

GETTING REPRESENTATION RIGHT FOR WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT: ACCOUNTABILITY, CONSENT, AND THE ARTICULATION OF WOMEN'S INTERESTS

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1 INTRODUCTION¹

The frustrated cry that the institutions which so deeply affect women's lives in so many countries are not accountable to them belies the ubiquitous belief that human beings should be able, individually and collectively, to determine the nature of the structures which govern how they live their lives. The modern demand for accountability is both a recognition of the existence of qualities which distinguish humans from other sentient creatures and, more importantly, a potentially useful instrument for protecting and (sometimes) nurturing those qualities (dignity, hope, love, respect) which define our human-ness.

Do the institutions most influential in determining development strategies deny accountability to women? As with the questions addressing the democratic nature of any regime, institution, or process, the answer will invariably depend upon how the term is understood. This is not merely a semantic quibble, as a great deal of political power can lie in the ability of political actors to define the terms of discourse in their own terms; and it is useful to remember that institutions such as the World Bank are manifestly not managed by women.²

The question of the extent to which a governance-oriented approach facilitates accountability to women *qua* women is irreducibly caught up in the question of the extent to which it **ought** to do so. My first task is to describe how the criteria of governance (as accountability) is firmly grounded upon the concept of **consent** as the principal prerequisite of legitimate political authority; my second, to note how consent has played an uncomfortably ambivalent role in the ability of women as a social grouping

to achieve (or even articulate) distinct political goals. My argument is that we can use the idea of a 'context of choice' (which underlies the expression of women's **subjective** interests) in order to make the (politically essential) concept of women's **objective** interests both useful and palatable. But, situating this context of choice too firmly within a discussion of identity as a primary good has very unenticing disadvantages for those concerned with changing the current conditions of women rather than merely legitimizing them.

The recent emphasis upon governance by institutions such as the World Bank as a framework for policy-making (World Bank 1993; OECD 1993; Bratton and Hyden 1992; Williams and Young 1994) has slightly but perceptibly shifted the terms of evaluation for programmes from efficiency and economic growth to whether the individuals affected by such programmes find them credible and worthy of support. Part of this trend has been purely pragmatic, insofar as it is difficult to implement and administer effective programmes over a long period of time without broad-based support³. But the demise of cold war ideological polarization, coupled with the limited achievements of more orthodox development approaches to date, have obliged (and permitted) such powerful institutions to think hard about the reasons why certain policies manifestly lacked wide-scale support. Given this focus upon participation, pluralism, and accountability, there seems to be good reason to believe that greater efforts will be made both to listen to women's voices, and to facilitate the participation of women in policy making at institutional and local levels.

¹ This article was written with the intrepid research assistance of Eva Thurlow.

² Since completing an internal study in 1992, the World Bank has increased the number of women in management from 9 per cent to 11 per cent. It hopes to reach its short-term goal of 15 per cent by 1997. But a glass ceiling remains: women account for 98 per cent of secretarial staff, 26 per cent of professional staff, 11 per

cent of management and one of 22 executive positions.' *The Globe and Mail* (8 October 1994), A10.

³ Williams and Young (1994) give specific reasons for the emergence of the governance issue within the Bank: experience with adjustment lending, internal bank factors, academic influences, and current fashion.

Yet the stress upon widespread acceptability as the pre-eminent standard of political legitimacy nonetheless poses potentially serious threats to WID programmes. This is because the fundamental idea underlying the authority of concepts such as participation, accountability, pluralism, and so on (i.e., traditional liberal ideals) is consent: certain practices are acceptable – and thus carry political authority – because all involved have agreed to them. But the emphasis upon consent in place of the achievement of more objective and concrete standards can itself be utilized to validate and to entrench the *status quo*.

Despite the obvious appeal of policy making based upon a principle of individual and collective self-determination, one ought to pay close heed to the ambivalent role of consent-based accounts of governance upon which liberal-democratic polities are grounded. From the seventeenth century on, for example, the doctrine of consent as the *sine qua non* of political legitimacy (and thus political obligation) was frequently used as a means to justify growing material inequalities between classes (and to reinforce the unequal power relationship between adult women and men). As feminists within liberal polities have become increasingly wary about offering unqualified support for consent-based accounts of legitimacy in policy-making, it is perhaps useful to discuss the double-edged nature of this concept within the context of the WID strategies and objectives which risk becoming undermined by selective (but common) interpretations of consensual legitimacy. Women cannot afford to dismiss the value of consent or consent-based theories, as they provide a strong basis for individual autonomy and political strength. But consent is, nonetheless, an ambiguous term that must be understood clearly, and used judiciously.

2 PROVISION AND AGENCY AS COMPETING BASES OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The evocative appeal of democracy has frequently rested upon its role as stalwart champion of the disadvantaged: 'majority rule was originally attractive because it was an ideology of opposition, an ideology that was not about government but rather

about displacing entrenched élites, undermining the powerful, and empowering the powerless' (Wertheimer 1990; Shapiro 1990). But the assertion that the powerless ought to be empowered stems as much from the visceral evidence of the consequences of their powerlessness as from an abstract belief in the value of human autonomy. That basic needs are simply not being met is much more direct and compelling evidence of egregious government than the circumscribed scope of political participation in an educated, well-fed, and healthy population.

The gradual acceptance of democratic political norms globally would seem to augur well for those concerned with the well-being of women. But democracy as a specific account of justifiable authority is not, in its more formal manifestation, about meeting the physical needs of those who are the most disadvantaged: it is about securing the consent of the majority in order to act on behalf of the polity. The two accounts do not always coincide. And, as democratic (or consent-based) principles increasingly define political legitimacy, those accounts of representation not explicitly based on consent are more and more frequently spurned or devalued. But consent is far more difficult to measure satisfactorily than material standards of living; and specific interpretations of what constitutes consent (as well as cultural variations concerning the value of consent) make the concept formidable to apply in practice. The brutal paradox is that while the least controversial evidence of women's marginalization is the striking physical and economic disparity they experience⁴, such disparity can be dismissed as relevant proof of marginalization as long as women are perceived to have 'consented' to such conditions. Thus the recent emphasis upon democracy as consensual policy making as the undisputed standard of organizational legitimacy could, ironically, undermine the authority of WID groups which expect that greater democratization will bolster their attempts to further the interests of women who are physically, economically, and culturally marginalized. If democratic governance becomes the principle by which programmes are evaluated, the political battle for WID will increasingly be to articulate women's consent in a way that

⁴ That women are disadvantaged *vis-à-vis* men by specific development strategies is discussed, e.g., by Myra Buvinic, 'Women's issues in Third World poverty,' in Buvinic, Lyette, and McGreevy, eds. *Women and Poverty in the Third World*

(Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983) and Barbara Lewis, 'The impact of development policies on women,' in Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter (eds), *African Women South of the Sahara* (1991).

does not reinforce their social and economic marginalization.

One of the few undisputed characteristics of democracy is the claim that the legitimacy of representation in the modern world rests unequivocally upon the assertion that the body claiming representative authority is democratic. Rather than narrowing down the field of what can be considered legitimate representation, however, this has merely expanded the claims of what constitutes democracy (Fierlbeck 1994). In many instances this willingness to probe and to question the nature of democracy and liberalism have facilitated the goals of WID: the assumption that the problems addressed by development theory are gender-neutral, for example, has been shown to be an instance of epistemological myopia. Women have been cut out of, or disadvantaged by, development programmes because of the lack of crucial information regarding women's roles, values, and preferences. This information was not collected because women's roles, values, and preferences were considered either unimportant, or identical to accounts articulated by men. This assumption of sameness has been increasingly challenged; but the political results do not seem to be commensurate with the formal acknowledgement of the relevance of these epistemological challenges.

That women, as an identifiable group, are manifestly disadvantaged materially *vis-à-vis* men within their own societies can be understood to be unacceptable for different reasons. One common claim, for example, is simply that it is wrong that their material and physical needs are not being met. Another is that this marginalization is evidence that women do not have an equal voice in determining the way in which their society ought to be governed, and that this political exclusion is wrong. The argument that political legitimacy depends upon meeting the physical needs of a group is one of the oldest justifications of any particular political authority. John Locke made this point quite clearly when addressing the assertion by Sir Robert Filmer that the power of sovereigns was paternal in nature, and thus absolute. Locke's argument against absolute sovereignty based upon divine right was that religious tenets made it quite clear that the sovereign was responsible to God to look after the welfare of the subjects: just as shepherds were employed by farmers to look after the well-being of the flock, and did not have the

authority to harm them at will, so too was the sovereign in a fiduciary trust with God to ensure that the needs of all of God's subjects were met as effectively as possible (Locke 1960). Thus the authority of a monarch was not simply given in the word of God, but depended more substantially upon the ability of the sovereign to meet the terms of the fiduciary trust placed upon him by God.

While modern liberal democracies assume electoral accountability to underlie the legitimacy of their regimes, the criterion that voters frequently use to judge the relative merit of competing representatives is the extent to which they deem that a candidate or party will facilitate (or has already facilitated) the material prosperity of the polity (or the subgroup in which the voter classes herself). It is arguable, too, that the perceived illegitimacy of formerly communist states was grounded as much upon the failure of such states to provide material goods as effectively as market states, as it was upon the inability of most citizens to participate in establishing the rules governing their polity. A few contemporary states do partially justify their authority upon their ability to provide for the basic needs of their populations. That a regime has increased the health and educational levels of its population, the agricultural productivity of the land, the strength of the economy, and the stability of the social order cannot summarily be dismissed as a claim to good governance, especially when the argument is presented that the provision of basic goods and services would not have been as possible within a state where political power is not strongly centralized (c.f. Jeffries 1993). Macpherson (1965) has argued that this is itself a justifiable form of democracy in which the emphasis is 'on ends, not means': '[i]t is to make the criterion of democracy the achievement of ends which the mass of the people share and which they put ahead of separate individual ends. And this of course is the classic, pre-liberal, notion of democracy...'

Problems arise, however, when basic needs are seen to have been met and further demands are placed on political actors. Once the population is literate, healthy, educated, and well-fed, which (or whose) needs ought to be addressed?

The increasing wealth and political fragmentation of seventeenth-century England led many political theorists to argue that the optimal form of political association was one based upon the consent of all

individuals. But the normative force of consent as the basis of political authority, according to Macpherson (1962), must be understood within the context of a nascent capitalist economy. The authority of the market required the assumption that those engaged in commercial exchanges did so of their own volition, were aware of the obligations imposed by contract, and agreed to be bound thereby. If human beings were presumed to be hierarchically ordered, with some individuals being naturally more gifted or deserving than others, the argument could be made that any exchanges were not equally binding on all parties (just as a contract negotiated between an adult and a young child is never strictly enforced because of the inequality in competence between the two). For capitalism to be seen as fair, the contracting parties had to be understood to be equal, the contract had to be seen to be freely entered into, and – most importantly – being responsible for contracts freely entered **regardless of the outcome** was to be taken as the ultimate principle of justice. Capitalism could only function if inequalities were seen as just; and therefore justice had to mean accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions.

It was justice in the economic realm, then, which influenced the interpretation of legitimate political representation as representation to which individuals consented directly. As the ideal of consent increasingly became accepted as the standard of political legitimacy, liberal regimes could less convincingly argue that women's voices were irrelevant because their interests were self-evidently met by fathers and husbands; or that colonial territories' interests were addressed by imperial regimes. If each individual entity were equal in what was fundamentally important, then each individual was entitled to consent or dissent regardless of any other criterion. Disallowing the vote to women or denying a colony self-determination had been justified ideologically on the basis that they were better provided for under the guidance and authority of their masters. But the normative force of individual autonomy was effectively engaged to contest the justifiability of constraining individual agency.

The moot point, of course, was determining what, precisely, constituted consent (c.f. Pitkin 1965). As the political manifestation of consent – voting – became increasingly institutionalized, the conditions under which consent was assumed to exist within the sphere of commercial contract were

usually unarticulated and so the dynamics of power within consensual market relations were not formally addressed. The past decades' experience of political rule within command economies may have illustrated the possibility that consent, which requires some formulation of meaningful choice of alternatives, may be difficult, if not impossible, without some underlying market system that permits a strong diffusion of political power. Simply to assume that exit is an acceptable form of voice is, of course, unappealing for a number of reasons. But economic sovereignty, both of producers and consumers, is one of several very useful choices or strategies in articulating the absence of consent; and especially so when one finds oneself in a political minority. But if the usefulness of a market should not be underestimated in determining the context of consent, so too should it not be overestimated. The more credence a society places upon 'consent' as the requirement for legitimate governance, the more the society must investigate conditions in which consent is presumed to have been given.

3 INTERESTS AND IDENTITIES: CONSTRUCTING THE 'CONTEXT OF CHOICE'

How ought consent to be understood? Carole Pateman (1988, 1992) has explored the way in which women have been presumed to consent to a status to which rational, autonomous male citizens would never submit:

The presumed consent of a woman, in a free marriage contract, to her subordinate status gives a voluntarist gloss to an essentially ascribed status of 'wife.' If the assumption of natural subjection did not still hold, liberal democratic theorists would long ago have begun to ask why it is that an ostensibly free and equal individual should **always** agree to enter a contract which subordinates her to another such individual.

(1988: 9)

But what women putatively consented to were not the terms of a negotiable contract, but 'to a status which in its essence was hierarchical and unalterable'. To what extent was the decision not to get married within the confines of such a contract an authentic choice? If the essence of womanhood were defined by her status as a wife and mother, then an unmarried and childless woman would

be a freakish monstrosity without any social identity; and any decision to accept this unpalatable alternative could itself well constitute proof of an irrational disposition.

It is in this way not the definition of women's interests but of **meaningful choice** which has become the most difficult theoretical obstacle for feminists. 'The most heavily charged conflict within the discourse about the concept of interests in modern times,' writes Anna Jonasdottir (1988), 'concerns the question of **objective and subjective interests**'. The reasons for this conflict are by now quite well known: to say that women as a class do have objective interests which must be addressed despite individual preferences devalues their own subjective articulation of what is important to them; while to admit only that women have subjective interests makes it all but impossible to address the disparities and attitudes that disadvantage women *qua* women. The accounts offered by theorists such as Jonasdottir (1988) and Molyneux (1985) to resolve this conflict have of themselves been quite persuasive: the solution to the dilemma of interests, of course, has been to distinguish between agency (or subjective interests) and the context within which agency can properly be said to be exercised:

The main advantage of such a distinction is that it permits the resolution of the conflict surrounding objective and subjective interests. The concept's **formal** aspect becomes primary so that the content of needs and desires is, from the point of view of interest, an **open question**. In a certain way this means that only 'subjective' interests exist ... [and yet] [u]nderstood historically, and seen as emerging from people's lived experiences, interests about basic processes of social life are divided systematically between groups of people in so far as their living conditions are systematically different. Thus, historically and socially defined, interests can be characterized as 'objective'

(Jonasdottir 1988: 41).

In other words, it is possible to speak of objective interests insofar as the formal or subjective aspect of interest-articulation is limited because certain individuals, by virtue of their membership within an identifiable group, are denied a range of reasonable choices. The ability to choose between choices without paying a high price for doing so can be said to be in women's objective interests without

delimiting the content of their choices for them. But this resolution raises further queries about precisely **which** conditions must exist for subjective interests to be reflectively chosen rather than unconsciously preferred. For, while the provision of certain material goods and formal political institutions would seem to constitute a basic requirement for the exercise of agency, many feminists and thoughtful liberals are changing the contours of the discourse surrounding the context of choice to argue that, in addition to material equality of condition and formal political equality, the assumption of choice is empty without a strong conception of **identity** within which choice is constructed. 'Consider,' asks Charles Taylor, 'what we mean by **identity**:'

[I]t is who we are, "where we're coming from." As such it is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense ... my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others'

(1991: 34).

Why is identity important? It is a fundamental aspect of any political system that holds choice and choosing to be crucial in determining the best life to live, in constructing a coherent account of political obligation, and in solidifying political legitimacy and authority. Liberal theory holds that 'the freedom to form and revise our beliefs about value is a crucial precondition for pursuing our essential interest in leading a good life' (Kymlicka 1989: 163) But where do these beliefs about value come from?

The decision about how to lead our lives must ultimately be ours alone, but this decision is always a matter of selecting what we believe to be most valuable from the various options available, selecting from a context of choice which provides us with different ways of life.

(Kymlicka 1989: 164)

Thus we cannot expect that people can make definite choices unless they have a conception of what is valuable to them; and they cannot construct a framework of value unless 'they fit into some pattern of activities which is culturally recognized as a way of leading one's life' (Kymlicka 1989:165). The political force of consent, based as it is upon choosing one particular alternative rather than any other

within a range of choices, thus requires a 'situated' account of value.

But what is the implication of this for women? To the extent that female identity is wrapped tightly in reproductive functions or the emotional nurturing of others, and male identity is **not**, the political legitimacy of consent (based on the availability of choice, which is itself firmly grounded in traditions which entrench the hegemony of maternal identity), will only structure women's choices in such a way that reinforces the current division of power between genders. Moreover, such a division will be increasingly considered legitimate because women have consented to such roles within an ostensibly open context of choice. There is no basis for challenging gender-based inequality if it is a result of free choice. If women understand that they can choose unattached lives free from the physical, psychological, and material demands of spousehood or motherhood, but still choose more traditional roles, then we simply cannot explain this away through references to women's own lack of consciousness of oppression. That women 'internalize' certain sentiments or values (Staudt 1990: 305) is no longer a claim of false consciousness that negates the claim of consent; it is a perfectly acceptable formation of a decision made within a specific context of choice which emphasizes the validity of the consensual choice made by women. But if a young woman has the formal choice to become an unattached professional, or to become a wife and mother first and foremost, to what extent is this a free and conscious choice if the woman's mother (or family, or society) professes disappointment (or disdain, or hostility) at the prospect of a single and barren daughter? To what extent does the free choice to engage in traditional roles diminish the 'free' choice of a minority not to do so? And to what extent should this framework of choice be legitimized simply because this is the social context within which a woman's identity has developed?

The resolution to the problem of objective/subjective interests offered by Jonasdottir works only as long as the context of choice is considered to be purely formal or material. But if Taylor (1991, 1992), Young (1989, 1990), and Kymlicka (1989) are correct in arguing that a stable social and cultural environment is yet another crucial variable in determining personal choices (because 'it's only through having a rich and secure cultural structure that people can become aware, in a vivid way, of the

options available to them, and intelligently examine their value' [Kymlicka 1989: 165]), then women's value specifically as mates or mothers becomes emphatically pronounced. The problem is **not** that women lack consciousness of themselves as women, but that they are all too conscious of themselves as women, when being a woman means fulfilling a specific socially-defined role. If we then accept, as Jonasdottir urges us, the primacy of formal or subjective interests, once we have determined that a viable 'context of choice' exists, then we are obliged to accept that women's own declaration of their interests as wives and mothers is what is truly important to them. And if they themselves articulate this account of interests, it becomes even more difficult for other women to argue why these choices, based as they are upon a given social context, are not valuable to **them**.

Accepting cultural membership as a primary good in the formation of a context of choice means that women will face increased difficulty in justifying why they wish to take advantage of formal opportunities that do not recognize their cultural value as women. Thus, rather than alleviating the feminist dilemma of choosing between the objective and subjective interests of women, Jonasdottir's account together with current arguments for the normative force of identity (determined within social contexts) only reinforces the claim that women are in unequal positions because they have **chosen** to put themselves there. And because they have so chosen (understanding what the alternatives are), they are obliged politically to support the resulting social and political relations.

4 CONCLUSION: CHOICE, AUTONOMY AND RESPECT WITHIN A FRAMEWORK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

If the most tangible and emphatic proof of the necessity for WID programmes is the material conditions of women *vis-à-vis* men, this evidence becomes ineffective as a means of contesting the legitimacy of policy processes as long as inequalities are deemed to have been the product of consent. Accountability, if it is to be accepted by women's groups as the new standard of political legitimacy, must involve a great deal of discussion regarding the particular nature of consent involved. The assumption of liberal democracy as a neutral context of choice has rightly been challenged (Young 1990). But as long as a legitimate context of choice is

perceived to be situated within existing social contexts, where the identity of women is structured by reproductive roles, the value of consent for women will not be fully realized.

In liberal theory, the normative force of consent carries with it a grim and disagreeable price: the obligation not to challenge decisions made by autonomous agents which we may find tremendously unpalatable. If the moral foundation of consent as the basis of political authority derives from the claim that individual adults are responsible agents who can – and must – take responsibility for their actions, then we cannot deny them the self-determining (but unappealing) choices which they make. The current debates within liberal theory which offer the most rich and provocative contributions to intellectual thought are those which ask under what conditions consent (or the selection of meaningful choices) can be said to obtain. And it is here that liberalism reaches its most thoughtful potential by reaching into the other two most alluring and influential schools of twentieth-century thought – socialism and postmodernism – and confronting their discomfiting challenges to the complacent assumptions of consent.

Although Marxism seems to have been politically discredited by its economic inadequacies and its severe circumscription of political liberty, its most discerning insights will be powerfully relevant as long as political authority and market systems co-exist. As long as significant material inequalities remain, the potential for distortions of acceptable relations of power will exist between formally equal individuals. This does not negate the possibility of constructing a political system based upon consent; but it does oblige us to monitor and debate the conditions under which material conditions unduly influence the calculation of consent.

More inchoately, but perhaps more devastatingly, the ragged but vociferous postmodern movement has presented an even more serious challenge to the doctrine of consent as the basis of legitimate authority. While the coherence of an argument grounding political legitimacy upon consent rests upon the premise of individual autonomy in decision-making, an increasing number of theorists have challenged the intelligibility of this assumption. Rather than existing as self-contained agents wafting through a universe of endless choices, we are situated creatures who are continually and

insidiously affected by the more fundamental emotional and psychological ties which we require in order to perceive choices in the first place. Loneliness or social censure or insecurity are formidable obstacles to an individual's ability to make specific choices even when formal political and substantive economic equality exists.

Thus I wish to deny neither the philosophical force of the accounts offered by theorists such as Jonasdottir or Kymlicka, nor the normative resonance of political authority based upon the idea of consent. To the contrary, I desire only to caution that we must be fully cognizant of what types of variables constitute limitations upon our ability freely to choose the types of political constraints within which we agree to live our lives.

Women as a group may, paradoxically, expand their context of choice if they are more willing to view themselves as individuals within arbitrary and contingent environments rather than as members of the class of women simply because women have been socially and culturally defined as a group for too long. The value of such a radical individualist approach is not in its atomistic premises but in its ability to make us aware of the extent to which we unquestioningly accept our society's choices as our own. Only when we consciously acknowledge the extent to which our social bonds themselves construct our context of choice can we realize that changing this context is itself a possibility; and it is only when we can effectively influence this web of contingencies within which our lives are shaped that consent can become a forceful basis of political authority for women.

Consent, as a basis of political authority, remains a forcefully compelling principle because it recognizes so many of the human qualities – autonomy, dignity, responsibility – which we collectively value. But to revere the concept of consent means that we must respect the unpalatable decisions made by others and respect, in turn, means that we cannot ultimately challenge the autonomy of the decision makers. Thus the more we respect consent, the less capable we are of investigating the context of choice; and the less satisfied we are with the context of choice, the less respect we have for the principle of consent in practice. To break this circle we must be willing to probe and to query the choices and decisions of 'autonomous' agents; for consent itself is not only a moral construct but, more tangibly, a

potently political device for ensuring obedience. Instruments of such palpable power must always be carefully and consistently scrutinized: and we

must be brave enough to say whether consent has been won at too high a price.

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