

The UN Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): A New Way to Measure Women's Interests

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Questions about the quality of political representation are central to research on women and gender, and to political science in general. Given a certain set of interests, how well do political institutions and political actors address and advance those interests? Research about the quality of political representation relies a priori on the existence of fixed, stable, and measurable interests; we need to know what women want before we can assess how well politicians represent them. Perfect measures of the interests that all women share have proven elusive. The measures of women's interests that scholars commonly employ lend themselves reasonably well to research, but have unfortunate side effects: They essentialize gender norms, exclude certain groups of women, or define women's interests too narrowly. In this essay, I explore the political implications of the empirical measures of women's interests on which scholars have relied in research on women's political representation. I offer a way to measure women's interests that draws upon the United Nations Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW provides a way to think about women's interests that is broad, inclusive, and sufficiently flexible to reflect changes over time. Furthermore, it enjoys the explicit approval of almost every nation in the world; 186 countries have ratified CEDAW since the UN General Assembly approved it in 1979.¹

Within political science, concern about women's interests emerged as a reaction against the view that such interests, if women had them at all, did not matter politically because the norm of coverture allowed their husbands or fathers to represent them "in the 'outside' world" (Sapiro 1981, 701). The effort to identify women's interests and to codify the study of them emerged as a consequence of the politically motivated desire to claim a space for women where none existed before, both in politics and in research on politics, but that has led us to define women's

1. To date, seven countries have not yet ratified CEDAW: Iran, Nauru, Palau, Sudan, Somalia, Tonga, and the United States.

interests too narrowly. A voluminous body of research on the political representation of women now exists, and much of it rests on two assumptions: First, women share a set of interests on the basis of their shared gender identity; and second, women's political interests differ from those of men. The first assumption has proven very problematic, and the second should be seen as problematic but generally has not been. The problems with the first assumption are well known. Gender always intersects with other forms of identity, and the impact of one's gender cannot be meaningfully considered in isolation from other forms of collective identity. Those who invoke "women's interests" as a political or analytical category implicitly presume a set of shared interests among all those who identify themselves as women. Invoking the term *women* rests on an assumption that it refers to something stable and knowable. Yet the existence of myriad differences among women limits efforts to identify what is meaningful and shared among them. Women's diverse experiences inevitably challenge the effort to fix the meaning of gender as a category of identity.

Scholars have sought to address this problem by defining meaningful subcategories of gender identity. In the field of gender politics and Latin America, scholars have, for instance, tended to eschew the idea that all women share a set of interests. Following the lead established by Maxine Molyneux (1985), scholars frequently categorize women's interests into two groups: one that reflects the interests that flow from women's traditional or conventional gender roles, and the other that challenges gender hierarchy. Molyneux coined these two categories "practical" and "strategic"; others have used the terms "feminine" and "feminist" (Alvarez 1990). Quantitative studies of political representation in Latin America, in the United States, and elsewhere often employ similar categories to compare legislative attitudes and behavior.

The initial idea behind conceiving of women's interests according to these two types was to challenge the assumption that all women share interests in feminism. Empirical studies of women's mobilization revealed that not all women sought explicitly to challenge the gender status quo. Prior to Molyneux, feminists often resorted to the Marxist concept of false consciousness to understand and explain the actions of women who did not explicitly espouse feminist interests; from this perspective, women who did not support feminism did not properly understand their own gender interests. Molyneux sought to explain the actions of politically active women who do not support women's rights *per se*, as well as those who do.

I find Molyneux's dichotomous understanding of women's interests unsatisfactory for a couple of reasons. Which interests fit in which category depends on the context in which women mobilize. Affordable, quality child care, for example, is often identified as a feminine interest, but one can easily envision it as a feminist interest if providing state-funded child care entails a direct challenge to male-dominated authority. Defining concerns related to the family as feminine interests essentializes traditional norms about women, and discourages men from embracing them. Defining family issues as consonant with women's interests precludes defining them as issues that men and women increasingly share (or should share) as these issues have evolved politically in the contemporary world. Categorizing issues related to the family and children as women's interests is problematic given the ways that changes in reproductive technology, family structure, and marriage law now implicate men directly.

A second assumption in research on political representation is that women's and men's interests are mutually exclusive. My concern here is that research on gender has exaggerated the differences between men and women and overlooked the similarities in their interests. Research on public opinion and political behavior tends to employ an empirical approach to defining women's interests by asking men and women to identify their interests. This research often shows that what men and women share is far greater than what they do not share. If we start empirically, by asking men and women to define their interests, then we find that differences exist but that they are often minimal. Differences between men and women's interests in various areas of public opinion and political behavior may be significant, both statistically and politically, but they are nonetheless often modest in size (Huddy, Cassese, and Lizotte 2008). A gender gap of a few percentage points may prove decisive in an election, and statistically significant results may garner publication in an academic journal — but a gap of 5% to 10% is quite small relative to the magnitude of what men and women share. Scholars often report what we might call the gender overlap, but their findings tend to emphasize the differences between men and women rather than the similarities. In a telling exception, Schwindt-Bayer (2006, 583) shows that male and female legislators share interests, but that women “are pressured to stick to issues in ‘women's domain.’”

One of the problems inherent in defining women's interests is revealed by trying to define *men's* interests. If women's interests flow from either a feminine or feminist conception of gender identity, then what are men's

interests? One possibility is that men's interests are the opposite of what women's interests are, that is, "everything else." But research shows that women do have interests in the economy and foreign policy and other issues that ostensibly fall in the "men's domain," and that they share these interests with men. Research on gender and political representation needs to account for the gender overlap as well as the gender gap.

CEDAW offers a better way to measure women's interests that addresses the political limitations of existing definitions. CEDAW, also known as the women's rights treaty, is an international bill of rights that identifies a comprehensive list of women's interests in equality across a wide range of areas, including political rights, education, employment, economics, foreign policy, health, rural life, and marriage and family life. Although violence against women does not appear in the formal articles of the Convention, the CEDAW Committee has, since 1992, considered the eradication of violence against women to be central to the elimination of discrimination. Through a series of General Recommendations, the CEDAW Committee has sought to reflect changes in the way that women's interests are understood over time.

CEDAW rests on the idea that all women do share an interest in their gender's not being the basis of discrimination. Freedom from discrimination allows women to pursue all our other interests. CEDAW identifies all the ways in which women's identity can lead to discrimination and aims to guide countries in drafting and implementing policies to advance those interests. The issues outlined by CEDAW do not apply merely to a particular subset of women but, rather, to all women, regardless of any other cross-cutting identity. CEDAW sets an international standard of women's interests in freedom from discrimination. Most countries in the world have ratified it, giving it global legitimacy as an indicator of women's interests. Moreover, CEDAW is a dynamic document whose meaning is constantly being refined and updated by the experts on the Committee in consultation with the governments that have ratified it and nongovernmental organizations that lobby on behalf of women's rights.

CEDAW transcends the dichotomy between feminine and feminist interests by asserting that women's gender-related interests are human rights. Women's rights opponents have criticized CEDAW as imposing a feminist political agenda upon them, but a close reading reveals that the central premise of the treaty is that women need to be free from discrimination to pursue any set of interests that they might have. CEDAW does not privilege a feminist conception of women's interests

over a feminine one. Rather than defining women's interests in terms of feminine and feminist concerns, for example, scholars might refer to CEDAW to develop broader measures of women's interests in terms of educational parity, the elimination of sexualized violence, or programs for rural women.

Although CEDAW is aimed specifically at women rather than gender, it also addresses the interests that men and women share. Article 5, for example, calls for the elimination of gender stereotypes that reflect "the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women" and the "recognition of the common responsibility of men and women in the upbringing and development of their children." CEDAW thus reflects areas of interest that women and men share, such as education and poverty, but discusses them from the perspective of eliminating discrimination against women.

I encourage scholars to use CEDAW to develop new ways to measure women's interests.² It offers a broader and more comprehensive way to conceive of women's interests that is less subject to the limitations of existing measures and more attuned to the degree to which men and women's interests overlap. As an internationally agreed-upon set of standards of women's rights, CEDAW would allow us to circumvent limited and culturally specific definitions of women's interests. Doing so will afford us a more accurate understanding of the interests that all women share.

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2. The text of CEDAW is available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>.