

THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE HEARINGS IN FINLAND

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from Pitkin and recent feminist theorising on the representation of women, the paper presents an analysis of the representation of women in the expert hearings by the parliamentary standing committees in Finland. On the basis of a quantitative analysis of the experts utilised in 2005, the paper investigates the descriptive (gender composition of the committees and the experts) and substantive representation of women (inclusion of women's NGOs, state gender equality agencies and gender studies scholars) in the expert hearings.

The results point out the gender segregation of committees and the expert pool. In average, every third expert consultation was by a woman, but their share of consultations varied very much by sector and committee. Those committees with the highest proportion of women also tended to use female experts most often. Women's group interests as defined by the study were consulted seldom and they very much concentrated in one committee and few issues considered to pertain 'directly' to women.

The results of the analysis are discussed in light of the different opportunities and barriers of the actors to actually 'represent women' in the hearings. The results rather imply two conclusions. Firstly, that ensuring the gender balance of parliamentary standing committees may indeed contribute to the substantive representation of women, although perhaps not always only in the direct manner which is often ascribed to it. Secondly, that in considering future policy initiatives, it may not be the gender composition of the expert pool that should be in focus, but rather the substantive representation of women (the inclusion of women's group interests).

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents some results from a study on the inclusion and exclusion of women as experts in the parliamentary standing committee hearings in Finland. Its aim is to investigate the relations, problems and political implications linked to various conceptions of women's representation in the

their interests (14 §). Moreover, the rights of children (6 §) and the Sami people to participate in decision-making processes were constitutionally confirmed.¹ However, there are no details in the constitutional law as to how the new obligations should be fulfilled. Pohjolainen (1999) points out that, for example, developing new legislation on participatory systems or introducing citizens' initiatives could be possible methods for implementing the statute. Indeed, various types of citizens' fora and internet open hearings on selected issues have been introduced in public policy-making especially during the 2000s to fulfill these goals (cf. also Rättälä 2001).

As far as women's participation is concerned, the Gender Equality Act of 1995 (modified 2005)

Typically, the committee secretary and the chair play an important role in proposing an initial list of experts to be heard at the earliest stage of the process. The committee members can and do propose additional experts during various stages of the hearings, each "according to her/his interests" (e.g. Interview 11.06.08) . MPs are thus able promote interests seen as important to them by proposing experts that are ideologically or politically near their own convictions (Helander and Pekonen 2007).

The proposal and selection of experts is moreover structurally divided into "organisational and interest group experts" and "individual experts". Most often, the committee members propose that the committee would need to hear the viewpoint of some authority, organisation or interest group and, consequently, it sends an invitation to it. It is then up to that organisation to respond and select an expert among its personnel or cohorts. Alternatively, the committee can propose the name of an individual person, most often an academic expert, who is thought to have relevant knowledge on the issue.

According to the research interviews, the gender of experts has seldom been discussed or noted upon in the deliberations on experts. The procedure concerning the calling of organisational experts also makes this issue the internal affair of the organisations in question. The process also includes many internal, informal, criteria (see Holli & Saari 2009), for example, regarding the 'excellence' of experts. If during the first expert consultation the person in question fails to fulfill these, s/he will not be called upon again. (Interview 19.6.2008).

In sum, the composition of the expert pool is very much a result of mostly informal practices and rules which are partly similar, partly vary from one parliamentary committee to another.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Representation in the deliberative fora of the parliamentary standing committees

The parliamentary committee acts as a deliberative forum, performing its task of checking legislative bills by relying, on the one hand, on the deliberations by its assembly of members, and on the other, on information received from representatives of "relevant" instances, interests and bases of knowledge. Drawing from theories of deliberative and communicative democracy, the crucial questions become: Who are included, who are not? Who must be consulted as a matter of course, which groups are seen as sometimes possessing interests that are regarded as worth of attention in specific issues? What is seen as necessary knowledge to take into account in this arena of deliberating and decision-making? Which groups and interests are excluded and on which grounds? Which role do women, their interests and their representation play in this arena?

To represent, *repraesentere*, means basically "to make present something that is not in fact present" (Pitkin 1967, 92). The concept of representation has foremost been developed by Hanna Pitkin (1967) who mapped out four main types of representation theories, each partial in its view: 1)

viewpoint, she nevertheless emphasises the interconnecteness of the four forms of representation: they form part of an integrated whole. According to Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler (2005), this tends to be forgotten in research on representation which tends to focus on one or two forms of representation only.

In feminist research, especially the question of descriptive and substantive representation and their relationship have been of special interest. Do women matter? Is there a relationship between their presence and proportion (descriptive representation) in a legislative assembly and the policy output and adoption of women-friendly policies (substantive representation)? The answers provided so far are partial and by no means clear-cut.

On the one hand, most scholars seem to agree that the inclusion of women, their presence (descriptive representation) in political decision-making is a necessary prerequisite for women's substantive representation to be possible at all (e.g. Phillips 1995, Young 2002). Jane Mansbridge (1999) has provided a theoretical basis for this viewpoint by arguing out the descriptive representation of disadvantaged groups, such as women or blacks, enhances, in addition to other democratic goods, their substantive representation by improving the quality of deliberations. That is, it improves the quality of communication and aids the articulation of previously uncrystallised interests by the disadvantaged groups. On the other hand, there have been much criticism against 'critical mass' theories which tend to assume that the number of women automatically affects the outcomes of policy-making. Instead, scholars point out, focus should be on 'critical acts' or 'critical actors' that matter more (e.g. Dahlerup 1988; Childs & Krook 2006). This point of critique also targets the assumption that all women automatically 'represent women' and their 'interests'. For example, Tremblay and Pelletier (2000) showed in their empirical analysis that to ensure the legislative success of women's concerns, a better strategy is to vote feminists (women or men) into the parliament that rely on 'women' (descriptive representation) only.

Recently, there have been some innovative viewpoints concerning the substantive representation of women which seem very useful also for our endeavour concerning the representation of women in parliamentary standing committees in Finland. Celis et al. (2008) criticise earlier research's narrow approach to the substantive representation of women in that, in their opinion, it tends to assume that women are the relevant actors; elected assemblies are the relevant sites; women's interests are the reason for women's activities; and that distinct policies reflecting 'women's interests' are the result of this activity. Instead, Celis et al. advocate a more comprehensive view of substantive

point out the state feminist character (adoption and mediation of women's movement interests to the state) and the effectiveness of such agencies for women's policy success.

Weldon (2002, 1159) also draws attention to the fact that the institutional structures of public policy-making and administration are formed in a way that silently favours the substantive representation of historically dominant groups, while blocking and silencing the voice and interests of marginalised ones. According to her, an effective representation of women requires the articulation of a group perspective in relevant fora and processes. Weldon (ibid. 1158) concludes:

Marginalised groups, then, are poorly represented in most contemporary democratic policy processes because their perspectives are not equally reflected or considered in the policy process. Better substantive representation for these groups would provide mechanisms for the effective articulation of their distinctive perspective as a regular part of the policy processes, and would seek to eliminate barriers to the equal treatment of that perspective in policy deliberations.

Data and methods

The research material for this study consists, firstly, of information on experts utilised by the 15 parliamentary standing committees of the Parliament of Finland in 2005. Secondly, we also make use of the statistics produced by the Finnish Parliament itself of the work done in the parliamentary standing committees. Thirdly, we also have use of the questionnaires which included a query of gender researchers' societal activities that were collected as a part of the Research Assessment Exercise of Women's Studies in Finland (Bergman 2001). Finally, we interviewed 18 MPs and committee secretaries of three parliamentary standing committees (2008) to gain more in-depth data on the work and selection of experts of parliamentary committees.

The year 2005 was selected as a focus of this study as it was the second full year of the parliamentary cycle (2003–2007). The second year usually represents best the average parliamentary year. After the first (partial) year, a new parliament has started to function normally and the work load of the standing committees reaches an average level compared to fewer reports and statements during the first year and more than the average during the last year of the parliamentary cycle. Moreover, as the second year of the parliamentary cycle has also been utilised by previous research on parliamentary hearings (Helander & Pekonen 2007), this choice had the additional advantage for making some comparisons possible.

During the parliamentary year 2005, the standing committees gave 260 reports on governmental proposals and 340 statements to other standing committees (Eduskunnan kanslian toimintakertomus 2005, 14). The Parliament has its own quite extensive production of statistics which however does not include any systematic and updated lists or statistics about the experts heard by the standing

Table 1. Women members and vice-members in the standing committees (2005 and 2008).

	Women members 2005		Women members 2008		Women vice-members 2005		Women vice-members 2008	
	Tot.	%	Tot.	%	Tot	%	Tot	%
Committee (all members/vice-members)					.	%	.	%

In a similar manner to Scandinavian results concerning the gender-segregated recruitment to standing committees (Bergqvist 1994; Wängnerud 1999) Timo Forstén (2005) in his longitudinal study of Finnish committee assignments between 1945 and 2002 pointed out their horizontal and vertical gender segregation. Horizontally, the Committees for Constitutional Law, Foreign Affairs and Finance have been very male-dominated – these are also the committees that tend to be regarded as the most prestigious in various committee rankings. Female MPs on the other hand have more likely been assigned to the Committee for Education and Culture and the Committee for Social Affairs and Health, generally considered to be dealing with "women's issues". (Ibid.)

Although in the context of their increasing numbers Finnish women MPs have gradually conquered access to all committees, the parliamentary standing committee system still basically displays a clear gender-segregated pattern (see Table 1), with two committees (Social Affairs and Health;

revealed that many of the women MPs explicitly regarded themselves as representatives of women to some degree.

Women MPs in the parliamentary standing committees thus can, often claim to and indeed sometimes do represent women's interests. Formally, MPs only represent their party and geographical electoral district. In practice, MPs however both regard themselves and are regarded by their constituency as representatives of many additional groups and interests, which vary from one MP to another: a professional group, a disadvantaged social group perhaps, the elderly or proponents of children's welfare, women or men. It is precisely the openness of their mandate after being elected which makes also the substantive representation of women by women MPs possible – and sometimes factual.

The other side of the coin is that women MPs – as well as male MPs – indeed represent many groups and interests, which is bound to lead to conflicts between the interests represented and their mutual prioritization. The question whose viewpoints and which interests should be given priority in a specific issue becomes a matter of judgment. As far as women's interests are concerned, the result may depend either on personal convictions (feminism) and knowledge, the openness of the committee to giving room to expressing (or: listening to) viewpoints emphasising women's interests or information received or not received in the expert hearings during the reading of the bill in the parliamentary committee.

Descriptive representation of women: the women experts

The second source of women's descriptive representation available are the women experts who are consulted in the parliamentary committee hearings. Earlier studies on Finnish committee hearings have not paid any attention to the gender of the experts utilised. The only information available concerns the experts utilised by the Committee for Constitutional Law (Wiberg 2003, 983-4) between 1945 and 2002 which shows that women gradually entered as experts in this arena from the 1960s onwards, but that they still were a small, about twenty percent minority among its experts at the beginning of the 2000s.

Notably, the number of expert consultations has increased considerably during the last 40 years from which there is data available: in 1966, the committees consulted experts 600 times; in 1978 2107 times; and in 2001 3980 times (Helander & Pekonen 2007, 87-90). Our study reveals a further increase: in 2005, the standing committees consulted experts 5187 times, in average 8.6 consultations/issue. Partly, the increase is due to the increase of issues dealt with by the committees, but, as Helander and Pekonen (2007, 91) point out, the use of experts by standing committees has increased beyond its impact.

In 2005, of the 4630 person consultations⁷, 1570 (33,9 %) were with female experts and 3060 consultations (66,1 %) with male experts.. In sum, of all the consultation every third was given by a woman. Male experts were consulted appr. 5,1 times/issuet and female experts appr. 2,6 times/issue. Looking at the distribution of experts by committee, the gendered segregation of expertise, reminiscent of the one found in the gender composition of committees, becomes visible.

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Table 2. Consultations by women experts in the standing committees 2005.

Committee	Consultations tot.	Consultations by women
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Table 3. Expert consultations by sector and the proportion of consultations by women experts

	Number of consultations	Of all consultations	Consultations by women experts	
Public sector	2770	53,4 %	963	38,0 %
Private sector	204	3,9 %	40	20,9 %
Civil society	1608	31,0 %	465	35,4 %
Research and education	587	11,3 %	98	17,0 %
Other	18	0,3 %	4	23,5 %
ALL	5187	100,0 %	1570 (N=4630)	33,9 %

Table 4: Consultations by civil society and the number and proportion of women experts

	Number of consultations	% of all consultations by civil society	Number of consultations by women experts	Women experts as a percentage (%) of the organisation's expert hearings
Labour market organizations	625	47.5	202	32.3
Churches and religious associations	22	1.7	3	13.6

Here, it is out of the scope of our study to measure the actual 'state feminism' of the gender equality agencies in the committee expert hearings. Referring to the results mentioned above as indicative of their potential to represent and mediate the viewpoints of women's organisations into the policy process, instead, we investigate the consultation of these agencies in the parliamentary committee hearings in 2005.

Overall, state gender equality agencies were consulted 12 times by the parliamentary standing committees, making up 0.5 % of all the consultations by the public sector, 0.23% of all consultations total (N=5187). 10 of their representatives (84%) were women, two men (16 %).

The Ombudsman and the TANE were both consulted twice; all their expert consultations were by the Committee for Employment and Equality and concerned the reform of the Gender Equality Act. By contrast, the Gender Equality Unit (TASY) was consulted 8 times. Its role was also more inclusive: although the Committee for Employment and Equality was the main forum for consultations (5 times), the agency was also consulted by the Committee for Social and Health Affairs and the Committee for Finance. Only two of the consultations dealt with the reform of the Gender Equality Act. The TASY was also consulted in other matters concerning, for example, the preparation of the agenda for Finnish EU presidency, the Lisbon strategy and various budgetary matters.

Of the 600 reports and statements submitted by the parliamentary standing committees in 2005, gender equality agencies were consulted as experts in eight matters (1.3% of all issues). The results show that gender equality agencies tend to suffer from the same problems than the women's associations which represent women's substantive, group interests in a more direct manner. The gender equality agencies are consulted but seldom; and their participation tends to be limited mostly to one committee and specific 'gender equality issues' only.

The Gender Equality Unit differs from this picture slightly, in that its role is marginally more inclusive. As far as women's representation is concerned, its institutional mandate is however more dual: it both defends gender equality and the improvement of women's (and men's) societal position and the Government's past, present and future activities, two objectives that may not always be totally in line with each other. Moreover, the scarcity and limited scope of expert consultations with gender equality institutions do not predict well for a successful implementation of gender mainstreaming either.

Representation by women's studies experts

In Finland, the first courses in women's studies in universities were held in the 1980's and women's studies as an academic discipline was institutionalized during the 1990's. Even though women's studies as an academic discipline is rather young, there is a long tradition of gender equality research in Finland from the 1960's onwards.

In the pool of academic experts heard by the standing committees in 2005 we¹¹ were able to identify 20 consultations given by researchers with some experience in gender research. Their expert consultations comprised 3.6% (20/561) of the consultations with the academic experts (academic expertise separated from other educational institutions) (0.4 % of all expert consultations (N=4630).

¹¹ We thank Researcher Liisa Husu and Academy Professor Kevät Nousiainen for their kind assistance in identifying experts who have done some gender research at some stage in their careers, in our database.

Experts in women's studies were heard by the following standing committees: Committee for Employment and Equality (6 times), Committee for Legal Affairs (4 times), Committee for Constitutional Law (3 times), Committee for Social Affairs and Health and Committee for Agriculture and Forestry (2 times), Committee for the Future, Committee for Administration and Committee for Commerce, one consultation each. Expertise in women's studies was sought in matters concerning gender equality legislation (4 times), the arbitration of crimes and prison laws (4 times), medicinal law (2 times) and laws concerning the safety of products (2 times). The rest of these consultations (one each) varied, including the establishment of the EU Gender Institute, EU legislation, population issues, working life, pensions, other social affairs issues and immigration issues.

On the other hand, it is not self-evident that there is a pool of gender expertise available and just waiting to be utilised if only parliamentarians showed some interest in this base of knowledge. In order to investigate this question more closely, we triangulated our data to look into the societal activities that gender experts themselves engage in. The aim was to check whether gender researchers really are as excluded from the political decision-making processes as our data from 2005 suggests, or whether they are included in the decision-making processes in other arenas

researchers did not have any societal activities, whether they did not wish to share them in a context of an academic evaluation exercise or whether they considered the question inappropriate altogether (for example, one researcher said: "I do not regard my societal activities as part of my scholarly work").

concentrated in one committee, that is, the Committee for Employment and Equality, and one issue, the reform of the Gender Equality Act (12 consultations out of a total of 38). The results also tell us that the representation of women's group interests was not deemed necessary by most of the other parliamentary standing committees at any stage when they dealt with the other 578 issues (96.3%)

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