Gendering the House of Commons:  
The Politics of Measurement and Success  
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Panel: Gender Mainstreaming: The Role of Specialised Parliamentary Bodies

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Many women know that the face of the House of Commons in Canada is predominately male and that members of the legislature are too often unable to act on community objectives. These concerns are strengthened by a declined confidence in governing institutions and a simultaneous lack of trust in politicians’ motives. Yet a paradoxical situation has arisen - as legislators debate issues which profoundly shape socio-economic conditions and women’s inequalities, parliaments “have become the public face of political disengagement” (Leston-Bandeira 2012, 265).

As a remedy to unresponsive legislatures, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has encouraged state authorities to develop “gender-sensitive” parliaments to improve the participation of women and ensure that policy and legislative debates are considered through a gender lens (Palmieri 2011). The Inter-Parliamentary Union has produced a number of extensively-researched studies on how to weave gender mainstreaming into legislative practices, recently agreeing to a Plan of Action at their 127th Assembly held in Quebec City in October 2012 (IPU 2006; 2009; Palmieri 2011; IPU 2012). And many legislators around the world have headed the call. Across developed and developing countries, there are approximately 100 gender-focused entities within legislative assemblies, ranging from parliamentary standing committees to cross-party women’s caucuses. Other measures to gender a parliament include the election of women, gender mainstreaming, and initiatives which balance work and life, such as on-site child care, family-friendly legislative sitting hours and proxy voting (Sawer 2013; IPU 2011; Palmieri 2010). A gender-sensitive parliament responds to the needs of both men and women, yet it is women who are consistently underrepresented in elected office, and it is women who typically do not hold offices of decision-making and authority in parliamentary chambers. The House of Commons is considered one of the “last bastions of male culture in Canadian institutions” with an atmosphere of an “old-fashioned men’s club in which women are interlopers” (Steele 2002, 14). I focus my analytical attention to this aspect of the House of Commons seeking ways to highlight gender processes in the chamber arguing for the feminization of the parliamentary system.

In Canada, little attention has been directed toward understanding how organizational practices within the House of Commons affect women after they have been successfully elected or how institutional practices frame policy and legislative debates to the detriment of women in society. Although tenacious biographies have been penned by women recounting their difficult experiences as Members of Parliament (Copps 1986; Carstairs 1993; Fairclough 1995; Campbell 1996), only a few studies in the Canadian political science literature refer specifically to women within parliament (Trimble & Arscott 2003; Arscott & Trimble 1997). And, except for the work of Manon Tremblay, there are negligible substantive studies of female parliamentarians’
influence on gendering legislative debates in national politics (1998; 2003). In American, Australian, British, European and Latin jurisdictions, however, rigorous empirical analyses have been undertaken discussing the array of opportunities and barriers which shape women’s power and authority within legislatures, albeit with a notable focus on parliamentary committees (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer & Taylor-Robinson 2005; Holli 2012; O’Brien 2012; Rosenthal 2001).

Yet within the House of Commons attempts are being made to gender legislative deliberations. Established in 2004, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women (SCSW) was struck as a dedicated gender-focused legislative committee in the House of Commons. The SCSW has published an impressive number of studies on a wide array of policy issues affecting the lives of women, their families and their communities. The SCSW has also strongly argued for the implementation of gender mainstreaming and for the implementation of gender-responsive budgets (House of Commons 2005; 2008). The Library of Parliament has also produced two concise reports reflecting on arguments presented by the IPU about the importance of women in elected office and the gender dimensions of the Canadian House of Commons (Barnes & Munn-Rivard 2013; Munn-Rivard 2013).

Addressing systemic discrimination in the House of Commons was forced onto the political agenda during the latter part of 2014 after revelations of widespread sexual harassment on “Parliament Hill” became public (MacCharles 2014.) After some protracted political debate and largely in response to pressure from the Official Opposition, the all-party Internal Board of Economy eventually devised and then released an anti-harassment policy which covers MPs conduct with staff (Press 2014). The House of Commons Policy on Preventing and Addressing Harassment, approved on December 9, 2014, defines what constitutes harassment as well as abuse of authority in the context of a MP-staff relationship outlining procedures for resolution and a process for filing complaints (House of Commons 2014).

While a start, there is much work to be done to enhance the organizational capacity of the House of Commons to attend to troublesome issues, not the least of which is the assurance of an institutional commitment to substantive anti-harassment practices in the chamber along with processes which attend to the working lives of women parliamentarians. I suggest that gendering the House of Commons is a good next step. Three fundamental inter-related principles underpin a gender-sensitive parliament address women’s place in politics and society: the presence of women in legislative bodies, gender mainstreaming legislative practices and debates, and the promotion of women’s empowerment. In effect, I suggest these principles can feminize a parliamentary system by infusing alternative ideas, practices and discourses which recognize women’s voices and experiences to instill a measure of gender balance between men and women in parliamentary work and outputs.

Focussing on the House of Commons, I discuss these dimensions by analysing the consequences and outcomes of institutions and organizations (using the terms interchangeably). I argue that particular gender equality indicators can be useful to reveal and subsequently address the complexities of gender inequalities in the House of Commons when integrated with a gender mainstreaming framework. I further propose that an analytical pathway to explore the consequences of institutions must be incorporated into gender mainstreaming initiatives to properly assess an institution like the House of Commons. To do so, I look to historical
institutionalism amalgamated with gender and organization theory into a feminist-institutional approach to capture a nuanced understanding of the House of Commons as a gendered social structure. An historical institutional approach is instructive given its theoretical focus on explaining “...how and why institutions lock the expectations and behaviour of individuals into relatively predictable, self-reinforcing patterns” even when confronted by major socio-cultural changes such as the rise of feminism and gender equality discourses (Krook & Mackay 2011, 12).

From a feminist institutional perspective, formal and informal practices and rules of behaviour, along with the interplay between institutional sites and actors within the organization, are conceptualized as deeply embedded in and mediated by male norms and gendered power relations. The representational system and legislative practices in the House of Commons are taken to be products of history, significantly influenced by Westminster parliamentary culture and conventions. The House of Commons is conceptualized as the public organization of control with clear delineation in the division of work and privilege (Mills & Tancred 1992; Itzin & Newman 1995; Acker 2006). It is a gendered organization which, in the absence of transformative reforms, continues to perpetuate complex inequalities between men and women both within and outside of the legislative chamber. Implementing successful gender mainstreaming will no doubt be a challenge. It is a framework devised for policy development, and there have been important questions posed as to what constitutes the achievement of “gender equality”. Indeed, although the concept of gender has been seriously debated this does not negate the possibility of institutional reform.

**Gender, Institutions and Inequality**

I begin the analysis in terms of how our everyday lives are structured and ordered within institutions to highlight similar processes in the House of Commons. In this analysis, the House of Commons is conceptualized not simply as a chamber of legislative debate, but as a place of work and the public organization of gendered social relations. The following questions guide my analysis:

- How and where do gender norms emanate within an institution?
- How do institutions perpetuate women’s inequality?
- How is “gendering” identified within an organization or institution?
- What gender equality indicators can be used to identify gender processes within an institution?
- How is change instigated and how is it measured?
- How do we know when gendering processes have been disrupted in the promotion of women’s equality?
- How does an institution become feminized or regendered?

In the IPU literature, gender is conceptualized as “the social attributes associated with being male and female and the relations between women, men, girls and boys” (Palmieri 2011, 5). While a well-accepted and quite valid definition, it does not account for the role of institutions in both sustaining and recreating appropriate and expected behaviours of masculine and feminine. This definition also does not attend to the way women within organizations often struggle with
institutionally developed gender systems, where women are typically situated in less powerful organizational positions and decision-making roles than men. I contend this is a stubborn truism, found in both in private and public sectors. In the construction of relations of power within organizations “everyone has a sex and performs a gender” but masculine forms of gendering generally dominate (Chappell 2006, 226). From this perspective, organizations evolve into institutional instruments of social control which “exercise power over a number of generations” (Vickers, Rankin & Appelle 1993, 133-134).

Organizations become gendered through four inter-related processes (Acker 1992; 2006):

1. The production of gender divisions and the recruitment and the organization of work;
2. The production of symbols, images and other forms of consciousness which explicate and justify;
3. Interactions between individuals within the organization; and
4. The internal mental work of individuals within the institution.

Joan Acker further argues that all organizations are in effect “inequality regimes” defined as “loosely inter-related practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations” (2006, 443). Inequality regimes mirror women’s inequality within society understanding that all organizations are embedded in a particular socio-political gender regime of power relations intimately structured by age, race, ethnicity, aboriginality, gender, class or sexuality. Inequality is understood as “systematic disparities” between actors within the organization in terms of their possession and control over resources, their participation in decision-making, the segregation of jobs, the opportunities available for promotions, financial rewards and other incentives which motivate individual behaviour over work and position (Acker 2006, 443). An inequality regime is open to change with shifts in relationships within the organization; it is not static or always permanent (Acker 2006). The steepness of hierarchy, however, certainly structures the depth of inequalities and determines the regime’s resilience. In steeply hierarchical systems like bureaucracies, for example, the inequality regime is fastened and more difficult modify compared to a flatter organizational structure which potentially provides more opportunities for women to engage in decision-making (Acker 2006, 445).

The House of Commons is decidedly a steeply hierarchal organizational system made operational through traditional office and clearly delineated lines of communication. The executive, while having to maintain the confidence of the chamber, is at the apex of the legislative system made all the more powerful over the last few decades due to the centralization of power in the office of the Prime Minister. A Speaker literally presides over debate in the House and holds the privilege of identifying who will articulate their views and that of their constituents. MPs who are recognized to speak in the chamber is determined solely by party leaders and party whips. The chamber is divided into two sides one officially designated as the “opposition” with institutional focus on the leaders of political parties who command the loyalty and discipline of the caucus. The division of work is further underpinned by the production of gender divisions and images also well-evident in the House of Commons. The chamber’s “winner take all” culture coupled with militaristic ceremonial practices, such as the Sergeant-At-Arms’ placement of the Mace as a symbol of the authority of the Speaker, is purposely organized
to remind occupants that men fought men in the pursuit of what’s best for nation and the commonwealth. Westminster parliaments were founded when men had the franchise, were legal persons and property owners. Men were the nation builders of yesterday and are the leaders of today. The parliamentary arena in Canada, as it is elsewhere, is a chamber where men dominate decision-making, determine what issues are for public attention, frame political discourse and determine the standards of evaluation.

**Regendering Parliament**

While the House of Commons is linked to an upper house, from a political and representation standpoint, it is a relatively stand-alone institution. However, in its functioning, layers of institutions are at work in both sustaining continuities and in shaping gendered inequalities. The House of Commons exists because of the presence of other organizations. Political parties, each quite diverse in terms of organizational cultures and objectives, are merged into inherited parliamentary practices. Indeed, the House of Commons produces and reproduces complex inequalities (Acker 2006, 442) made all the more sharp given the institutional dynamic. As Kareen Jabre reminds, “Parliaments are in essence a platform where conflicts are channelled into politically negotiated solutions, and where diverging or conflicting interests are transformed into policies and legislation that is applicable to all” (Jabre 2009, 55). Yet some of the organizations within the House of Commons have a valued-driven notion of what constitutes “applicable to all” being able to justify women’s place within society, the economy and the family through ideological lenses. Women in the current Conservative Party of Canada, for example, may well support the party’s position on “choice in child care”, but know that it is women who are the primary caregivers and who disproportionately comprise the economically disadvantaged. They are likely also aware that for immigrant and aboriginal women, these situations are often much more desperate. Complex inequalities are overshadowed, however, by the priorities of the party and Westminster parliamentary practices and conventions.

A member of parliament, a position still largely based on the breadwinner male citizen, is de-sexed and de-gendered. Indeed, the “structuring of physical space” and the conditions of work within the chamber “assume that parliament representatives are not at the same time primary carers for family members” a role which, in most instances, falls to women (Sawer 2000, 370). Within the House of Commons, a “logic of appropriateness” is clearly at work (Chappell 2006, 225). As Louise Chappell reminds, all institutions construct and justify certain types of conduct while discouraging others often in terms of acceptable masculine and feminine traits and behaviours (2006, 225-226). In the House of Commons, behaviours are sometimes obviously gendered, such the accepted dress of MPs based on male business attire, or the issue of women MPs bringing their children to the chamber or onto the floor of the House. More often, gendering processes are subtle resulting from the unconscious actions such as perceptions about appropriate leadership traits. In either form, the logic of appropriateness upholds traditional practices which reinforces a masculine/male archetype parliamentarian who is expected to wear a suit to work, assume a particular leadership personae and is apparently devoid of having to worry about balancing work and family. Child care services have been in place for over 30 years and many of the washrooms are equipped with change tables, two recently installed in 2012 (Barnes & Munn-Rivard 2013). Unlike some other jurisdictions, however, there is no financial assistance to cover child care expenses and the benefits received by parliamentarians do not specifically
cover parental leave (Barnes & Munn-Rivard 2013, 3-4). As well, parliamentary privilege upholds that MPs have the “right to carry out their parliamentary duties without being assaulted, menaced, intimidated or insulted” yet there are no stated objectives prohibiting sexist language (Barnes & Munn-Rivard 2013, 4).

While change is difficult to instigate in hierarchical, consolidated institutions like the House of Commons, inequality regimes can be disrupted especially if one organization within the operation of the legislature influences other actors. The idea of an electoral contagion has been used to explain why hesitant political parties such as the Conservative Party of Canada has become more sensitive to criticisms about the lack of women in its ranks (Goodyear-Grant 2013, 125-126). The current Official Opposition Party, the New Democratic Party, has had a long-standing organizational commitment to parity in the nomination of men and women as candidates, and the Liberal Party organizationally supports the nomination and election of women through the National Women’s Commission. Although the motivations of the Conservative Party are about expanding the electoral base rather than a commitment to progressive women’s equality, actions of their main competitors have likely influenced the Conservative Party’s attention to women as voters. This may in part explain why, after the May 2011 election, a record 76 women were elected representing 24.7 percent of the seats of the House of Commons – an encouraging increase from the previous 22.1 percent (Cool 2011, 1). The percentage of women elected has stalled, however, hovering between the 20 to 22 percent mark over the last eleven years increasing just over 10 percent since 1988.

The importance of increasing the number of women in elected office is based on the argument that their presence in the House as a “critical mass” can instigate changes within an organizational culture and facilitate legislative outputs which benefit women. According to presence theory, when more women enter the chamber, a feminized politics acts as a catalyst given women’s shared experiences in the home, the economy and in public life (Lovenduski & Norris 2003). It has also been argued that women tend to bring a different style of politics to the chamber preferring less combative, consensus-based processes – a politics which conflicts with party practices and parliamentary mores (Palmieri 2011; IPU 2009; Steele 2002).

In a study of the UK parliament after which a number of women were elected in 1997, Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris assessed the proposition that women politicians support and articulate different political values and policy issues than men (2003, 87). Their findings did not support the argument that a higher number of women led to radical change in the predominant culture at Westminster, but nor was it “politics as usual” (2003, 100). Evidence suggested that women politicians across the parties did interject different values from their male counterparts, particularly in debates on equality measures (2003). While we have less evidence in the Canadian case, in a study of female parliamentarians in the 35th Parliament which sat from 1993 to 1997, Manon Tremblay found that a majority of respondents tended to hold territorial conceptions of political representation and tangential conceptions of representation in terms of group identity such as women (Tremblay 2003, 224-225). Manon Tremblay did conclude, however, that during the term of the 35th Parliament, it was women members of the chamber rather than men who most often gave priority to women’s issues (1998, 464).
The political aspirations of women vary and in Canada this is particularly the case due to regionalism, linguistic and ethno-cultural diversities. Contemporary research has questioned gender stereotypes of women as “naturally more principled” and conciliatory than men complicating the link between the presence of women in legislatures and substantive actions on behalf of women (Mackay 2008; Ross 2002, 190). The focus has now turned to the actions of critical actors, which includes men, in the promotion of women’s equality initiatives (Childs & Krook 2009). As many feminist scholars have pointed out, there is no one category of woman and there are no guarantees that a critical mass of women will make a difference (Hankivsky 2013; Sawer 2012; Childs & Kook 2009). As I have been arguing, an institutional surround influences and often transforms behaviours when individuals uphold or internalize an institution’s logic of appropriateness. As members of a political party, women legislators have varying identities, cultural backgrounds and socio-economic experiences. They hold a spectrum of political values and choose a particular political party which best reflects their political beliefs. Yet, if organizational processes shift, so too may gendered understandings of feminine and masculine; gender and power.

As a consequence of the typically low numbers of women in conjunction with the chamber established as a “men’s club” (Steele 2013, 14), particular patterns of behaviour emerged in the House of Commons becoming institutionalized through party practices and parliamentary custom. Men’s access to power “has been reinforced over time through ‘constantly repeated processes of exclusion’ of women” (quoted in Chappell & Waylen 2013). Gendering processes, shaped by historical trajectories inevitable in all organizations, eventually become normalized. The resultant institutional culture in the House of Commons, especially during Question Period, is an overly oppositional, hierarchical environment which suppresses women’s experiences, their talents and a feminized style of politics. This is why it has been suggested that female parliamentarians often find the smaller setting of legislative committees more comfortable than the theatre of parliament (Sawer 2000, 370). Female members can use House committees, for example, as “leverage beyond that of individual parliamentarians, who may have conflicting accountabilities” between their personal preferences and party policy (Sawer 2012, 322). Yet, even in this milieu, gender and hierarchy still matters. Research indicates that female parliamentarians are typically concentrated in or chair social policy committees rather than finance and industry committees because they are considered less power-full, status-driven committees (O’Brien 2012; Palmieri 2011; Darcy 1996). Gender dynamics continue in committee with female parliamentarians participating less in discussions and interrupting less often during deliberations than their male counterparts (Kathlene 1994). In a study of all standing committees in the Parliament of Canada, only one has a participation rate of over 75 percent which as expected, is the House Standing Committee on the Status of Women. Four of 39 standing committees have 50 percent or more female parliamentarians – four of which are in the Senate (Barnes 5, 2013). In the House of Commons, nine Standing Committees have female participation rates between 25 and 49.9 percent, and in April 2013, only two women chaired a House of Commons committee: Health and Status of Women (Barnes & Munn-Rivard 2013, 5-6).
Regendering Institutions – A Plan of Action

In order to give substance to the anti-harassment policy recently approved by the Board of Internal Economy in the House of Commons, I suggest that a Plan of Action articulating a series of indicators be devised agreeable to political actors yet substantive enough to target areas requiring regendering. I argue for indicators to ensure that a rigorous process is developed and to ensure that results can be tracked and trends compared over time. A strategy with indicators may improve the possibility of gender mainstreaming becoming a formalized, organizational commitment, especially important given expected turnovers in government and opposition parties in the House. Indicators can act as a “pointer” to highlight a specific condition, situation or process”, and in pursuit of a gender-sensitive House of Commons, indicators can put into practice objectives set out in the Plan of Action (CIDA 1997, 5).

I look to the work of the formerly-named Canadian International Development Agency which developed a broad range of gender equality indicators for women in development initiatives which I argue is apropos given the framework’s emphasis on institution building and project development. Risk indicators highlight aspects of the external environment which may impede or facilitate the realignment of gendering processes. Input indicators look to the array and type of resources available to encourage, for example, participation of parliamentarians in legislative debates. Process indicators are the delivery of resources and how rules and practices support gender mainstreaming. Finally, output and outcome indicators measure effectiveness and performance achievements (CIDA 1997, 16-20).

To achieve results, indicators must be based on clearly defined objectives, be realistic and include an array of measurements. The objective of gender mainstreaming is to “achieve gender equality, and making institutions more reflective of the needs, aspirations and experiences of all women in society” (IPU 2011, 6-7). The Plan of Action addresses these objectives, specifically noting the importance of:

- Increasing the number of women in parliament and their equitable participation within the legislature;
- Implementing gender equality legislation;
- Mainstreaming gender equality throughout parliamentary work;
- Creating and making more sensitive gender infrastructure and parliamentary culture;
- Assuring that gender equality is implemented as a responsibility of men and women;
- Encouraging political parties to champion gender equality; and
- Enhancing gender sensitivity among parliamentary staff.

To implement a gender mainstreaming strategy, an initial working group of parliamentarians could be struck, working closely with the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, to establish common ground between the political parties, building on existing working relationship between MPs. Fundamentally, ideas generated from this working group will become part of a strategy to alleviate party discipline, facilitate participation of all parliamentary actors, infuse a new standard of legislative discourse and realign hierarchical methods of control and decision making.
Risk Factors:
I am proposing the strategy begin with a discussion of the reasons why a gender-sensitive parliament can facilitate parliamentary responsiveness, less in terms of devising indicators but as a qualitative plea for legislative reforms. Bearing in mind the politics of devising indicators in a parliamentary setting, one of the key barriers to injecting gender mainstreaming into the House of Commons is the practices of political parties. Political parties must be encouraged to promote women within their ranks, specifically targeting recruitment strategies for candidates and as leaders. This encouragement can be made all the stronger to political parties if it is connected to a discussion about support among citizens who believe the House of Commons underwhelms Canadians in its performance. Discussion points may include:

- Attitudes of Canadians towards public institutions and percent changes over time
- Canadians’ satisfaction with democracy and the House of Commons
- Percent of Canadian who did not vote compared with previous elections
- Percent among Canadians possessing socially tolerant attitudes
- Percent among Canadians supporting the advancement of women in non-traditional occupations
- Number of women nominated by a party in relation to men
- Number of female political party leaders in relation to men

Input Indicators:
Input indicators will be quite extensive given the many processes and internal institutional practices involved in the chamber. Crucial to this process is to find ways to flatten the steepness of the organization to encourage inclusion in decision-making and cross-party collaboration for MPs generally huddled within their own organizations. Procedural and institutional reforms can potentially realign parliamentary practices and hence gendering processes if they question gender neutralities and conventional practices.

As an initial start, existing data can be accessed through the PARLINFO search engine on the Parliament of Canada web site. PARLINFO does a good job of providing data on the number of women who ran as candidates from 1921 to present, as well as the current number of women in the Senate and in the House of Commons. This type of data – called a participation indicator – is one of the first steps in building a suite of input indicators. Other input indicators may include:

- The presence of a gender focused parliamentary committee and resources allocated to the committee in relation to other committees
- Creation of cross-caucus committees supported by party leadership
- Collective caucus decision-making in allocation of committee memberships
- Gender-based analysis across all parliamentary committees
- Gender-based training of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff
- Production of sex-disaggregated data not available through PARLINFO
- Creation of a gender code of conduct
Creation a Commissioner for Gender Equality to act as independent oversight mechanism to ensure consistent application of gender mainstreaming and to track results across all indicators

An *empowerment indicator* must also be devised to measure the actual involvement of female parliamentarians in decision-making and the extent of their control over their work environment (CIDA 1997, 34-39). Empowerment indicators could reveal gender divisions of labour if assessments investigate the committee membership of women and track how many times, and to what effect, female parliamentarians participate in other key leadership positions, and if male parliamentarians interject an equality discourse. Quantitative and qualitative methods could work together to gauge, for example, how many times female parliamentarians participate during discussions and what kind of language they use to support a policy prescription. Assessments can also be conducted examining the participation of community and women’s groups in committee deliberations to reveal what kind of knowledge and discourse they bring to deliberations and the degree of knowledge transfer between witnesses and committee reports. Indicators may include:

- Percent of women elected to the House of Commons in relation to men
- Percent of women on Speaker’s list in relation to men
- Percent of women appointed or elected to leadership roles within the chamber, such as Speaker, chair of committees, house leaders, party whips, caucus chairs in relation to men
- Code of Conduct to promote less aggressive legislative language
- Autonomy for legislative committees to conduct research and hold public consultations
- Percent of funds dedicated to off-set travel expenses of community-based groups and private individuals

**Output and Outcomes Indicators:**
In many ways, output and outcome indicators are some of the most important given they track the results of input processes which are then used to assess change, evaluate capacity building and identify performance achievements. Indicators may include:

- Increase in the number of women elected to the House in relation to men
- Percent of committees which apply a gender-based analysis in relation to those which do not
- Increase in the number of community-based groups providing testimony to committees in relation to other types of organizations
- Election of a women as Speaker of the House (and to other identified leadership roles)
- Reports of cross-caucus committees reporting on discussions with the Commissioner for Gender Equality
- Passing of legislation requiring gender analysis
- Diminished use of gender-specific and elimination of sexist language during Question Period over legislative sessions
- Annual reporting to Parliament by the Commissioner for Gender Equality tracking results and party responses from previous legislative sessions
If implemented, this strategy may lead to the feminization of the House of Commons derailing institutionalized male dominance. Existing institutional practices suppress the number of women elected to the chamber, restrict the opportunities available to female parliamentarians to assume leadership positions, entrench ideas about acceptable masculine and feminine behaviour leading to legislative outcomes which too often work against women’s equality. Change can take place, although likely incrementally, if a gender mainstreaming strategy is carefully devised, persistently monitored and genuinely motivated by parliamentarians working toward a responsive parliament.

The Politics of Designing and Implementing Gender-Sensitive Indicators

To dismantle the institutional dominance of masculinity, reforms are required which attend to both the formal and informal aspects of the House of Commons. Without structural changes within the chamber, gendering processes will continue unabated or re-emerge even after reforms are implemented. As Fiona Mackay observed in her analysis of the reconstituted Scottish Parliament which integrated gender equality initiatives into its operations post-Devolution, an established institution can overwhelm attempts to introduce new ideas and perspectives (Mackay 2014). Institutional legacies can revive “old norms of Westminster” leaving power relations intact requiring gender equity actors to remain vigilant to ensure enforcement (Mackay 2014; Chappell 2011, 166). Gender mainstreaming has been advanced as a way to do just this: make parliaments less masculine, more welcoming to women and open to gender analysis, preferably framed, at least in intent, by feminist critiques and discourses. Except for the few studies published by IPU, however, gender mainstreaming initiatives have been developed to analyse public policy processes within the administrative state and not the organizational surround of a political institution like the House of Commons. As Sonia Palmieri noted in her analysis of the Australian parliament, “...in much of the literature on gender mainstreaming, the role of parliament is not emphasised or considered” (2010, 5). Indeed, in Canada, gender-based analysis was devised specifically to challenge administrative practices and to raise awareness among public administrators that policies and programs have unequal gendered impacts. Formulating appropriate indicators and evaluation methods to provide empirical insights into how to best work toward a gender-sensitive parliament, are still evolving if not untested.

Since the mid 1990s, gender-based analysis, or GBA+ as it is currently named to include diversity analysis, has been implemented across federal government departments, albeit with varying degrees of success (Hankivsky 2013). Some progress has been achieved, but gender-based analysis has suffered from a lack of organizational capacity and political clout on the part of the lead government agency, Status of Women Canada, to compel the implementation of GBA across government. As well, gender-based analysis is viewed as too narrow in its interpretation and development given emphasis on an expert-bureaucratic model which integrates gender into policy development by professional public administrators but does not critique the need for gender-based analysis (Grace 1997; Paterson 2010). In reality, gender mainstreaming can be “demanding and challenging” (Hankivsky 2013) not only because of a lack of knowledge as to what gender mainstreaming entails, but also due to vague objectives and conceptual ambiguity with terms such as gender and equality (Grace 1997; McNutt 2010; Paterson 2010; Hankivsky
As a “policy about policy” gender mainstreaming is squarely focused on planned actions, programs and policy analysis (McNutt 2010, 3). Applying gender mainstreaming in the House of Commons will be challenging given the GBA+ model does not account for how institutional factors contribute to sustaining women’s inequality.

Gender mainstreaming can be effective, however, if it incorporates “systematic identification, collection and analysis of gender data backed by qualitative assessments” (Breitenbach & Galligan 2006, 598). Gender equality indicators are often the subject of criticism given the delicacy of determining objectives and defining key concepts. Disagreement will surely emerge between actors in the House of Commons in defining what is meant by gender equality, along with how it should or could be achieved. One political party will likely prefer processes and policies which support individual responsibility; others legislative intervention. Unlike the formulation of indicators for policy analysis, applying gender equality indicators within a place of public debate will be at the mercy of the various political parties working in-concert for purposes beyond ideological partisanship. Indicators are already criticized because they can be used for political purposes. Indeed, government officials sometimes refer to indicator-driven data as evidence they are acting in a policy area (Breitenbach & Galligan 2006, 598). Within a legislative chamber, these criticisms will surely be more acute. One political party may disagree, for example, with what constitutes effectiveness or “good practices” in light of how the indicator impinges on their party’s perspective of an issue or legislative preferences. As well, political parties may retaliate at the suggestion of developing indicators which evaluate their performance because they perceive themselves as independent organizations free to conduct their business in support of their constituents’ objectives and demands. In essence, attempts to establish acceptable measurements through gender mainstreaming may be perceived as stifling democratic deliberation and representation.

Moreover, indicators can “suffer from the danger of measuring what is easy measure, ignoring qualitative concerns, or leaving aside areas of importance less easy to measure” (Breitenbach & Galligan 2005, 600). Gendering processes include the invisible side of an organization unlike the quite obvious, quantifiable absence of women in the legislative chamber (Acker 2006, 452). This is particularly salient in the House of Commons. As a public institution, processes within the House are shaped by a confluence of legal requirements to ensure transparent public reporting juxtaposed to cabinet and caucus conventions of secrecy. Indicators to reveal organizational myths, symbols and attitudes within the House of Commons, and the so-called rules of the game, are ambiguous to conceptualize and difficult to measure particularly in terms of assessing change and discerning shifts in gendering processes.

Application of gender mainstreaming in a legislative arena will also necessitate political parties giving up some of their control over framing deliberations and setting the legislative agenda. This situation will unfold when gendering mainstreaming questions conventional ideas about “expert knowledge” and which groups or individuals are considered legitimate witnesses invited to meet legislative committees. Feminist activists and women’s equality organizations who give testimony at committee meetings, if indeed they are invited to do so, often struggle against state architectures which tends to view their contributions as non-objective, experiential information rather than evidence-based, empirical data given by “entrenched groups who are already seen as legitimate actors” (Smith 2005, 87).
The Inter-Parliamentary Union, and indeed many organizations which support the idea of
gendering or feminizing organizations and practices, strongly argue that indicators must be
developed through participatory processes. Members of the Standing Committee on the Status of
Women are presently well-versed in gender analysis and organizationally well-placed to consult
with Canadians, and to promote the importance of gender mainstreaming to their legislative
colleagues. The SCSW has already undertaken extensive studies of gender-based analysis
recommending a number of measures such as gender-based training prior to each session of
parliament, gender-based analysis in all committee deliberations and the establishment of a
Commissioner for Gender Equality appointed as an Officer of Parliament to oversee the
implementation of GBA (House of Commons 2005; 2008).

In sum, the unique organizational objectives of the House of Commons, along with the
practicalities associated with the political, multi-organizational surround of a parliamentary
setting, present a number of challenges in building a gender sensitive parliament both in means
and measurement. Gender equality indicators will be questioned and will substantially rely on
political will to be implemented. Reforms measures need to be realistic in terms of the political
dynamics in the House and the public purpose of the chamber. Some hierarchical dimensions of
the House of Commons, for example, will have to remain intact in order to ensure accountability.
To inaugurate a gender sensitive parliament, strategies to persuade legislative actors ought to be
cast in terms of enhancing parliamentary responsiveness – common ground upon which all
parties can agree. From my reading, Canada has been a relatively active member of IPU,
contributing data in the development of IPU’s premiere document on gender-sensitive
parliaments (IPU 2011). I suggest looking to the IPU Action Plan as a guide for the formation of
a gender mainstreaming strategy. The House of Commons could assume a leadership role
making the case that a gender-sensitive parliament is not just about making parliament work
better for women, it is about a “modern parliament; one that addresses and reflects the equality
demands of a modern society” (IPU 2012, 9).

Conclusion

A key question, and admittedly a challenge, for feminist institutional scholars is how to reform
institutions toward positive outcomes for women. I am proposing a strategy which targets
organizational practices within the House of Commons to rebalance gendering processes and to
regender practices and behaviours in the chamber. This effort is important to the women’s
equality project go both will enhance women’s presentation in legislative politics and overall
parliamentary responsiveness. Gender equality indicators resulting from the vigilant application
of gender mainstreaming can promote the development of a gender-sensitive parliament. I
have argued that while gender mainstreaming is typically applied within bureaucratic policy
development processes, it can be undertaken within a variety of settings. To be sure,
implementing gender equality initiatives supported through indicators within partisan
organizations such as the House of Commons invites scepticism. Not only is the chamber multi-
organizational creating a rather complex institutional landscape, the variety of actors, offices and
political parties within the House of Commons often work at cross-purposes. Still, if the agreed
upon measures are perceived as objective and undertaken through participatory methods to
enhance parliamentary performance, it is a task worth exploring.
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