
Women Legislators and Women's Issues in British Columbia

by Grace Lore

Women in Canada, like women world wide, have been historically and consistently underrepresented in the world of politics. Struggles for fair and equitable representation, as well as the academic exploration of the issue are relatively new. Although grand strides have been made since the expansion of the franchise to (white) women in 1920, women in Canada remain among the least represented in the world. Although 68 women were elected in the 2008 federal election they still constitute only about 20% of the members of the new parliament. The current British Columbia Legislature is comprised of 46 British Columbia Liberal members, and 33 members of the New Democratic Party, with 17 women comprising approximately 21% of both caucuses. This article looks at the participation of women in the British Columbia Legislative Assembly.

The levels of representation in provincial Legislatures are similarly insufficient, and British Columbia is no different — women make up just 21% of Members of the Legislature. While their under-representation is irrefutable, the extent to which this poses problems for women, the democratic process, and the resulting government policy is heavily debated. One way to investigate this issue is to explore whether there exists a connection between numeric representation and substantive representation. In other words — do low levels of women in the provincial Legislature translate into low levels of representation for the women of British Columbia?

The approach this paper will take is to examine whether women vocally and actively bring attention to women's issues. If women raise these issues more frequently than their male counterparts, one may conclude that fewer women in the Legislature result in these issues being raised fewer times and receiving less attention. Statements by Members (Standing Order 25B) from the beginning of the 38th Legislature (after the May 2005 election) until the adjournment of the fourth session,

May 29th, 2008 will be used in this study. A comparison will be made between the proportion of the statements made by women that address women's issues and the proportion of statements made by male MLAs that address these issues.

Statements are a useful (although imperfect) tool for examining this issue because they give private members an opportunity to speak on behalf of those they represent in the house and are expected to be non-partisan in nature. What exactly a 'women's issue' is, and even whether such a thing exists is heavily contentious. Providing a strict definition can quickly erode the important differences that exist between women and their diverse needs, interests, and experiences. This paper will attempt to use the least controversial measures of 'women's issues' possible. Issues concerning the occurrence or prevention of violence against women, the prevalence of eating disorders in young women, breast and ovarian cancer, funding for women's centres, pay equity, polygamy as it effects women, and the acknowledgment or recognition of either a women's day or women in the community who have furthered women's issues, will all be counted. These issues are mostly non-contentious — few women would argue that domestic violence or inequity of pay should not be resolved, or that women's cancers do not constitute a problem for their gender.

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Throughout this study, a non-partisan, non-political approach will be used. Neither the names of the parties nor the names of MLAs will be used while references statements or results. The under-representation of women in British Columbia is a non-partisan issue (with women making up equally low numbers of women in both caucuses), and it would be a mistake to make it one.

Between the first session after the election in 2005 and the adjournment of the most recent session, women made more statements on women's issues than their male colleagues, both in the actual number of statements given and in the percent of their total statements that addressed women's issues. In the first and second sessions, women made 11 and 6 statements on women's issues respectively, while men only made 5 and 4.

In the 2005 session, this meant that 16.7% of all of women's statements addressed a women's issue, while only 3% of men's statements did the same. In 2006, 9% of women's statements articulated a women's issue, while only 2% of men's statements addressed similar issues. This discrepancy is also true of the 3rd and 4th sessions. In 2007, women made a total of 18 statements (or approximately 14% of the total) on women's issues, including several on breast cancer and women in the business community. Men during the same session made 3 statements (or approximately 1%), including one on eating disorders. In the fourth session, women made 12 statements on women's issues (15.2% of all their statements) while men only made 5 (just over 2% of all statements). These numbers suggest that increasing the number of women in the provincial Legislature would also raise the profile of women's issues and that the under-representation of women may be resulting in a diminutive level of importance placed on critical issues for women.

Another way to examine this issue is to look at the proportion of all statements that address women's issues that are made by women, versus the proportion that are made by men. Consistently, women make the majority of these statements despite being a minority in the Legislature. In the first session in 2005, women made 68.8% of all statements concerning women and women's issue, yet made up only 21.6% of all MLAs. Women were responsible for a similarly disproportionate amount of such statements in the following three sessions; in 2006, during the second session, women made 60% of such statements, in 2007 women delivered 85.7%, and in the most recent session in 2008, women made 70%.

Not only do women use more of their statements to represent women and bring up women's issues, but women, on average, make more statements than their male colleagues. In the first session, women made an average of 6 statements per member, while men only made

4.27. In 2006, during the second session, women made an average 5.58 statements — 0.5 more than their male counterparts. In 2007, the difference was even more stark — women made 47% more statements than men, (women made an average of 10.83 statements, while men made only 7.36 statement). In the most recent session, the difference was less extreme, but women on average still made more statements than men. While it is true that not all women are making more statements than men, the discrepancy in the average of statements is consistent and significant. One possible explanation is that women, given their small presence in the Legislature, may see themselves as responsible for representing women, in addition to representing their constituents and their party, and so are more vocal (through the use of statements, at least) than their male colleagues.

These analyses suggest that women do substantively represent women and women's issues. To the extent to which one can draw conclusion from the analysis of statements by members, it can be argued that women's issues receive less attention, and perhaps that policy and decision making may not take into account the unique experiences, perspectives, and challenges of women. It cannot be ignored however, that even among women, statement's addressing women's issues were rare, making up between just 9% and 15% over the four sessions. In addition, many of the statements made regarding women's issues were repetitive and strategically timed. Many of the statements are made on days such as International Women's Day or the Day of remembrance and Action to Stop Violence Against Women. In the third session, for example, five of the eighteen, or approximately 27%, of statements were made on and about those two days. It may be argued that statement such as these are aimed more at timely sound bites than substantive representation of women by women.

Other criticisms include tokenism, whereby one assumes caucus to have appointed women to make statements, motions, or participate in debates that involve women's issue, should not be too easily dismissed. Despite the progress made since the expansion of the franchise and the right to engage actively in the political process, women have a long way to go before they achieve equal representation in the British Columbia Provincial Legislature. The debate over the degree to which this constitutes a problem and the various means that may (or should) be employed to rectify women's under-representation continues. In the mean time, this study of statements by members in the 38th Legislature suggests that women's issues remain only minimally important and women's voices relatively quieted.