An Essay on Women's Political Representation

Consider This*

Unrepresentable Women

August 2017. In my mailbox is a YouTube link from a colleague in Sweden.[1] *It's not my research area, but I know she only sends me stuff that's worth watching. I hit "play." A white woman on a TV panel speaks: "In response to you," she says, looking into the audience, a slight smile on her ruby lips, "the journalist [you are referring to] might soon realize that actually it wasn't really all that empowering." The camera zooms in on a woman of color in the audience, presumably the questioner.*

A tweet appears on-screen, the first of a series that pops up throughout the show:

SEX WORK IS STILL WORK. IT IS JUST DONE WITH DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE BODY

I notice the program's title: Incompatible with Equality.

The panelist continues: "and I also think, ahem, that is not representative of the people who are in prostitution. The majority . . . don't have

* Our vignettes are specifically heuristic; their function here is to introduce and illustrate moral/political dilemmas, highlighting what we term *women's poverty of representation*, and to invite explorations of positive ideals—what we term *women's political representation as it should be*. This Introductory Essay is deliberately written to be accessible, rather than seek to show "how much material" we have read or "how complicated" it all is (see Allen 2018, 16–17). Academic references for the observations and claims we discuss here are provided later in the book. We do, however, provide links to popular books and a couple of foundational gender and politics works that informed our analysis.

Feminist Democratic Representation. Karen Celis and Sarah Childs, Oxford University Press (2020).
 DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190087722.001.0001.

a background in journalism. Sorry." The questioner doesn't respond in the face of such confident, arguably condescending, tone and body language.

Another on screen tweet appears:

THE PROBLEM WITH PROSTITUTION IS THAT THE WOMEN WHO ENTER INTO IT FREELY, ARE A TINY, TINY MINORITY

The panelist drops a killer line: "My definition of prostitution, personally, is sex between two people, one person who wants it and another who doesn't want it . . . If you have two people who want to have sex, they don't pay, obviously." The audience laughs.

KAJSA EKIS EKMAN [THE PANELIST] IS DANGEROUSLY IMPRESSIVE. GREAT TO HAVE MY THINKING CHALLENGED IN A SUCH A WAY

I find myself agreeing.

"If you ask any person in prostitution, you can take the money now and leave, or you can stay for the sex, how many of these are going to stay for the sex? I mean, really?" The audience applauds enthusiastically.

The show's male host asks Lydia, another of the panelists and a researcher, for an international perspective on trafficking. She situates the journalist among the minority of the thousands of women she's interviewed.

"Let's say the other 80 percent . . . that have been exploited, have been abused, have no real choices, and come from poverty or other conditions in which they have normalized violence, for instance child abuse and pedophilia . . . What about these women? Then you really need public policies to give them a way out." In any case, she states, all prostitutes experience violence as part of what they do.

More tweets come thick and fast on screen:

THOSE CRAZY SCANDINAVIANS AND THEIR CRAZY SOCIAL POLICIES. WE COULD LEARN A LOT.

PROSTITUTION IS NOTHING MORE THAN THE MALE ELITE SEEKING TO REPRESS AND SUBJUGATE WOMEN.

Lydia recounts the experiences of a South African woman who "was given the choice to have a visa, to study, to bring her kids and get away from prostitution. She doesn't feel like she was forced out of prostitution. She feels like she had a chance for the first time in her entire life."

IF SEX WORK IS JUST ANOTHER TYPE OF WORK, SHOULD IT BE INCLUDED AS PART OF WORK FOR THE DOLE?

"It is a gender equality issue. I don't see that many women in advanced countries exposing themselves to prostitution as compared to countries in which it is actually the only choice they have."

While Lydia talks, the camera zooms in on a second woman of color in the audience and then moves to a group of white women. I can't help noticing that the woman of color is shown in close up, and the white women are in a group shot. Is it because the former is in a minority, while the latter, the majority of the audience?

HOW MANY MILLIONAIRES ARE PROSTITUTES?

The host now gives the floor to Elisa. Warned there is little time, she opens with a punchy one-liner: "I see society over and over again protecting men at the expense of women." She continues: "all of the social stigma of prostitution, legal or illegal, always goes to the women. In America when a prostitute is murdered, there is almost some kind of reluctance to investigate it. When a man is murdered, they don't say, 'hey let's wait, let's investigate if he ever visited a prostitute before we decide whether or not it is worth investigating.'"

An older, unhappy-looking panelist is invited to make the final contribution: "I'm always puzzled by why we are so focused on prostitution. I think that feminism is doing itself a disservice by focusing so much on something that affects so few women. I don't agree that prostitution affects all of us."

Kajsa cuts her off: "Yeah, but the number of men involved though." More applause. She continues in a firm voice: "If you look at Germany, where one in every four men pays for sex. He maybe has daughters, a wife . . . and it affects the way he thinks about women." The older woman starts to respond but is prevented by audience applause. Kajsa "won";

they both smile. I'm smiling, too—the exchange has had a ristretto-like effect on me.

A new tweet flashes up.

I AM A SEX WORKER. I DON'T SELL MY VAGINA. NOBODY OWNS IT BUT ME.

It pulls me up short.

Is this the only intervention by a sex worker?

I close my browser, uncomfortable and much less sure all over again.

Representational Silos

It had been one of those perfect swims. The ones where afterwards you feel like a completely different woman. Five minutes in the steam room to decompress and warm up, followed by 50 lengths front crawl in a refreshingly cold, blue-lit, pool.

I was back by my locker, toweling off my body. From behind, I heard a voice:

"Would you mind zipping me up, please?"

I turned around. I had not yet put on my glasses, but the figure was unmistakable even though she was across the changing room. This was something I had never seen before in real life: a woman in a burkini. I began to move toward her, only to see a blurry figure offering to help. As discreetly as possible, I went back to getting dressed. And yet I was intrigued. I couldn't help quickly donning my specs. I tried to take it all in.

The burkini was plain black leggings, a thigh-length top with long-sleeves, and a short, fluted skirt. The fabric looked silky. The head covering reminded me of the protective mask that racing car drivers wear under their helmets. I had expected that it would be more like a wetsuit, rubbery and thick. The burkini was little different from the Lululemon leggings that were all the rage for London's gym goers. Minus the head covering, my fellow swimmer could have walked around unnoticed among all the other women in their athleisure wear. Except of course, it would have marked her out.

All zipped up, she tucked the triangular back of the head covering into the neck of the top and headed to the pool. Neither the woman who had pulled up the zip nor any of the other women in the changing room said anything. We did not even exchange glances. Were we being terribly English? Perhaps. Or, maybe they had experienced this all before, and I was the only one new to such a situation.

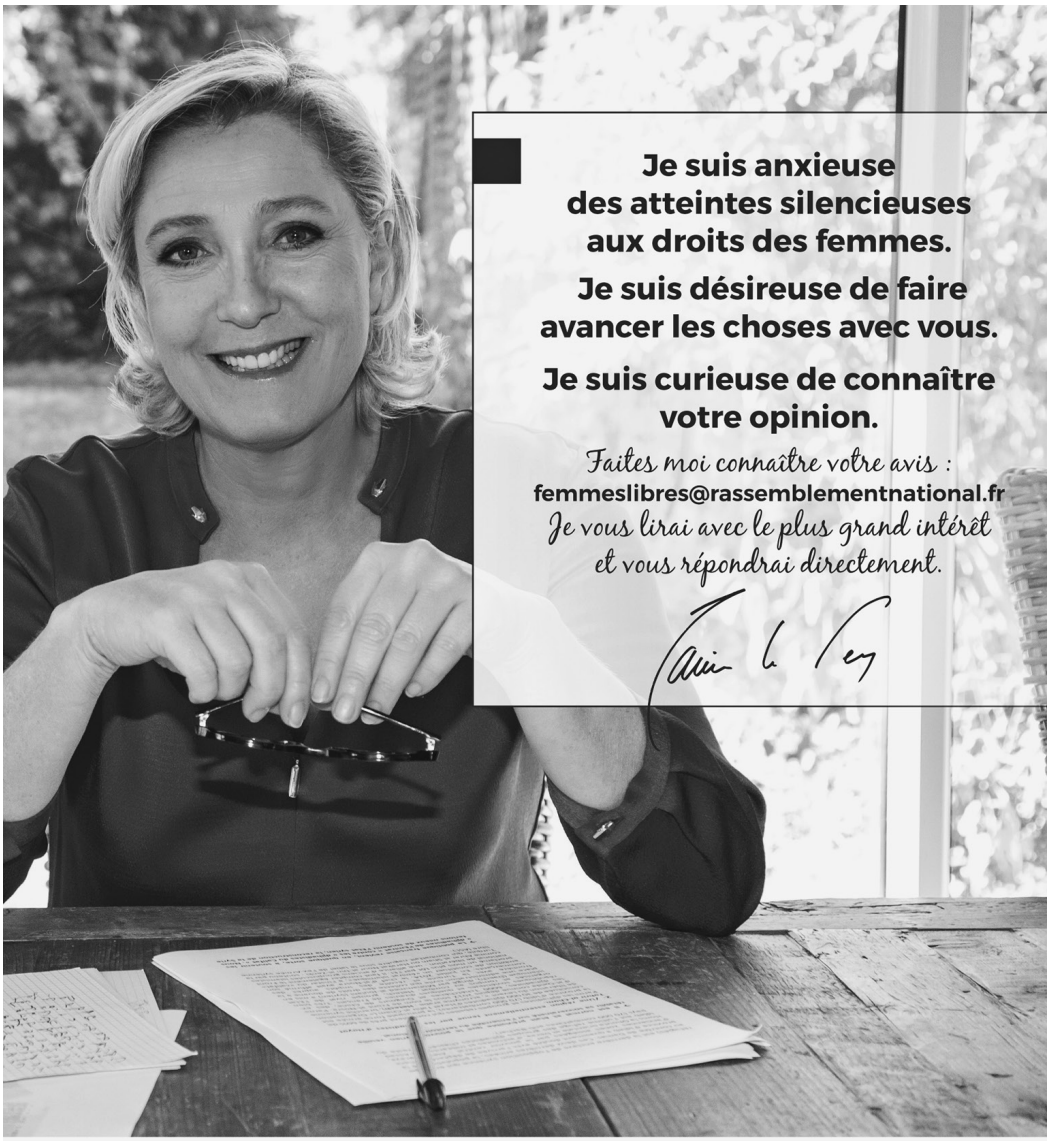
Possibly we all just didn't dare to speak; did I want to risk hearing their views? No one in the changing room could have been unaware of the "burkini debate." The 2016 photograph of a turquoise, tunic-clad woman with a headscarf being forcefully disrobed by French police on the beach at Nice had become a lodestone for social media controversy on Muslim women's attire. Or maybe, the burkini had become normalized in the United Kingdom after Nigella Lawson, the "domestic goddess" celebrity chef, had introduced it to the British public some years before, when photographs of her wearing one on an Australian beach had been spread across the media.

As I dressed, I wondered if the swimmer had worried about our reaction before she asked for help. I'd heard what sounded like an everyday favor one might ask a friend before a party or from another woman in a shop fitting room. Did she consider her request straightforward, and free from any political overtones? Was she concerned or fearful? I also wanted to know what it felt like to swim in a burkini. Can she feel the water moving over her body in the same way that I do? Or does her costume drag and detract from the "joy" of swimming? And if so, why does she wear it—so that she can swim? I asked none of these questions.

I blow-dried my hair. As I sat in front of the mirror, I was confronted by the gym's wallpaper—image after image of women's shoes, all high-heeled, some strappy, peep-toed, and platform-soled. Some months previously when the gym was first renovated, I had complained to the manager and tweeted about how sexist I'd found the wallpaper. To no avail. Virgin Active did not see, or could not admit, the irony of their interior design; a place that aims to makes bodies fit and strong displaying representations of precisely the kind of shoes that stop women from running. On that day, the dissonance seemed to me ever more problematic.

The Wrong Representative

"Women of France—Proud of Our Liberties
Will French women be able to wear what they want tomorrow?"



"I am very worried about the silent attacks on women's rights.
I want to move things forward together with you.
I would like to hear what you think about this.
Send me your opinion at: femmeslibres@rassemblementnational.fr

I will read your message with the greatest interest and I will respond to you promptly."

"At the European elections, your choice will be one for your liberties and those of your daughters and granddaughters. Behind your vote lies a choice for civilization.

On May 26, 2019, women of France, vote for your liberties.

Vote for the list headed by Jordan Bardella."

Inside, the election pamphlet reads:

"Is it normal to force seven-year-old girls to wear a headscarf?

MP Taché thinks that this compulsory dress code, sometimes at a very young age, is comparable to a headband."

"Some mayors already give permission for separate swimming hours at the pool. Will they ban bikinis at beaches tomorrow?

"What do public authorities do with the explosion of sexual aggression and harassment? 'Free speech'[2] has shed light on the magnitude of the problem of sexual aggression: 53 percent more victims. Faced with this plague observed in all European countries, we have to move from denunciation to action."

"Can we accept that in France, in 2019, under Islamic pressure, in certain neighborhoods or schools, women are advised not to wear a dress or are obliged to wear a headscarf?

Since the 2009 movie 'The Day of the Dress,' which denounced the problem, the situation has not improved. Many women experience pressure concerning their choice about what to wear."

"Are French Islamic women going to lose their inheritance rights due to the application of Sharia law?

*The European Court of Human Rights has opened up the possibility for the application of Islamic heritage rights (*Molla Sali vs. Greece*). Some French Muslims can be disinherited following Islamic law where both parties choose to do so. But will the choice of the disinherited woman genuinely be a free one?"*

"Is a female medical doctor unable to treat a male patient?

In French hospitals men refuse to be treated by a woman and refuse their wives treatment by male doctors! Are we going to continue to comply with such demands from a past era?"

"Is it normal that a man refuses to shake hands with a woman?

It happens today that men refuse to shake hands with a woman because she is a woman: there is no condemnation foreseen, legal nor moral, for this sign of discrimination that offends women."

"Is it still acceptable that a woman is paid less in the same position as a man?

This question has been pending for ages and nobody dares to really tackle it."

"Is it acceptable that single mothers do not earn a decent living?

It is essential that the difficulties mothers experience are finally and fully taken into account: special social aid, better access to child care, increases in housing subsidies."

"Isn't it worrying that a Minister in France has to launch a 'plan against genital mutilation' and against 'forced marriages'?

These phenomena say a lot about the evolution of women's rights in our country. Who could have predicted this a few years back? The subject is taboo."

Not Meriting Representation

Following Twitter in the run-up to the Irish Referendum in 2018, it was impossible not to have been moved. Only by voting to repeal the 8th Amendment to the Constitution would Irish voters enable their TDs (members of parliament) to legislate for the provision of abortion in the Republic.

The 8th Amendment to the Irish Constitution passed in 1983 reads:

"The state acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to

respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right."

Women and men of all ages traveled home for the referendum, but an overwhelming number of tweets documented the real-time stories of thousands of young women returning to Ireland to cast their vote. Many included photographs of young women—often wearing black REPEAL sweatshirts—on airplanes, at ferry ports, coming through customs, and exiting Irish airports. Many had traveled hundreds of miles and spent hundreds of pounds to get home. For those who wanted to return to Ireland but did not have the funds, gifts from friends and family or crowdfunding paid for their tickets.

Discussions took place in the media, among friends, in workplaces, and unprecedentedly within families and across generations—with "abortion stories" often being recounted for the very first time. The streets of Dublin were littered with pro—and anti—posters, some highly professional and others seemingly handmade. Amid the anti-abortion posters, one stood out. It read, "women can't be trusted."

Why can we not trust women? You cannot trust the "social abortionist," the party-going, unthinking young woman who treats abortion as a form of contraception, and is likely a repeat offender; you cannot trust "unfortunate" young girls with chaotic lifestyles incapable of taking such serious decisions; you cannot trust "the wanton," wicked girls who must repent before God for the (d)evil they have embraced; you cannot trust the women who will discriminate against the disabled foetus; you cannot trust the culturally or religiously-chauvinist women willing to abort the female foetus; and you cannot trust women because the exploitative "abortion industry's" interests lie in maximizing profit.

The untrustworthy woman of the Irish referendum poster is all *women; individual women seeking an abortion and all those other women who support legal and safe access to abortion. The untrustworthy woman is, thus, rendered a political minor—shackled all over again. Politically subjected, men must take decisions for her. Is this why so many young Irish women came home?*

With nearly two-thirds of the vote, the 8th Amendment was repealed on May 25, 2018.

The Poverty of Women's Political Representation

A political claim that you cannot trust women strikes at the heart of questions about democracy—about who is, and who is not, part of the people. It seeks to deny women their political equality, undermines their right to participate in politics, and pushes women back to an earlier disenfranchised state when it was agreed among men that we were to be represented first by our fathers and then by our husbands.[3] Such an attack on women's political status in the 21st century, just when many established democracies are celebrating centenaries of women's suffrage, leaves us in a heightened state of concern. It is a good reason for writing this in the first person; for us, it is personal. Moreover, to witness the claim that you cannot trust women is a stark reminder that today women cannot trust democracy to do good by us. In the very

act of Ireland's young women returning to vote—and overwhelmingly to vote "yes" in the referendum on the 8th Amendment to the constitution—we see the very embodiment of the second claim (that women cannot trust politics) and a refutation of the first (that politics does not trust women).[4]

Electoral politics can both grant and take away women's rights, and in the face of the democratic erosion that we see around us across much of Europe, we very much fear their removal. The Irish case notwithstanding, we are undoubtedly witnessing something of an anti-abortion moment. Women's access to legal and safe abortion is under very real threat in many countries. Long considered a fundamental feminist demand, the reality that women would once again be "on the defensive"[5]—having to re-make demands of their political institutions—is indicative of a political landscape skewed against women. The idea that male-dominated political parties and male politicians' voices are privileged in decision-making on abortion seems to us the epitome of the poverty of women's political representation.[6] Critics might well counter that in stating this we deny the fact that some women hold anti-abortion views. Not so. Our point is distinct: those who seek to restrict access to abortion do so in spite of the fact that a significant minority of women will undergo an abortion in their lifetimes, with those financially less able and without papers having unsafe ones. Women inevitably die. We ask: where is democratic politics' responsiveness to these women?

Against the backdrop of a perceptible shift toward a more populist politics in much of Europe, the ascendant women's issue in electoral politics is undoubtedly gender and Islam. Across the spectrum political parties are animated by its perceived threat to women's rights. The threat for Muslim women is said to include free choice in their dress, a hyper-vulnerability to family violence, and harmful inheritance, marriage, and divorce rights. The wider threat is presented as a fundamental incompatibility between gender equality and Islam. We are troubled not so much here because many politicians are eager to share their opinions over gender (in)equality, but because women are often misrepresented in contexts of male-dominated politics. First, politicians are keen to speak about—and, indeed, legislate on—Muslim women's dress, even as some Muslim women ask us to stop talking

about the burqa.[7] With elected representatives' attention focused on clothing, other issues are neglected. Contemporary representations of Islam and Muslim women's interests in formal politics frequently contradict how some women, particularly those most affected, conceive of their political interests. Second, the debate about Muslim women's interests is too often led and dominated by men. As Humaira, a young Muslim British woman claims:

> . . . with 71 percent of UK MPs being male, the idea of Parliament passing any law restricting women's bodily autonomy is patriarchal and oppressive.[8]

Our concern over women's political misrepresentation is not limited to the very obvious case of the populist politician, such as France's Marine Le Pen, whose rhetoric of women's rights coexists alongside, and is wrapped up with, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agendas. In competitive party systems, there may be rational reasons for traditional political parties adapting, if not accommodating, representative claims about women made by populists of both the left and right. To assume that traditional political parties have, to date, addressed women's issues would also be mistaken, however. Most political parties are in the game of winning votes. The issues they prioritize are those that appeal to, or at least do not harm or repel, their established constituencies. Over the last 20 years or so, political parties in many established democracies have become more responsive to women often in a (liberal) feminist direction, but in the current climate these parties might just see more votes to be won in a shift away from gender equality.

The greater presence of women in our parliaments and in government might be presumed to have improved the political representation of women. The widespread expectation is that they will speak up for women and in so doing constrain male politicians, thereby offering a corrective. There is obviously something in this, but the political misrepresentation of women and the backsliding on gender equality is taking place despite an increasing presence of women in formal politics in many countries. Optimism that their presence will bring about positive change has to be tempered: we must be careful of rushing to assume that any woman politician will do.[9] Not all women agree

about what is in the interests of women. Essentialism should not be the ground upon which we stand. Equally, given the diversity of views among women and (even) among feminists, feminism should not be our standard either: we need to accept that the presence of only some women or some feminists in our parliaments is not sufficient to represent all women.[10] With the Le Pen vignette in mind again, we might reflect on whether the "right" women representatives are those currently vocal in formal political debate and/or present in our political institutions.[11] We should acknowledge, too, that women politicians are often constrained in what they can say and do; it is not always easy, or cost free, for them to stand and act for women even when they want to.

To suggest that those who sit in our legislatures—male and female—do not always reflect the priorities of women begs consideration of whether there are meaningful representative relationships between the political class and women. In the absence of these, and where traditional parties and views dominate the political agenda, this risks a deleterious effect not only on political outcomes in policy and legislative terms, but also regarding how women feel about democracy. When women's perspectives, issues, and interests are experienced as marginal to the main business of electoral politics, perceptions among women that politics is not for them are made real. Moreover, politics is experienced as something that is done *to* and not *with* them. This creates a sense of being ruled over and risks delegitimizing representative democracy. The dangers here are particularly high for different women. In the words of another young Muslim woman:

> I would like to know *how they would feel* if I had the upper hand and law-making at my fingertips and decided that English women had to cover up and could no longer wear tight-fitting clothing (emphasis added).[12]

If we contrast the prominence given to gender and Islam in contemporary politics with the political attention given to prostitution, we illuminate a further way in which women are poorly represented in politics. Despite some women politicians seeking to elevate this issue up the formal political agenda, prostitution remains an issue with limited traction; it usually has little appeal for traditional political parties

competing in the electoral marketplace. Politicians from populist and more established parties of the right have recently highlighted the issue, but this has tended to be embedded within their wider anti-immigration rhetoric and conservative morality, rather than signaling a concern for women per se. For the most part, prostitution is framed as: marginal to most women's experiences; predominantly affecting marginalized and minority women; and characterized by strongly opposing views, including among feminists. It is also commonly framed as a universal phenomenon—the "oldest" and "natural" profession—the latter frame implying a male right to sex, paid for when necessary. Recall Elisa's intervention: "I see society over and over again protecting men at the expense of women." If we push the logic here, criminalizing, proscribing, or heavily regulating prostitution would seem to make little sense for our disproportionately male politicians and masculinized political parties.

We should further consider the quality of political debate over women's issues and interests. This speaks to another way of conceiving of women's poor representation: querying whether politicians are well-positioned to speak about what is in the interests of women. At its baldest this is about the foundations upon which politicians make representative claims for women. It makes sense to start from the assumption that their views will be influenced by their overarching political ideology, with policies considered in terms of partisan advantage. Most are party politicians, after all. If we take all three of our substantive vignettes—abortion, prostitution, and Muslim women's dress—liberals and libertarians will likely favor non-criminalization for reasons of freedom and choice, whereas conservatives, leftists, and populists would most likely favor criminalization for reasons variously of morality, protection, and exploitation, and/or on the grounds of culture, race, and immigration. Yet it is still not quite that simple. Parties do not always follow ideological logic when they turn their attention to women's issues.

It is necessary to ask what evidence our politicians draw upon when they decide their stance on a particular women's issue. To whom do they meet and speak? In posing these questions it is not unreasonable to assume that representatives will listen to the most vocal, organized, and well resourced. In the prostitution vignette, Kajsa was confident

and articulate, professional-looking and sounding, and someone with whom the audience identified. But one tweet drew the viewer's attention to who was mostly absent: prostitutes themselves. Even when those directly affected are party to political debate, it is pertinent to further examine which voices are included and which are thereafter privileged. Former and current prostitutes are frequently found in both the pro- and anti-criminalization camps and are often heard in political debates. Should we not also be concerned to ensure that the most vulnerable—the very young, the trafficked, and those without papers—are not marginalized or excluded, to limit the risk of women's political misrepresentation? First-hand experience, expertise, and data are, in any case, rarely uncontested, and arguably never more so in these "post-truth" times. Who is considered an expert and what counts as expertise are, moreover, highly gendered, class based, and racialized. So, who is rendered an expert, and what evidence is designated authentic, authoritative, and instructive? In reflecting on Belgian debates on prostitution, we suspect that the long-standing, extensive, but internally divided feminist voices would not be perceived as the "best" kind. In contrast, the views of the male historian who presents himself as objective would likely play very well.[13] Explicitly rejecting the "abolitionist-feminist lobby's ideology," "giving voice to his interviewees" "without judging or praising," it is easy to imagine politicians being persuaded by what he has to say.

Even when our elected representatives have heard from those directly affected by an issue or from those with relevant expertise, we should not be surprised if they remain unsure about what should be done. As already noted, their ideological predispositions will not always easily transfer to questions of gender inequality, and, as we also readily admit, there is rarely an indisputable "women's position" for politicians to adopt. How then should elected representatives make a just decision between seemingly incompatible demands among women, especially when all claim the authority of feminism? Watching the Swedish YouTube clip, our sympathies ebbed and flowed between the various contributors, leaving an unhelpful ambiguity about what is in the best interests of the women involved, and whether those interests are at odds with a commitment to a more gender-equal society. To make this more real, albeit rather crudely, we ask: is it okay for

politicians to privilege the interests of highly educated white feminists, powerful religious groups, or middle-class parents living in gentrified areas close to a red-light district—those on the privileged side of society—over marginalized women for whom prostitution might be at that time their only means of economic survival?

The core features of this brief reconsideration of prostitution also hold for Muslim women's dress. The Nice incident showed in a very powerful way how a legal ban on the headscarf can rudely affect those who dress in ways deemed illegal. The public disrobing sparked outrage in some feminists even as others felt the police action wholly justified. The latter regard the veil as oppressive to the individual woman who wears the headscarf and to women as a group, who through this apparel are constituted as distinct from, and inferior to, men. Irrespective of why any individual women choose to wear the veil, gender equality in this reading requires that it be banned. In the extreme, if that stops our swimmer from entering the pool, so be it. The former consider a woman's right to wear whatever she chooses a fundamental right, regardless of whether this choice is influenced by religion, cultural norms, or one's individual fashion choices—the burkini is, thus, regarded as no different from a tight-fitting top or a bright yellow dress. On this reading, women are oppressed and rendered unequal when politicians make decisions about woman's attire and when the law takes on a prescriptive form.[14] That said, if we return to the commentary on the U.K. celebrity chef, the simplicity of the idea of free choice is itself rendered suspect. It was first assumed that it was Lawson's *choice* to wear a burkini in a way that is rarely assumed for Muslim women. Lawson was a curvaceous woman holidaying in the strong, Australian sun. So, her choice was deemed free and, thus, okay. Later, she made it clear that hers was very much a constrained choice. Her then partner, the one pictured with his hands around her neck outside a luxury Mayfair restaurant, "liked his women pale." Her choice was now considered no longer okay either.[15]

We are not so much interested in which of the two views readers *personally* hold regarding prostitution or the burkini or, for that matter, abortion. Rather, we are concerned with how to ensure that good political decisions are made by elected politicians, in contexts where conflicting and incompatible views are held between women over what

is in their interests. We might think at first that it is best to privilege those for whom the decision has direct impact—the young woman without papers seeking an abortion who is prepared to undergo an illegal termination, the woman for whom prostitution enables her to pay the rent and feed her children, or the burkini-clad swimmer who seeks nothing more than to participate in an ordinary leisure activity. Nevertheless, might the non-burkini swimmer, or those of us walking past sex shops explaining to our granddaughter why women are sitting on stools in their underwear, feel—and be—considered directly affected, too? Map onto this differences of class, ethnicity, immigration, and religion, and working out how best to represent women's interests in each of these cases becomes harder still. Once again, we might find ourselves wanting to take especial care to ensure that the voices of the most marginalized women or those who are few in number are heard. We should be attentive, too, to the political and other conditions in which these women voice their interests and, thus, whether what they say is acknowledged and listened to. Our point here is simple but absolutely critical: how women's interests should be represented in politics cannot easily be "read off" from what some women say is in women's interests, or from societal, academic, or expert debates on women's issues, or worse, from whatever Internet site political actors stumble over or are directed to by algorithms. To put it bluntly, we are not persuaded that our politicians are either in a position to inform themselves of the diversity of women's issues and interests, or to recognize that some groups of women and some interests (read: the most marginalized) are easily ignored.[16]

Critics might counter at this point that it is not so much that our politicians do not make enough effort, nor that they willfully misrepresent women, but that women are not easy to represent in politics. In short, if women cannot agree what it is that they want, politically speaking, they make themselves unrepresentable. This critique renders suspect much of what we have said thus far—it takes the blame away from the political institutions of representative democracy and from its key actors, our elected politicians and political parties. We have already conceded, as our abortion vignette showed, that even on a fundamental women's issue women disagree. We, furthermore, accepted that even on this issue, overwhelmingly regarded as the "red line"

that distinguishes the feminist from the non-feminist, there are some women who oppose abortion, whether for religious or other reasons, and yet still self-identify as feminist. Fortunately, forcing women to agree in order to redress women's poverty of representation is not an option we advocate. On the contrary, instead of trying to erase women's different conceptions of what is in their interests, we hold that these should be centrally addressed via representative political processes.

Expecting women to speak with one voice in politics would be to hold women to a different democratic standard than we hold men. According to widely accepted understandings, representative democracy is designed to peacefully settle fundamental conflicts about "who gets what, when and how" in large and complex societies where there is no agreement about political ends, and where resources are finite. In this traditional reading, politicians debate citizens' competing political interests and take decisions about what is best.[17] Male citizens' views are not homogeneous, and yet we (citizens and political parties) do not think of them as politically unrepresentable because they conceive of their political interests in different ways. Political parties purposively seek to represent different groups of men. Why should women be expected to behave and be treated any differently? As we see it, the problem said to arise from different conceptions of what is in the interests of women is more a failure of our party systems, institutions, and politicians to *make* women representable. Put more strongly still, the representational deficiency lies not with women but with the organizational basis of our formal political life.[18]

Women's inability to hold their politicians and political parties properly to account adds to their poverty of political representation. In party democracies, whether one finds politician A better than politician B is strongly influenced by one's ideological predispositions, values, and socioeconomic positionality. Gendered political interests frequently sit uncomfortably on top of all this. In the first instance, it is very difficult to hold elected representatives to account on gendered grounds when women's issues and interests are absent from or marginal to formal politics. In other words, and as already mentioned, when party politics mostly avoids the terrain of women's issues and interests there is likely to be little practical meaning in talking about electoral mandates from women to parties and/or from women to

individual politicians. It is also the case, as already stated, that even when party politics attends to women's issues, gender does not map neatly, or completely, onto left–right politics. This "lack of fit" leaves women having to decide whether to withhold one's vote from a party that says or does little in respect to women's interests, even as it may address other political interests they also hold. We should also be aware of less honorable parties and politicians who make offers that *appear* explicitly aimed at women and in their interests, but that are intended to fulfill different political goals. Finally, it is important to restate that poor representation in policy terms can reinforce the feeling that women's issues and interests—indeed, women—are marginal to or even outside of democratic politics.

For all these reasons, it matters that women are able to distinguish between the "good, bad, and the ugly" representative.[19] Inevitably perhaps, we return to Le Pen. Her critics will conclude that whatever she says to the contrary, Le Pen is most definitely not seeking to redress the unequal situations that women find themselves in, relative to men. Rather, she seeks to advance a particular depiction of France, understood as a specific ethnic and secular nation, and with a traditional gender order. Claims by Le Pen to be representing women are accordingly about something other than realizing what is in the interests of women; her rhetorical accommodation to liberal feminism is nothing more than the strategic deployment of pseudo-feminism masking racist ends. Women who vote for Le Pen are, thus, regarded as having been manipulated, and in such circumstances, the idea of accountability between women and politicians becomes meaningless.[20]

As currently practiced, electoral politics offers too few incentives for women to make gendered demands on our formal political institutions and politicians. This renders women more "unrepresentable" still, or as we would put it, it engenders their political misrepresentation. It thereby reduces the chances of women mobilizing as women in civil society in ways that would enhance their participation and representation in formal politics. This is especially true once again for marginalized women whose participation in, and expectations of, representative politics will likely be still lower. Let us return to our prostitution and burkini vignettes. In both cases, women are seemingly deeply entrenched in their respective silos, frequently speaking

past each other. In contexts of Islamophobia, anti-immigration, and racism, combined with a poverty of women's political representation in electoral politics, the tendency for women neither to come together and mobilize *as* women in civil society nor make demands of formal politics is reinforced. It is asking a lot—probably too much—for women to distinguish between those who voice concerns about gender equality through choice and de-criminalization, and who distance themselves from populist parties and racists, and those who are happily subscribed to such views.

The Representation of Women *as It Should Be*

In moments when we despair of formal politics—at political rhetoric, policies, and legislation that either ignore or are harmful to women—we fantasize about a feminist future in which *all* political decisions are good for women. In this we may feel tempted, like others disappointed with democracy, to put our trust in the hands of an enlightened feminist despot or guardian, whose superior knowledge and virtue will rule by laws that end gender inequality and injustice.[21] Unfortunately, she is, and must remain, a mythical figure. A feminist guardian embodies and reproduces political inequality by dint of her very status. We are her political minors, and whether she does what we want or not, she cannot be held to account. More than this, we are compelled to ask what her superior knowledge and virtue consists in. If it is the technical skill of governing, then such skills might be obtained by any other (woman) citizen. It cannot be moral. We find the idea of an absolute feminist truth untenable. Given that feminists frequently disagree, how could a feminist public good, so to speak, be revealed? Herein lies the paradox: to rule "well" our feminist guardian would have to consult with the women she governs, in other words, to engage in democratic practices.[22] What looks at first glance a "quick and easy" feminist alternative way to govern turns out to be something that we cannot defend. Short-lived, killed off in a single paragraph by the democratic critique, it is, nevertheless, much too soon to give up on what we wanted from our feminist guardian. Previously we asked you to consider women's poverty of

representation. Now we return to our vignettes and ask you to explicitly imagine political representation *as it should be*.

In representation as it should be, it would not have taken an Indian woman—Savita Halappanavar—to die in hospital from septicemia following a miscarriage, having been denied a termination,[23] before the touchstone women's issue of abortion was taken seriously by Irish politicians. There was no medical reason for her death, only a constitutional one. Denied the termination Halappanavar asked for, her very public passing in 2012 was critical to the successful referendum campaign some five years later.[24] A Dublin mural read: "*Sorry we were too late*. But we are here now. We didn't forget you" (emphasis added).[25] The campaign that Halappanavar's death reignited forced Ireland's politicians—and, for that matter, many of its citizens—to attend to what women were saying; they could no longer get away with ignoring women's interests, interests hitherto denied and resisted by the state.[26] In her death, Halappanavar held Ireland's political class to account for deciding that women's suffering and lives were a price worth paying for the satisfaction of others' interests. In contradistinction, had women been well represented, the issue of abortion would have been addressed earlier, for different political reasons and in a different manner, because, fundamentally, abortion is a necessary procedure that women undergo, whether, as already stated, they are legal and safe, or illegal and risky. Women's medical, social, and economic interests would, furthermore, be at the center, not the margins, of the debate inside and outside of formal politics; the Church and parties' masculinized interests would not have predominated.

In representation as it should be, new political conversations and new conversationalists are brought forth, with different kinds of political "talk" publicly legitimized. During the Irish referendum campaign many women recounted their abortion "stories" for the very first time. Their discourse introduced new ways of speaking about women's bodies and fertility. Women spoke about "the financial, emotional and personal suffering" and the "harm and the hardship" of seeking abortions.[27] Of what it feels like to secretly fly to England.[28] The public and private sharing of women's lived experiences proved critical in getting the political interests of Irish women across to those who held different views, including, importantly, to those who held

political power.[29] Women's "evidence" was persuasive, with substantive effects on Irish citizens and politicians' views of the 8th Amendment. In a handmade-looking poster, women shackled by chains represented by the number eight graphically presented abortion as a question of women's right to bodily autonomy; in the absence this right, it asserts, women are in an enslaved state. The repeal campaign created new linkages between women, and between women and men, which had been lost through the silencing of women, too afraid to speak of their abortion experiences. It also connected women and their political institutions, which could no longer turn their backs on women's demand for abortion reform.

Achieving the realization of a shared women's interest in Ireland—with abortion publicly recognized as a legitimate political issue that should be legislated for—did not require any pretense that all women agree that abortion is a "good thing" or even that all agreed to a specific abortion provision. Differences among women over what is the interests of women remain evident. Another referendum poster had a pointed gendered message: sex-selective abortion goes against the interests of women. We might personally dislike or disagree with its claim that feminists should be against abortion because, as they highlight, sex-selective abortions target the female fetus; we might as individuals have preferred that such posters had not been produced. We hold, nonetheless, that on this women's issue, as with others, women's good political representation requires that all who are affected by the issue, and the diversity of views, contribute to the public political conversation.

The inclusion of competing conceptions of what is in the interests of women is not to be read here as an equalization of different views on abortion—a false equivalence. What matters is that these different conceptions are publicly aired; otherwise we are treating women as if they were homogeneous and, thus, differently from how politics treats men. *All* must be heard: we do not make a priori claims over which voices should be privileged, as it is the voicing of these interests as part of the public political debate, among and between women in society and politicians, that matters.[30] It is the latter's subsequent acts of listening, deliberation, and decision-making that deliver good processes of representation and good outcomes. This is the representational

effect of greater and better interpersonal and public conversations, greater connections between citizens and their political institutions, and more informed elected representatives making decisions that they seek to be "for" the represented.

In representation as it should be women learn from and about other women's experiences through new political debates. The burkini episode was our personal wake-up call. The myriad questions that went unasked of our fellow swimmer epitomized a political problem that was, however, not just about us as individuals. It said something bigger about the quality of our public political conversations and of our political institutions. It revealed to us, in a stark way, the necessity of learning what issues look like from other women's perspectives. Neither knowing how to ask, nor having undertaken the necessary work to learn about Muslim women's dress, and yet conscious of how politically fraught the issue is, we carried on getting dressed and, ignorant and mute, exited the changing room.[31] *In representation as it should be*, political learning—hearing from the perspectives of those who are directly affected—is neither accidental nor individualized. It was only a year on from the burkini episode that serendipitously our "re-education" began. In reading a copy of *It's Not about the Burqa* given to one of us in the BBC's "Woman's Hour" studio,[32] we gained access to a group of Muslim women's experiences. We can only speculate as to whether we would have otherwise come across this book. We are more certain, however, that had we read it before coming across our burkini-clad swimmer, our reaction would have been different.

New political conversations among women in civil society are both a good in itself and critical to a re-gendered public political debate in the formal realm of politics. "I am a sex worker. I don't sell my vagina. Nobody owns it but me": this was seemingly the only intervention from a prostitute in the Swedish YouTube clip; it was at the very end of the discussion. Its effect was to make us "much less sure all over again" over what should be done about prostitution. We worried that the debate had been skewed to privileged women—the high-class sex worker, the academic critic—and skewed in ways that silenced the most marginalized—the trafficked, pimped, or drug-dependent prostitute. We do not need to suspect Kajsa, Lydia, or Elise's motives; we can assume that what they said reflected their experiences

and expertise. What concerned us was that other perspectives and interests were absent, or rendered marginal because only some were invited or participated. In the case of a TV show it might not matter who speaks—although we think it does—but it most definitely does matter who speaks on prostitution in civil society and inside our political institutions.

In ideal political conversations among women, and among women and their political representatives, disagreements over fundamentals may remain. We do not *need* the prostitution camps to necessarily change their interests, but they will share a commitment to speaking and listening to each other, to making their discussions inclusive of different women who may bring new experiences and perspectives to the debate, and to being open to preference transformation. Deliberations on these may, in turn, give rise to new policy ideas, or old policy ideas hitherto not prioritized may gain greater support. Women's disagreement is considered constructive; women's interests are identified through debate. Some agreements may arise, and new coalitions of support might be built: for example, agreement that the stigma surrounding prostitution should be removed, that the safety of prostitutes must be uppermost, or that the economic drivers of prostitution should be minimized. Where gender-unequal contexts continue to exist, where women are exploited, abused, and at risk, there may be agreement to actively reduce demand. In the absence of any such temporary or tactical agreement, there is, nonetheless, a shared commitment to act and hold to account formal politics for its failure to deal with the issue of prostitution.

In political representation as it should be, politicians are party to these new conversations, neither passive recipients of women's interests, nor disconnected from the women they claim to represent. Politicians hear from an inclusive range of those engaged in and affected, for instance, by prostitution; it might well be the first time that most are in the same room as prostitutes. They listen and learn, inter alia, what drives women into and out of prostitution, free choice, economics, and trafficking; how the experiences of prostitution varies by economic, social, racial, and citizenship status; and what the effects are on sellers and users, whether it reproduces sexist or misogynist views on women and gender equality, a point that Kajsa made in the YouTube clip,

or how it meets men's sexual needs that otherwise would go unmet. When women are in receipt of good political representation, men's interests are revealed. Oppositional interests between women and men are not always marked or drawn out in political debate: men's interests frequently pass as neutral, non-gendered political interests. New, more nuanced deliberations will follow. Hearing about the quotidian violence prostitutes risk, or the societal stigma and economic insecurity prostitutes face—learning that the 1990 movie *Pretty Woman* narrative is not typical—encourages politicians to rethink what might be done even as, or if, they maintain a commitment to their primary position on criminalization or legalization. Detailed descriptions of the daily struggles some women face putting "food on the table" might come to matter alongside more abstract notions of morality, religion, individual freedom, exploitation, or alienation.

In political representation as it should be, elected representatives fully recognize their role in representing women and are accountable to them about their actions and decisions. The political agenda is overhauled. Newly informed, having been exposed to women who are affected by the decisions they make, politicians care more and know that they will need to persuade women that they have met their interests. Marine Le Pen's 2019 European election pitch to women was forthright. Those who claim to represent women, she contends, have failed to protect Muslim girls' innocence and freedom; they have not stopped the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) or forced marriage. French culture, symbolized by its sunbathing practices, is under threat. Feminists have failed, alongside political parties and the state, to close the gender pay gap. Against this, Le Pen offers herself as the politician who will protect future generations of women from Islam and multiculturalism, and who will bring about gender equality.

With Le Pen's representative claims part of public debate over what constitutes women's issues and interests, her voice—one not to everyone's (feminist) taste—may very well be amplified. Speaking as a divorcee and single mother, some of her claims may well be confirmed by some women: the charge that French politics and French feminism is elitist, her claim that abortion rights are settled in France, and her claim that women's interests are under threat from Islam might well resonate. Some of the grande dames of French feminism have publicly

agreed with Le Pen's latter claim, for example. While such observations may discombobulate, the open and visible contestation over what is in the interests of women contributes to the quality of women's political representation. It makes deliberations and decision-making more inclusive, transparent, and accountable to women, even if that includes Le Pen.[33] Le Pen may assert that she "gets" ordinary women and has lived-experience as a woman, but if she wants to argue that her politics is what is best for women, she must now do so knowing that she will need to substantiate and defend her claims. She will surely find her political agenda directly challenged.

In this imagined feminist future, we look forward to a politics in which diverse women participate and contribute to the conversations of civil society, and with women participating in and represented in and by a formal politics that reciprocally seeks out their participation and representation. Learning among women, and between women and the politicians who ultimately make political decisions, is maximized. The formal political agenda reflects women's issues and women's interests; these are a routine and not a marginal feature of formal politics. Political institutions are sites of contestation over what constitutes women's issues and interests, and where the diversity of these are discussed, deliberated, and decided upon. Bringing about *political representation as it should be* demands a significant change in our democratic politics and of its political institutions, political representatives, political parties, and parliaments. Our elected representatives would be institutionally and systemically required to represent women. This role is designed into the political institutions of our representative democracy. This future is one we call *Feminist Democratic Representation*.