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Gender issues for active citizenship

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of active citizenship from a poststructuralist gender perspective and discusses how men and women seem to be positioned in private (family) and public (political and work) domains. This perspective provides an analytical tool for exploring how gender has been understood in the construction of citizenship values in different European contexts. The aim of the study was to investigate how people learn to be active citizens. It draws on empirical research, primarily from the UK, but as part of a European multi-country study involving Slovenia, the Netherlands, Spain and Finland.   The findings here are taken from life history interviews that explored how people acquired their understanding of, and ability to contribute to, active citizenship in the domains of work, state, family and civil society. The investigation looked for ways people made meaningful connections between their experiences and how they then acted out citizenship roles and responsibilities. The findings highlight that the learning of citizenship values needs to include a more pluralistic understanding of gender relationships, particularly in relation to family roles. The paper concludes with the argument for an ethical education that would empower women to play a more equally recognised citizen role in societies.

Keywords: gender, active citizenship, life histories

Introduction

There is no gender but only women, men and genders constructed through particular historical struggles … over which races, classes, … sexes etc … will have access to resources and power (Harding 1991, p.151).

The above quotation highlights that gender is a socially constructed concept that affects the way both men and women behave and think. A poststructuralist perspective aims to look beneath the surface of what men and women say, in order to reveal how discourses and relations of power influence our lives. This means revealing that which is not obvious in the way we speak, write, interact or even make decisions about our lives.   Our socio-cultural, political and individual histories inevitably contribute to the meanings we give to ourselves, our societal roles and our relationships with others.

Feminist critiques of the concept of citizenship (as both a social and legal status) have argued that it is distinctly male and predicated on an idealist notion of the white, European, middle class, able bodied man. Indeed, most countries can reveal histories that demonstrate the open oppression or denial of women's access to public life and this applies, of course, to other social groups such as migrants or people with disabilities. To emphasise these historical origins of citizenship values, English historical texts are cited as portraying citizenship as a man's duty while women's lives were rendered invisible (Brindle and Arnot 1999). Even the words and descriptions associated with the active citizenship were more closely associated with stereotypical masculine characteristics such as impartial, dispassionate and unemotional behaviour, defending one's country. Words associated with femininity such as nurturing, caring and emotion are not seen as valued qualities in the active citizen (Sawer 1996).

For a more detailed breakdown of feminist positions on citizenship, see Preece (2002). In brief, feminist poststructuralist or pluralistic perspectives argue that citizenship activities should be interpreted more broadly. There are a number of dimensions that influence this requirement. They include the notions of *independence* - a valued citizenship quality - and *interdependence* – a more relational way of viewing citizen connectedness (Porter 2001, Lister 1997); the *vocabulary* (and its implied meanings) that is associated with active citizenship; the concept of family as a private domain that is ignored for its contribution to citizenship (Yuval Davis 1997); and the need to recognise that *women's issues* should be given equal prominence in democratic structures and political decision making. Lister (1997), for example, argues that political activities should be defined more broadly so that 'society' includes 'family' – where many of women's activities are often located. Furthermore, for many women, their political activity is through neighbourhood action. Yet their activities often fail to be located in formal democratic structures that would enable their issues to be taken forward. In other words, it is argued, we need a multi-layered concept of citizenship with a 'broader understanding of the significance of difference' (Lister 1997, p. 197). By highlighting social, rather than civil, citizenship we enhance the moral relationship between citizens which requires involving more women actively in the formal political process. Prokhovnik (1998) argues that citizenship should be seen as a broader concept than its political or socio-economic concerns. This would also create space for new definitions of masculinities so that men, too, are encouraged to deconstruct their own gendered practices.

Whilst today's discourse of equality suggests that such stark differences no longer prevail, this study revealed more subtle evidence of gender disparities in the way men and women learned to be, and behaved as, active citizens. Not all country researchers in this study felt the differences were equally significant, especially amongst the younger generation, but in most cases there was acknowledgement of attitudinal trends trend that still encouraged these disparities.

The research

Although reference will be made, where relevant, to the other European findings, the focus of this paper will be on 21 life history interviews from the UK. The interviews were conducted between 2000 and 2002 as part of a European Framework V funded study 'Education and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship' (ETGACE). An additional study 'RE-ETGACE' was conducted in Romania and Hungary in 2003, though gender was not a variable that was analysed in this cohort.

The aim of the study was to investigate how people learned to be active citizens. We looked for ways in which people made meaningful connections between their experiences and how they then acted out citizenship roles and responsibilities. The overall research aimed to investigate how people acquired their understanding of, and ability to contribute to, active citizenship in the domains of work, state, family and civil society. A gender specific dimension explored the following issues:

1. What values and attitudes have influenced decisions by men and women over their lifespans to undertake citizenship activity?
2. Are their particular features of the present environmental and social conditions which women and men face differently?
3. Are there particular ways in which women and men give meaning to their experiences and their identities?
4. What are the implications for a future agenda for citizenship education that incorporates a gender perspective?

The UK sample consisted of 12 women and nine men from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Their ages were between 25 and 40 or between 55 and 70. The gender focus here is primarily (though not exclusively) on the women's stories. Of the UK women interviewees, Sandra (age 40) and Marlene (age 63) had strong working class backgrounds. Whilst Martha lived in a working class area her parents had middle class aspirations and a military influence. Three women (Mandy,

Charlene and Gloria) were heavily influenced by their working class and associated trade union membership. Hazel (age 40), Catherine (age 39), Pamela (age 70), Jane (30) and Carla (57) all had middle class backgrounds, though the generation differences affected the values and attitudes they were brought up with. In view of the small sample, the following findings cannot be generalised. They do demonstrate, however, the subtle way in which experiences, discourses and power relations interface on an ongoing basis to influence gendered identities, perceptions and (sometimes) life changing decisions. The analysis explores how individuals are caught between acting as knowing 'subjects' and acting unconsciously as individuals who are socially conditioned (Jones 1997). It also reveals how individuals might act as their own agents of power and challenge normative assumptions and expectations about themselves. I explore the findings under three thematic headings, all of which address to different degrees the gender issues of family, interdependence, women's issues and vocabulary and its implied meanings.

Gender related values and attitudes

This theme relates to how educational expectations in childhood influenced career choices for men and women. For girls the expectation was that they would get married so career options and ambitions for educational advancement were limited and gender specific. This meant that most of the older women active citizens in this sample had taken up further or higher education options later in life than their male counterparts and only as a result of encouragement from significant people outside the family.

While the younger generation of women were far more likely to enter unisex professions such as management or computing, they nevertheless revealed one common theme. Marriage always resulted in either disrupted career plans or at least a change of job for the women, but not the men. Women's autonomy, therefore, had less value in the public sphere than it did for men. Of the women who did play a public 'citizenship' work role through their trade unions, they all admitted to both gender discrimination and a struggle to prove themselves in their public role. This latter feature was also evident in the interviews from Slovenia and the Netherlands. Amongst the Slovenian interviews Podemik et al (2001), for instance had this to say:

> Ana's [a younger politician's] experience is that a woman must put in much
> more effort to achieve some aims than men since they can achieve them by
> just being men … Olga and Ana, both younger politicians, mention examples

of discriminating attitude of the public against women. Both have experiences with media which depicted them worse than their men colleagues (p176).

These experiences suggest that women's autonomy is defined by different boundaries – controlled geographically by husband's public life, family relationships and in public life itself by media images

Across all the country reports an interest in women's issues comes only from women themselves – thus diminishing their opportunity to have those issues taken as seriously as those brought up by men. There were exceptions, however.   The Spanish interviews showed that national women's movements had made a difference:

> During the 70s and at the beginning of the 80s women's rights fought mainly for the legalisation of abortion and divorce as well as free expression of sexuality. This fight resulted in the legislation of divorce in 1981 and that of abortion in 1984. Some of the interviewed women have actively participated in this fight (CREA 2001, p.204).

This indicates that, where women play high level governance roles without the involvement of men, democratic and grass roots resistance can make a difference to national policy. A further examples of such initiatives in Spain has come about through popular education for women who had been denied higher education during Franco's rule:

> 'Popular women' have started to take high personal responsibilities as agents of social change, starting to reaffirm themselves as subjects of their own biographies and breaking down the structural barriers (CREA 2001, p.206).

Such positive experiences have implications for education for active citizenship, which will be discussed in the final section of this paper.

Environmental and social conditions

The second theme focuses on personal or social circumstances that affected people's decisions to become active in society. These all relate to the private domain – the family. For many women their influential circumstances were family related – a parent's illness, having children, domestic violence, feeling isolated as a wife without paid work. The three women trade unionists were motivated by a sense of injustice which derived from issues to do with race, gender and class discrimination. Nevertheless, the focus of their trade union work was on improving the lives of

working mothers. So their private, family experiences influenced their wider social roles.   Having a 'care' role in the family was a critical influence – either to hinder or to determine citizenship activity.

An example of role hindering activity is given from Marlene. She allowed herself to be subjected to abuse and violence from her husband for 25 years for the sake of keeping her marriage together. The power of dominant, rationalising discourses affects people's sense of agency and their understanding of rights and entitlements so that the oppressed can collude in their own oppression. Marlene explained how her experiences from her childhood led her to believe that her role in society was to become a mother:

> There was such a lot of Catholic stuff, it came up in everything, and I don't know if I told you about the priest that used to come in twice a week. He said 'what is the most important job for a man?' So we said 'policeman, fireman, lifeboatman, a pilot..' And he said in a sanctimonious way, 'No, it is a priest'. So of course when he said 'what is the most important job for a woman?' we all shouted out ' a nun, it's a nun'. 'No', he said, 'No, it is a mother' (Preece and Edirisingha 2001, p. 39).

As a dutiful wife, she 'always stayed back'. She thought her role 'was to support him, make sure there was clean clothes, food and the place was quiet when he comes in'.

Such role hindering was seldom the case for the men's citizenship activities, although there were indications that the issue of 'gender' as a social role that defines and labels can also apply to men. If men do not fit the their socially expected role, then they too experience marginalisation. In the UK two gay men who had experienced oppression about their sexuality took up citizenship roles that interfaced with the private domain. Furthermore, Merel, from the Netherlands provides an example of how stereotype assumptions about male behaviour in the military no longer fit the model of participatory democracy necessary for bottom up governance structures:

> I left the military academy, because I didn't like the way some of my fellow cadets screw you over for their own careers, and because I discovered that it wasn't my style to give orders in such an authoritarian way (Basten and van der Veen 2001, p.137)

Consciousness of what is oppressive, therefore, will determine whether and what action people choose to take. The implications for learning active citizenship from a gender perspective lie in how people can be enabled to develop a critical awareness of the influential nature of their gendered discourses.

Unequal status of women in private and public roles

There were several examples of care roles influencing women's citizenship activity. Out of the 12 UK women interviewed, ten had taken a caring role towards their families, such as children (their own or others') and family members who were ill. Beryl (an African Caribbean woman aged 55) mentioned how the experience of taking care of her son, when he broke his neck after an accident, gave her a new awareness:

> I saw women as carers and how they would take care of their children from maybe birth and they would be still taking care of some children into adulthood depending on the kind of illness that they have (Preece and Edirisingha 2001, p.40).

In contrast, caring did not seem to be a motivating factor for most of the men's involvement – either in determining the nature of their citizenship activity, or in affecting how much time or commitment they gave to it. In this respect 'family' did not affect what they chose to do. The women interviewees, however, always deferred to family considerations and needs in relation to their citizenship commitment. Taking 'responsibility for' the children was articulated only by the women. This difference in attitude seemed to be reflected across the country interviews, though women in the Netherlands identified a more mutual – though gendered – support relationship. So the Netherlands male interviewees would say they received support from wives or partners who looked after the family; while women would say they received support from husbands or partners who ensured financial security. Here a notion of 'interdependence' seems to be working, albeit through gendered roles.

There were also more open examples of women's public roles being given diminished status by male colleagues.

Catherine, for instance, described how her gender, rather than her policing abilities, meant that she was 'pushed around' in the police force. The police force membership was almost entirely male. Where men were allowed to see assignments through to their completion, Catherine was often called away because someone else wanted a woman to contribute to her assignment:

> I would get sent on these specialist things like … murder inquiries … and then
> I'd get called back … because they hadn't got a female and so everyone else
> would stay on a murder enquiry for six months and I would be on there for a
> week and a half … and then I'd go back and something else would happen …
> and I'd go on that for a week … I would never see anything through and it
> became a standing joke … I just got pushed around (Preece and Edirisingha
> 2001, p.41).

This eventually affected Catherine's career and she left to become an air hostess –
an acceptably gendered locus for being part of a uniformed organisation.

A similar issue is described by Rita from the Netherlands. She leaves her squatter's
movement because it is a 'very macho movement' where:

> If you do not belong, you are just out … You must really take effort to fit in,
> wear the right clothes, show your face at the right places, have the right
> friends … I wanted to achieve certain things … but I just didn't get through to
> them (p. 137).

Whilst they both chose to leave rather than complain, the incidents demonstrate how
gender, rather than citizen skills, can be defined by men and ultimately define the
woman's public role. In this sense the power to define women's form and content for
active citizenship is attributed to men.

Implications of the findings for gender-sensitive citizenship education

The Framework V study supported claims by Siim (2000) and Hobson (2000) that the
meaning and status of female citizens will, to an extent, vary according to their social
and political histories. Public roles are often the result of changing national contexts.
European Enlargement, for instance, has already increased public consciousness of
diversity and difference. Nevertheless there are still gender concerns, particularly in
the way words associated with masculinity (action), rather than femininity (caring),
are interpreted as part of the public discourse for citizenship activity. How the
women learn to think about active citizenship contributes to their either challenging or
supporting dominant positions in the discourse. Whilst the ETGACE study indicated
that active citizenship is often learned incidentally and informally throughout life,
there were other influences.

It is interesting to note, for instance, that eight out of the 12 UK women interviewees (but only two of the nine men) identified their acquisition of critical awareness and active citizen skills through their university experiences. This group of women included the three trade union activists. Whilst some of this learning was through the curriculum itself (for instance four women enrolled for women's studies at some point in their adult education) a considerable amount of learning was through informal discussions and interactions. The implication here is that women may find the critical thinking element of higher education a valuable resource to counter traditional, more stereotype attitudes towards women that are likely to be learned in the family and immediate society. Here they would be allowed to question their society induced status and extend their identities beyond the normative expectations in private domains. The union women all used their training roles to raise other women's confidence and political awareness as well as build up personal skills that helped them negotiate their way through the male dominated world of trade unionism.

Citizenship, therefore, is learned differently by different social groups according to their assumed status in society and according to how policy decisions privilege certain qualities of the good citizen above others. Even where women are not constrained by family commitments, their role and status within society may already be internalised and embedded in social structures that define (men and) women normatively according to their gender.   Formal education, and informal learning, have their part to play in challenging normative values and raising awareness of issues to do with power relations, oppression and hegemony. The core discourses of dependence/interdependency; family/private space and rights/responsibilities may be an important focal point for effective education and learning for gender sensitive active citizenship.

Porter (2001, p. 5), amongst others argues that interdependence (rather than the more separate notion of independence) should be taught as a feature of responsible citizenship. This would highlight 'the ways that independence requires dependency and nurturance in our intimate lives and result[s] in the connectedness of citizens in our socio-political lives' In other words we need a more inclusive recognition of our relationship to one another and our collective responsibilities towards society. 'Caring' is not just a private, female activity. It is part of the interdependency of family upbringing for citizenship responsibility. A recognition of the concept of interdependency would then lead to a broader recognition of the link between the public and private worlds of citizenship and the increasing role that all individuals play

in both. There are a number of feminist arguments around this issue. Prokhovnik (1998) argues that re-defining the public private distinction is an ethical issue. It means recognising citizenship practice in the private realm as part of a diversity of citizenship practices that are already undertaken by both men and women:

> It is not that women need to be liberated from the private realm, in order to take part in the public realm as equal citizens, but that women – and men – already undertake responsibilities of citizenship in both the public and private realms (p. 84).

In this argument Prokhovnik is also trying to open up dialogue for new definitions of masculinities and citizenship so that men, too are encouraged to deconstruct their own gendered practices.

Yuval Davis (1997) suggests that recognising the private (family) sphere as contributing to the state and civil domains of citizenship activity will influence the systems of welfare, power and political organisation. Otherwise, even where women have received state support for domestic commitments, the loci of control in public spaces are still with men. She goes further to point out that being an active citizen must include different definitions for what counts as active. For instance, disabled people cannot carry out normative citizen duties if they are defined by such criteria as the ability to die for your country.

Flax (1992) proposes that even the discourse of 'equality' needs to change, so that new meanings can be introduced. She proposes that 'justice' (p. 194) is a more appropriate word since it signifies the need to question and analyse relationships and behaviours that have created power imbalances. It also implies the need for fundamental review of normative behaviours.

This feminist, ethical dimension gives greater significance to marginalised experiences. By highlighting social, rather than civil citizenship we enhance the moral relationship between citizens. This includes involving more women actively in the formal political process as well as recognising the conditions necessary to support care responsibilities in the process.

The implications of these arguments for an effective education and learning for active citizenship lie in the need to learn new values, identities and expectations. Whilst critical education can help women find new ways of representing themselves it also requires a fundamental change of learning across society – so that men and women

learn how to value women and other marginalised groups differently. This brings us back to the analytical question of power. In other words, how do people act as conscious subjects towards each other and what is their understanding of ethical responsibility? Of course, for such analysis to be effective we first have to recognise there is still a gender problem. Secondly we have to be prepared to examine our own responsibility towards the problem. Then we have to be prepared to act differently, to re-learn new ways of seeing ourselves (our subjectivities) and new ways of relating.

Concluding remarks

From this brief encounter with some women's experiences we can see that the concept of active citizenship is subjectively defined according to normative values at a given point in time and place. How people learn the formalities of active citizenship may be similar across most sectors of European society. The learning of citizenship entitlement, however, is defined both formally and informally through normalised value systems and social expectations for different social groups. Women, men, and other social groups learn to act out roles which may or may not be understood in public documents as active citizenship. Their understanding of their rights and responsibilities in relation to others will be learned, at least in part, according to how they are positioned in society. The social structures of society will also either facilitate or hinder their interactions with political decision making (Preece and Edirisingha 2001, p. 45)

If we wish to promote a more pluralistic, ethical citizenship, we will need to understand how societal systems, structures and practices contribute to hegemonic practices or how they may enable new possibilities for agency (self determination). The concept of being a woman (interfaced with race, disability or class) has the potential to displace her potential public role in society because her perceived gender status is made more visible than her personal qualities. Even today, women's relationship to men is often still defined by their gender and family position. So there is still work to be done. For instance, policy and educational practices can explore how women are socially constructed formally and informally. An ethical citizenship education would examine how much women's visibility enables a shared power relationship with men. Education for active citizenship, then, depends in part on how people are taught to be regarded in society. Formal and informal educational situations determine which skills are valued and which are not. So it is up to us, as

individuals and members of wider society, to publicly value the interconnectedness of work, family, the state and civil society in helping to create tomorrow's citizens (Preece and Edirisingha 2001, p.45).

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