


CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Feminist Democratic Design and the Redress of Intersectional Representational Problematics¹

Karen Celis¹ and Sarah Childs² 

¹Department of Political Science, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium and ²School of Social and Political Science, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Corresponding author: Sarah Childs; Email: Sarah.Childs@ed.ac.uk

(Received 06 June 2024; accepted 12 June 2024)

If one were to write the history of representation from an intersectional perspective, it would read as a veritable comedy of errors. A story, in short of inclusion and exclusion, privileging and marginalization, and of good, mis-, poor, and non-representation. No facet of politics is untouched by these dynamics – whether civil society or formal political participation, political recruitment and leadership, or policy and legislation (Siow 2023).

Intersectional Representation Problematics

An anthology² of women’s Intersectional Representation Problematics might go something like this:

Absence and Underrepresentation

In many parliaments, majority, minoritized, and marginalized women are either not present or are too few in number, relative to their percentage in the population. Elite, majority men are overrepresented everywhere (Hughes 2016). Women’s numbers are in many countries increasing, and in some parliaments, minority women are better represented descriptively than their men counterparts (Mügge et al. 2019). Yet, any “complementarity advantage” – being a woman and an ethnic minority ticks two representational boxes – is premised upon on gendered assumptions about their lack of threat to old, elite, white men’s power.

Misrepresentation

There are some signs that minoritized women’s interests are in receipt of greater attention than in the past, but this is at the absolute margins (Siow 2023). Some of

this talk is undertaken by descriptive representatives but not all can or do so (Bajpai 2019; and as we return to below). Most claims are mouthed by elite, majority men, and in an instrumentalized, essentialized, stigmatized, homogenized, selective, and stereotyped fashion (Siow 2023; Joly and Wadia 2017). Talked about and over, heard but not listened to, and lacking institutionalized accountability, agency is restricted if not denied. With little material, cultural, and political capital, some women are “easy to ignore” because their very positionality places them far away from elite politicians. Even civil society activism privileges advantaged sub-group interests, which are universalized and predominate; disadvantaged women’s interests are excluded from the core demands of women’s civil society groups (Christoffersen and Emejulu 2023).

Institutional Neglect and Violence

Built for men, and privileging masculinity in racialized, classed, and other ways, parliaments reproduce representative relationships for the non-prototypical representatives marked by disconnect and distance (Hawkesworth 2003). Trust, affinity, and belonging are felt disproportionately by elite and majority citizens (Hinojosa and Kittilson 2020). Absent an institutional obligation to represent groups, it is left to individual representatives who care. This is not without cost and requires additional labor (Harder 2023), invites media representation that depicts them as “different and out of place” (Runderkamp et al. 2022), and subjects them to violence, as minoritized women experience disproportionate and/or differentiated harassment, abuse, and intimidation relative to majority women and minority men. Such normalized violence reduces what women might want to say and where they can speak, and limits audience reach. Ultimately, it renders women, especially marginalized and minoritized ones, less good representatives and less electorally viable candidates (Collignon et al. 2021).

Feminist Democratic Design

In a concerted attempt to address some of these intersectional challenges, we designed a new process of group representation, entitled feminist democratic representation. This approach offers an “intersectionally updated” design for parliamentary processes in which “differently affected” women, not least the most marginalized, are formally included and listened to. Elected representatives are moreover held to account for whether, during their deliberations and decision-making, they act in a responsive, inclusive, and egalitarian manner to the perspectives of women in all their ideological and intersectional diversity (Celis and Childs 2020; Celis and Childs 2023; Celis and Childs *forthcoming*). However ambitious our intent, the redesigning and re-fashioning of parliaments can only ever be a partial answer to the representational problematics that play out across democracies, *inter alia*, additional sites of formal politics, civil society, women’s organizations, and the media.

Intersectional Representational Problematics are systemic — as the above anthology has laid bare — and thus require a comprehensive re-thinking of the

ideals, principles, and practices of democracy. To this end, we make the case for politics and gender, as well as intersectional scholars, to engage in some serious feminist democratic design (FDD). FDD builds from Michael Saward's 2021 book *Democratic Design* (DD), which asks the following question: "How might, or how should, democratic institutions and practices be organized and activated for a given time and place?" DD is a problem-driven methodology which identifies a range of democratic practices that solve democracies' incomplete democratization and is "firmly focused on the systemic level" (Saward 2021, 109). Yet, without refracting this methodology through a feminist lens, democratic designers will be unable to meet the Intersectional Representational Problematics characteristic of contemporary politics. FDD consists of three iterative phases: design thinking, designing, and building.

Design Thinking

When designers imagine democracy *as it should be*, core democratic ideals, principles, and practices are reconsidered. A re-reading of feminist, intersectionality, and democratic theories, *and* attending to activist political practices, forges an ideal intersectional, feminist democratic polity. This imagining redefines the conception of equality that is a foundational principle of any democratic design. Already included in Saward's (2021, 56) "democratic minimum," FDD shifts from a definition of equality of opportunity to a more structural, transformative conception. Formal equality of opportunity in unequal societies always fails to deliver for women, especially the most marginalized, and thus in FDD, it will not suffice. Complementing the democratic minimum is democratic sensibility, i.e., the ethos or orientation that must drive democratic design work. Here, FDD offers a second intersectional update. Democratic sensibility now requires the "fair consideration of the interests of, and respect for the agency of" the *differently affected*, decentering the interests and agency of the dominant group" (Saward 2021, 62-63).

Designing

When designers produce their designs, they choose and sequence democratic practices to realize preferred democratic principles (Saward 2021, 81). This principle/practice "dual core" reflexively redresses the specific problems faced in a particular place and time (Saward 2021, 54). In our context, democratic designers cannot but attend to the pervasive attacks on representative/liberal democracy and equalities. These are not so much separate, but newly entwined. Constructed as an elite project operating against the people, gender ideology and anti-feminism is the ground where anti-democratic, populists, and illiberals come together (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). This attack is not just on women and other marginalized groups (important though this is), but an attack on fundamental democratic values, spaces, and culture. In sum, the work of democratic designers cannot be divorced from this existential challenge to both democracy and equalities: what used to be considered a minority or partial concern is now, more than ever, a democratic essential.

What practices would an intersectional feminist design include and exclude? Eschewing the forced choice between different “models of democracy,” democratic designers mix and match amongst established, hybrid, and new democratic practices (Saward 2021, 34). There are plenty of practices available, including fashionable innovations already claiming to further democracy, such as citizens assemblies. To be included on a FDD “menu” of approved democratic practices, an “intersectionality test” must be passed: all must reduce inequality and injustice and maximize equality for the differently affected. The FDD menu would further benefit from additional innovations: novel practices crafted through the imagining of ideal intersectional feminist democratic politics.

Who designs in FDD and how should they “do” their design work? FDD depends on coalitions of designers and designing processes that are themselves intersectionally fair and just (Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Exclusive/inclusive coalition composition and approaches should be responsive to the specificities of each location, but the commitment to intersectional fairness and justice rules out the heroic, patriarchal, and/or colonial designer. And, when determining the “scale and ambition of the design, along feasible/infeasible and radical/incremental axes” (Saward 2021, 123), FDD coalitions must do so with intersectional perspectives foregrounded. What counts as “radical” and/or “infeasible” from the perspective of the status quo might be considered the bare minimum from the perspective of minoritized and marginalized groups.

Building

FDD conceives of this third stage as inseparable from design thinking and designing. Plans on paper do not in themselves change anything, whereas the intersectional feminist imperative is to make democracy better for women in their diversity in the here and now. When designers build, they are trialing and revising their new designs *in situ*; the ongoing work of the democratic design coalition becomes investigating the efficacy of their design. Evaluative standards for new designs on the ground include the extent to which they deliver democratic effects for all women, *inter alia* inclusion, trust, recognition, connection, mobilization, responsiveness, and accountability. As designs are trialed and revised, mechanisms are necessary for women in wider society to formally judge the quality of their participation and representation – a “feeding back” to inform the design coalition’s ongoing designing and building work.

Building in contexts of gendered de-democratization place an additional task on the FDD coalition: to respond to the almost inevitable resistance and backlash they “invite.” Developing counterstrategies becomes, then, central to developing the “best” design for a particular place and time. These counterstrategies will likely need to go beyond refining or replacing particular democratic practices and involve other protective strategies. Against political violence, for example, new criminal laws and additional resources *might* be needed to reduce occurrence and punish perpetrators, suggesting not unproblematically in the former case, a more carceral approach. Similarly, greater regulation of media representations *might* well be necessary, begging questions of free speech.

“Thinking Big” About Feminist Democracy

Politics, intersectionality, and gender scholars need to know significantly more about how established and innovative democratic practices and devices can redress inequality, and how they can be implemented on the ground, especially in our contemporary times characterized by polarization and de-democratization. Across the three phases of FDD, democratic designers will benefit from traversing the academic-practitioner divide, engaging in novel conversations between academic disciplines and subfields and real-world actors. Codesign by academics, practitioners, and civil society actors is the way to go, with new designs centering the knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of those currently at the margins. In sum, we need some “big thinking” about democracy, feminism, and intersectionality — a more creative imagining of what democracy might be and how it can be brought to life.

Notes

1. We would like to acknowledge that this contribution has benefitted from previous discussions with Petra Ahrens, Alice el-Wakil, and Niels Spierings.
2. If an encyclopaedia must be complete, an anthology need only be a selection.

References

- Bajpai, Rochana. 2019. “What do Descriptive Representatives Describe? Minority Representative Claims and the Limits of Shape-Shifting.” *Ethnicities* 19(5): 740–62.
- Celis, Karen and Sarah Childs. 2020. *Feminist Democratic Representation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Celis, Karen and Sarah Childs. 2023. “From Women’s Presence to Feminist Representation: Second-Generation Design for Women’s Group Representation.” *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 6(3): 359–76.
- Celis, Karen and Sarah Childs. Forthcoming. “Democratic Listening”. In Saward, Michael. and Diehl, Paula. (eds.) *Bodies, Spaces, Claims*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Christoffersen, Ashlee and Akwugo Emejulu. 2023. ““Diversity Within”: The Problems with “Intersectional” White Feminism in Practice.” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 30(2): 630–53.
- Collignon, Sofia and Wolfgang Rüdig. 2021. “Increasing the Cost of Female Representation? The Gendered Effects of Harassment, Abuse and Intimidation towards Parliamentary Candidates in the UK.” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 30(2): 630–53.
- Graff, Agnieszka and Elżbieta Korolczuk. 2022. *Anti-gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Harder, Mette Marie Staehr. 2023. “Parting with ‘Interests of Women’: How Feminist Scholarship on Substantive Representation Could Replace ‘Women’s Interests’ with ‘Gender Equality Interests’.” *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 6(3): 377–94.
- Hawkesworth, Mary. 2003. “Congressional Enactments of Race–Gender: Toward a Theory of Raced–Gendered Institutions.” *American Political Science Review* 97(04): 529–50.
- Hinojosa, Magda and Miki Caul Kittilson. 2020. *Seeing Women, Strengthening Democracy: How Women in Politics Foster Connected Citizens*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hughes, Melanie. 2016. “Electoral Systems and the Legislative Representation of Muslim Ethnic Minority Women in the West, 2000–2010.” *Parliamentary Affairs* 69(3): 548–68.
- Joly, Danièle and Khursheed Wadia. 2017. *Muslim Women and Oower*: Springer.

- Lowndes, Vivien and Mark Roberts. 2013. *Why Institutions Matter: The New Institutionalism in Political Science*. London: Red Globe Press.
- Mügge, Liza M, Daphne J van der Pas, and Marc van de Wardt. 2019. "Representing their Own? Ethnic Minority Women in the Dutch Parliament." *West European Politics* 42(4): 705–27.
- Runderkamp, Zahra, Daphne van der Pas, Anne Louise Schotel, and Liza Mügge. 2022. "Space Invaders and Norm-Politicians: How the Media Represent the Intersectional Identities of Members of Parliament." *European Political Science Review* 14 (4): 566–82.
- Saward, Michael. 2021. *Democratic Design*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Siow, Orly. 2023. "Needles in a Haystack: An Intersectional Analysis of the Descriptive, Constitutive and Substantive Representation of Minoritised Women." *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 6(3): 328–58.

Karen Celis is Research Professor of Political Science at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel: karen.celis@vub.be

Sarah Childs is Professor of Politics and Gender at the University of Edinburgh: sarah.childs@ed.ac.uk

Cite this article: Celis, Karen, and Sarah Childs. 2024. "Feminist Democratic Design and the Redress of Intersectional Representational Problematics." *Politics & Gender* 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X24000242>