because of the stronger presence and activity of women MPs. Thirdly, men MPs were the most active in representing women, even after the introduction of women MPs. In the 1930-1979 period, men MPs accounted for 65.8 percent of interventions in favor of women. Their numerical dominance in parliament is, of course, the logical explanation for this finding. Just as the arrival of women MPs did not have an impact, the growth in the number of women MPs did not have a significant influence on the number of interventions in favor of women.

However, the contribution of women MPs was important given the number of interventions in favor of women, and this was the case from the moment of their entry.

The rise in the number of interventions in favor of women during the five decades after the advent of women MPs can be mainly attributed to the activity of women MPs. From the second half of the 1960s onwards, the number of interventions coming from women MPs increased substantially, parallel to the decrease in interventions coming from their male colleagues. Women MPs were overactive in representing women in proportion to their number. They clearly devoted a higher priority to it and invested more time and energy in their attention to women's interests. They partially compensated for their numeric under-representation by addressing on average more groups of women and more subjects in longer interventions. Women appeared to be the most fervent representatives of the female citizen. The conclusion that a very small group of women MPs contributed significantly to representing women adds to the conclusion of a series of other studies that showed that the presence of "a few good women" (Trimble, 1997, 130), and consequently not per se a critical mass, was essential to the representation of women.

3.2 Acting for *more women*

Besides *more* substantive representation, a second possible improvement in the substantive representation of women that studies on the substantive representation of women document is related to the *quality* of representation. The Belgian women MPs did not only contribute numerically, but also in a qualitative, unique way to the representation of women during the analyzed budget debates. Although the presence of women MPs and voters did not provoke any drastic breaks as far as represented women and their interests were concerned, women MPs were the only ones to bring up certain groups of women and subjects. For instance, only women MPs discussed important issues related to the participation of women in the labor force, such as: discrimination of women regarding minimum wages; considering female wages as an 'accessory'; the role of prejudices in the discrimination of women on the labor market; the responsibility of the labor unions in respecting the principle of equal wages; quotas for female labor participation as an instrument for fighting female unemployment; and the presence of women in juries for appointing public officers.

Also other scholars highlight that the presence of women legislators had an important qualitative impact on the substantive representation of women. Katherine Cramer Walsh (2002) concludes that an important improvement that women MPs realized regarding the substantive representation of women was the inclusion of the perspective of the caretaker during plenary debates on five important laws in the 104th Congress. Lyn Kathlene (2001) and Susan Beck (2001) detect an important differential input of female MP's in the initial phase of the realization of bills. The broader range of sources of information that the female MPs had at hand led to more 'sensible' legislation showing a more all-including vision of women's problems and their causes (Kathlene, 2001). (Non-voted) bills of female representatives echoed the different life experiences of women (Beck, 2001). Female representatives were responsible for the growth and the diversification of women's rights in Congress in the period 1953–1992 (Wolbrecht, 2002). They proposed not only more women's rights legislation regarding employment possibility, equal wages, women's health, abortion and educational rights, but they were also the most active in proposing new subjects and new policy solutions. Linda Trimble (1997) reports that an increase in women MPs resulted in more attention for diversity amongst women; the interests of aboriginal, lesbian, disabled, and ethnic-minority women were also taken into account. Nevertheless, this increase in attention for more diverse women's issues disappeared a subsequent legislature which featured an even higher number of women but also a dominant neoconservative ideology.

More support for women's interests is a first criterion to assess the improvement of substantive representation of women, since it makes political representation more responsive to women. Broadening the scope of women's interests by including new issues and views regarding women's interests is a second important criterion for evaluating substantive representation of women. It strengthens and increases the responsiveness of the substantive representation of women, since more women's interests and more different women are represented. Hence, by increasing the representativeness of the substantive representation of women by recognizing the diversity amongst women and the plurality of women's interests, the representation of women is responsive to more women. A third criterion to assess the quality of the substantive representation of women

is the degree to which it not only reflects diversity amongst women but also conflicts and ideological debates about women's interests.

Next to the quantitative and qualitative contributions to the substantive representation of women, my study reveals that during eighty years of substantive representation of women during the budget debates a normative discussion took place that evolved around the question 'What is in the interest of women?' Throughout the different claims and aims of MPs to improve the situation of the female citizen, different views became apparent of what was 'in favor of women.' The desirability and nature of paid work done by women in light of their task and role as mothers and wives and vice versa form the contours of a debate that I found throughout the entire researched period (be it with a different interpretation). This normative debate echoes Offen's distinction between individualist feminism and relational feminism. On the one hand, I discern a series of interventions where women were considered as individuals with the right to be treated equally compared to men. On the other hand, a portion of the interventions can be categorized on the basis of the observation that they considered women first within their relational situation as mothers and wives, whereby this role should be appreciated, and/or second, as people with a female-specific role and task in society.

These two positions coincided for the most part, but not completely, with the political factions in the Belgian parliament. The leftist faction (Socialists and Communists) was the biggest advocate of the aim for individuality and equality. The Catholic/Christian-democratic and nationalist parties were the most ardent defenders of the aim to appreciate the specific role of women in family and society. The Liberal Party was strikingly marginally present in the pursuit of improving the situation of the female citizen.

Women MPs participated in a unique way in this normative debate regarding 'what was in the interest of women'. In certain situations and concerning certain subjects, they broadened the dominant vision of what was good or bad for women. An example of this can be found in the socialist faction in the post-war period that was strongly devoted to equality in many different policy domains. Male and female socialist MPs pursued equal treatment on the labor market and improvement of the situation of working women (equal wages, child care facilities, education and training for women that guarantees

employment, pleas against fiscal discrimination of working women etc.). Nevertheless, there were a few major points of disagreement amongst the male and the female socialist MPs. Where the men were also in favor of part-time labor, the women were more skeptical. They feared that part-time labor would hinder equal treatment of women. For the same reasons, they also criticized allowances for mothers to stay at home to take care of children. Thus, besides strongly supporting the equality discourse in their faction, they also criticized the differential discourse of their faction in which women were to take on specific female roles within the family and in society at large.

The Christian-democratic faction was the most fervent proponent of the difference discourse. For instance, women and men MPs pleaded for higher wages for specific female jobs (such as teachers) and for a general system of part-time labor for women. Only female members of this faction criticized part-time labor because it would undermine the economic position of women. Furthermore, part-time labor, according to these female Christian-democrats, would need to go hand in hand with a redistribution of family tasks. Measures to enhance the combination of work and family would also be to the benefit of men. By criticizing the difference discourse and by broadening the equality discourse to the private sphere, these women MPs took a unique stance in their faction and its dominant discourse regarding the interests of women.

The interventions of women MPs were, thus, often situated outside of the dominant interpretation of women's interests. This widening of the political agenda had a relatively small quantitative importance, but did certainly realize a more diversified substantive representation of the female citizenry. This type of diversification should be considered as an improvement in the substantive representation of women because it increases the responsiveness of political representation towards more groups of citizens. Furthermore, the broadening of the dominant political vision about women happened through the presentation of ideas, visions, and especially discussions that were formulated by the women's movement. The allowance for women to stay at home to take care of children and regarding part-time employment for women were ardent points of discussion amongst women's movements from different ideological strands. Some were in favor of these measures because they would value the role of women as mothers and care-givers; others criticized them for treating women as different and harming their equality at home

and in the labor market. Improving the substantive representation of women, making it more responsive to female citizens, implies ‘politicizing’ ideological and normative debates about what is in the interest of women. These conflicts of opinion should not only be present in civil society but also in the political arena, so that they can inform political and policy choices.

My research shows that this kind of qualitative improvement in the substantive representation of women was realized by women MPs who had strong ties with the women’s movement. These are what Suzanne Dovi (2002) would label ‘preferable group representatives’ who participate in social networks with dispossessed subgroups of women. Indeed, these women MPs were engaged in normative debates about women’s interests and contributed to them in a unique way by combining insights on women’s issues with a specific ideological frame. Of course, such normative, ideological debates can only happen if opposite stances are voiced. Here, my research showed that the presence of women in the different political factions fostered the articulation of conflicting ideological positions regarding the interests of women and gender relations.

4. Conclusion

In contrast with the increasing demands for better substantive representation of women and the political practices to reach it like quotas and the installation of women’s policy agencies, little theoretical debate exists on what substantive representation of women is and should be. Using Pitkin’s three criteria for substantive representation – acts, interests and responsiveness - this article first discussed the acts that empirical research takes into account when investigating the substantive representation of women and the way it operationalizes women’s interests. Next, again starting from existing research including my own research on the substantive representation of women during eighty years of budget debates in the Belgian Lower Chamber, it reflected on what ‘good’ substantive representation of women would entail.

The acts through which the substantive representation of women is realized are situated in different stages of the decision-making process (e.g. initiating legislation, speaking for women during political debates to broaden the political agenda, supporting and voting

bills of specific importance for women). Furthermore, substantive representation of women also takes place outside of the parliamentary arena: in civil society (i.e. women's movements lobbying or working together with the state) and in public administrations (i.e. women's policy agencies gendering policy debates and contents, and providing feminist policy feedback). Women's interests are as diverse as the acts involved in the substantive representation of women. Traditionally, they are divided into those stemming from private and public division of labor and aiming at improving the practical living conditions of women (practical gender interests), and those aiming at overcoming discrimination and at reaching gender equality (strategic or feminist gender interests). Often these two categories are combined to assess whether, for instance, women MPs are more fervent representatives of women than their male colleagues.

Especially comparative research across time and space can provide answers to pertinent questions regarding the prerequisites for enhancing the substantive representation of women. This article aimed at furthering comparative research on this issue by making suggestions regarding the operationalizations of core concepts that are applicable in different states, political contexts and time periods. I firstly argued that a formal (as opposed to a thematic) operationalization of the substantive representation would enhance the comparability of our knowledge on the substantive representation of women. Secondly, I indicated three criteria that can be used to measure and compare the increase in or the improvement of the substantive representation of women. Firstly, improving the substantive representation of women implies more acts in support of women's issues as broadly defined as possible, thus including practical and strategic interests. Secondly, to improve the responsiveness towards more female citizens, diversity amongst women and feminist strands needs to be recognized and voiced. Good substantive representation of women features a high level of representativeness of the concerns and views of different groups of women and feminists in society. This diversity would eventually also imply that contradictory and conflicting views on women's interests as they are voiced by women's movements from different ideological strands would become part of mainstream political debates in the political arena.

I argue that improving the substantive representation of women and correcting the substantive under-representation of women – more and more a central concern of

democratic governments - would entail these three changes. Theoretically, they could be enhanced by more descriptive representation, for instance by increasing the number of women or feminist MPs with strong ties with the women's movement in all the political factions. In certain circumstances, empirical research concludes, women legislators act more for women than their male colleagues. Furthermore, increasing the number of women also enlarges the possibility that, through these women MPs, the life experiences and perspectives of different groups of women and diverging ideological stances can be brought into the representational process. Nevertheless, a lot of scholars report that descriptive representation does not automatically lead to substantive representation, thereby weakening descriptive representation as a tool to guarantee substantive representation. Guaranteeing political and policy attention for diversity and normative conflicts regarding what is in the interest of women might therefore be a task that is more easily assumed by women's policy agencies. Women's policy agencies could generate alliances with a broad array of women's movements and contribute to the representation of diverging and conflicting views on women's and gendered interests and views and on feminist demands.

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