

Gender, Conservatism and Political Representation

Edited by: Karen Celis and Sarah Childs
Published by ECPT Press in 2014

Book review by Arina Antonia IACOB

National University of Political Science and Public Administration
iacob.arina@gmail.com

Today, descriptive representation of women is present among conservative parties in Europe, The United States, Argentina, New Zealand, Japan and Turkey. But can this concept lead to a substantive representation of women claims and issues?

In *Gender, Conservatism and Political Representation* by K.Celis and S.Childs, the authors significantly contribute to comprehending the way conservative women representatives act in their attempt for substantive representation of women. The subject by itself represents a challenge, seeing how the literature usually is inclined to take a critical approach to the conservative claims and actions regarding women. In their analysis, following a structure of 14 chapters, the volume contributes to the study of conservatory women presence in the political sphere by means of conceptual and empirical research which covers the literature's void on this subject.

For a more comprehensive reading, a short analysis of the theoretical setting proposed by Celis and Childs is needed, this framework being a starting point for the case studies included in this volume. The authors redefine certain terms as "*women's interests*", "*representative claims*" and "*women issues*" in the attempt to avoid the *essentialist trap* – basically not to reject on unjustifiable grounds the way "*conservative women are acting for women*" (p. 4).

Throughout the gender studies field it has often been said that the conservative vision cannot be recognized as helpful in the public agenda-making process that is dedicated to a substantive representation of women. This has led to a focus on left-wing parties – considered to be closer to both descriptive and substantive representation of women. Authors have argued that a conflict exists between the substantive representation of women and the manner in which the conservative representatives act for women. The literature does not establish a distinction between the substantive representation of

women and the feminist perspective on substantive representation. According to this vision, only the gendered claims of conservative representatives which follow the feminist perspective should be analyzed and be considered “*acting for women*”. These are the claims that stray from the ideology of their own party and join the feminist perspective. But how do we consider the **other claims** made by conservative representatives, in the context of women representation? (Karen & Childs, 2012, 218).

In introduction, Celis and Childs put forward the idea that universalizing women’s problems is not the key, proposing that a new notion of substantive representation and its perception should be created. The authors emphasize on the fact that regarding substantive representation solely from a feminist point of view results in the creation of a theoretical framework, difficult for understanding the gender claims of conservative representatives. By rejecting the idea that substantive representation is by definition either feminist or left-wing, the authors propose a dual perspective on the **representatives claims** (1) type I claims which adhere to the feminist view and (2) type II claims which are gender claims that target a women’s perspective, yet in a distinct manner from the feminist view. Even if these claims support a more traditional view of women’s role, they can be considered to better women’s lives in traditional terms and not in feminist terms (p.11).

Given this theoretical framework, the authors generate a complex analysis of the empirical reality in which right-wing parties act for women. The conservative claims for women are therefore viewed as gendered representative claims, with regard to the fact that women’s interests vary and are not confined to the feminist interests. This perspective of the volume is particularly interesting and valuable as it reject all forms of essentialism and bias.

The first part of the volume focuses mainly on descriptive representation of women within the conservative parties, following the themes of election and participation in elections, emphasizing the historical, ideological and religious heritage of each party. The authors center on the ambition of conservative representatives to effect feminist/gender changes, while also stressing on their position within the parties: what are the means in which women in conservative parties gain influence? (p. 6) The case studies are extremely diverse both methodologically (historical analysis, discourse analysis, interviews, participatory observation) as well as geographically, covering conservative parties in Germany, Japan, Italy, Turkey and Bulgaria.

Relevant themes are covered in this section such as *the supply of eligible candidates and demand factors*, in the attempt to explain the difference of percentage, within similar conservative parties, in regard to the descriptive representation of women. The difference, the authors argue, is caused mainly by the electoral system, the threat of left-wing parties and the internal mechanisms of each party (pp. 33 – 34); another central theme is the manner in which the male breadwinner model first appeared in the Christian democratic parties as a legacy of Christian belief and the way in which it was abandoned regarding family policy (pp. 41 – 42). Also, the authors analyze women's concerns which are present within conservative party policy, but which do not reside on the feminist agenda (p. 63); moreover, they find that a reconciliation is needed between the traditional perspective of the party and the current shift in women's perspective on themselves and their political roles (p. 78); furthermore, the analysis centers on the active role that women play in Islamist conservative parties and their impact on enactment of laws regarding the empowerment of women (pp. 96 – 98); finally, one of the most valuable finds, in my opinion, constitutes the idea that the pattern observed in the West is not followed in post-communist states, as right-wing parties are more inclined to act for women compared to left-wing parties, the latter carrying the burden of their communist descent (pp. 115 -117).

The second part of the volume centers on the potential of conservative women to act for women (p. 4) and how gendered claims are categorized in the dual perspective on the representatives claims (type I and Type II). This is followed by a study of the connection between descriptive and substantive representation, while rejecting the assumption that substantive representation of women is equivalent to the substantive feminist representation of women. Most case studies contained in this part conclude that conservative representatives have clear claims for women and “act for women”, even if they stray from a left-wing perspective. In practice, substantive representation of women is not synonymous with the feminist substantive representation (p. 14). Throughout this part, the case studies portrait how conservative women who join electoral races are bound to challenge the traditional gender roles and are bound to settle in accepting the idea of motherhood, a key element for conservatives. The authors also approach the fact that conservative women are negotiating gender roles within their party. (p. 123). Moreover, this part of the volume is methodologically rich: the articles use qualitative comparative analysis methods in order to observe the following

indicators, within the representatives' discourse of both conservative and liberal women: (a) identify as a women, (b) name women as subject and (c) advocate for women. (pp. 143 – 144).

The whole volume's assertion is based on the importance of a conceptual distinction between the interests of women (which infer taking on a feminist perspective – type I claim) and the traditional perspective (type II claims). These two categories are part of women's issues (p. 217). In my opinion, the essential conclusion of this part of the volume is that women originating from left-wing parties do not hold a monopoly on substantive representation of women, yet this assertion is only valid under the conceptual umbrella put forward by Childs and Celis.

In the third part of the volume, the case-studies focus on the relationship between the electors and their representatives, to better understand and explain the existence of a women citizen who is both conservative and feminist and to identify a series of issues this person faces. This leads to a better understanding of the relationship between the women elector and those who are supposed to represent her, the conservative political parties. These chapters focus rather on the quality of representation during the relationship with electors and portraits the fact that conservatism and feminism are not mutually exclusive (p. 15).

The main argument that arises from each chapter of the volume is that conservative representatives matter in debates related to substantive representation of women and it is necessary to reject the assumption that only left-wing parties are capable of bringing women's issues to the political agenda. The 14-chapter-volume represents a valuable contribution to the literature, both through methodological variety and the originality of their process, utilizing normative concepts in the case-studies.

As a conclusion, I wouldn't recommend this volume only to students and academics interested specifically in conservative women representation, but also to those who desire a more comprehensive understanding of what substantive representation of women implies and how we can analyze it empirically.

Bibliography

Celis, Karen, Sarah Childs, 2012, 'The Substantive Representation of Women: What to do with Conservative Claims?' *Political Studies*, vol. 60., pp. 213-225.