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Introduction

The academic study of gender and politics has become well established in many parts of the world over the last three decades or so. During the same period, women's descriptive representation has increased in all regions (Dahlerup 2018). Whilst gender and politics scholarship has been best placed to explain this increase, feminist academics – those committed to 'the feminist project of societal change' (Kantola and Lombardo 2017, 21) have frequently been intimately connected to these developments. Yet the relationship between scholars, their research, and changes in the descriptive representation of women has been subject to little documentation, analysis or conceptualization. This article addresses this gap, offering an account of the role gender and politics scholars may have had on these changes. If the 'why' question is straightforward – the 'feminist imperative' drives many of us to seek to transform as well as study the world (Campbell and Childs 2013; Ferree and Verloo 2016; Kantola and Lombardo 2017) – questions remain as to what our role is, and what influence and impact we might have, on whom, and through which channels? Methodological difficulties arise in part from the varieties of potential influence, presenting academic analysis to a political party or an electoral commission, assisting political actors in identifying the most appropriate quota system for a particular polity, a public intellectual role that seeks to increase the legitimacy of women's presence in politics, as well as more diffuse, discursive contributions that overtime may engender new understandings of representative and inclusive democracy. Our purpose here is to trace such involvement and consider the opportunities and resistance that the academic actor might need to negotiate.

In explicating the role of the gender and politics scholar as a potential change actor in politics, we seek to augment understandings and theories of political change present in the gender and politics literature, especially feminist institutionalist accounts (Krook and Mackay 2011). We are mindful - based on our own experiences - that seeking impact in general, and undertaking consultancy in particular, poses challenges to the scholar, academically, politically, and personally. Influenced by feminist theories of institutional change (and resistance), we consider what *feminist* academics may have to 'give up' when we seek to act as change actors in formal politics. How much time it will demand? With whom can we make alliances to promote change? What compromises are required? To

what extent is it possible to meet the expectations and demands of academic feminism and feminist/women's movements, if we decide to act? How can we avoid acting as academic *betterwisser* when engaging or working with women politicians, whose daily and intimate experiences of political life are greater than ours? How should we respond when we are faced with institutional and individual resistance to our scholarship and us as feminist researchers?

The article opens with a review of the 'feminist imperative' that underpins the impact that gender and politics scholars frequently seek, followed by some methodological considerations important to this essay. By investigating gender and politics scholars' activities in seeking to effect change, both indirect and direct, and over time in two cases - the Nordic countries and the UK - we illustrate the various means by which gender and politics scholars have sought to influence women's descriptive representation. We then turn to a reflective consideration of our individual stories of acting as feminist change actors. We do so with appreciation of the formal and informal rules of political institutions, and in the penultimate section we discuss both the opportunities and the (apparently) non-gendered and gendered constraints and resistance to enhancing women's political representation.

The 'Feminist Imperative'

As an academic I believe that it is not only important to strive for excellence in research and teaching but to consider how best to engage with, contribute to, and have an impact on public debate and policy... For me, it was a unique opportunity to play a part in ensuring that the new House [Scottish Parliament] was not dominated by male politicians.... Drawing on experience of practice in other countries...and on academic research ...it was possible to demonstrate how gender balance could be achieved [via twinning]

Alice Brown, formerly of the University of Edinburgh (Brown 2014, 113-4).

The pioneering generation of gender and politics scholars are reaching retirement age, bringing forth awards and prizes, honorary professorships, and festschriften. In such accolades there is acknowledgement of the 'sheer scale and range' of the re-gendering of political science that has occurred over more than a generation (Dahlerup, 2010; Randall 2014, 15). What started as a handful of frequently isolated and marginalized women is today a truly international community of hundreds. The fifth biennial meeting of the

European Conference on Politics and Gender in 2017, for example, had some 560 participants and 100 panels. The feminism of much gender and politics research was clear from the outset, as scholars were influenced by, and or active in, second-wave feminism.¹ One dimension of this was, and we would argue remains, the ‘feminist imperative’ (Campbell and Childs 2013). As captured in the above cited quotation by Professor Alice Brown, many feminist scholars are concerned not only with offering feminist critique within academic circles, but also seek to act beyond the university. As Campbell and Childs note (2013, 185) ‘the “ivory tower” never accurately captured what many feminist scholars including feminist political scientists were, and are, doing’. This desire to act follows from feminist conceptions of what constitutes politics, a sense of community between us within the academy, and an identification with and commitment to those outside, and to transform gender power relations (Ferree and Verloo 2016; Kantola and Lombardo 2017).²

Gender and politics scholars have and are frequently part of broader networks of feminist movement activists and intellectuals, politicians, femocrats (feminists in state bureaucracies), and journalists. Some scholars will themselves move back and forth between these categories. It can hardly be a coincidence then that ‘many of the findings and frameworks’ of gender and politics research on women’s descriptive representation ‘fed back into the strategies and rhetoric of feminist activism’ (Dahlerup 2014; Randall 2014, 15, 18; Galligan 2014, 35; see Bjarnegård and Kenny (2017) for a ‘state of the art’. Given that gender and politics scholars wider feminist relationships – all other things being equal - should facilitate impact, we should not be surprised about the potential, at the very least, to bring about more direct changes to formal politics. What is more surprising is that our change efforts have seldom been documented or integrated into our academic theorizing (Campbell and Childs 2014; Stephenson 2014; Skjeie et al 2017). Neither the oft-cited concepts of critical mass (Dahlerup 1988) nor critical actors (Krook and Childs 2006, 2009), or indeed theories of party and political feminization (Kittilson 2006; Young 2000), have addressed the figure of the academic change actor. This lacuna might be more surprising still, given the velvet triangle literature regarding feminist policy change (with actors in the

¹ Universities were themselves important sites for feminist resistance in the 1980s (Campbell and Childs 2016, 4; Dahlerup 1998).

² This desire is not unique to gender and politics scholars, cf. environmental or peace studies.

state, civil society, and universities and consultancies (Woodward 2003, 84)), and the feminist knowledge transfer literature (Bustelo et al 2016). Neither does the feminist change actor appear much in the decade-old feminist institutionalist recruitment literature, even though it rightly gives greater emphasis to women's agency in accounting for political change (Krook and Mackay 2010; Waylen 2017). Skjeie, Holst and Teigen's (2017) study of the Norwegian Gender+ Equality Commission is a recent exception that explores the role of, and resistance to, the feminist academic. Most pertinent here is their attention to feminist criticism of the role of academic expertise and the absence of social partners and advocacy group representatives (amongst others), and the development of a feminism that is less committed to political equality and democratic inclusion and participation (Skjeie, Holst and Teigen 2017, 137).

Methodological considerations

We have identified the following research questions to illuminate the influence of gender and politics scholars on women's descriptive representation: (i) In respect of which of the myriad factors that determine the level of women's descriptive representation do gender and politics scholars seek to act? (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013; Kenny 2016). Do they target the political system, party context, recruitment processes and supply or demand-side factors, biased conceptions of merit, party organization and internal democracy, and quotas? Any influence may vary according to which is targeted. (ii) Upon whom do we seek influence? Political leaders and party selectorates/nomination committees, female representatives and/or male allies, women's movements, civil society activists, and INGOs, or voters and the wider public (i.e. broader societal attitudes). (iii) Through what channels and (iv) when and under what circumstances are gender and politics scholars' interventions most likely to be impactful? In no way do we wish to suggest that it is easy to capture cause and effect, especially in terms of the magnitude or relative importance of academic actors. In addressing these questions our two cases are the Nordic countries and the UK. In the former we trace the impact of Nordic gender and politics research back to the 1970s, when women's parliamentary representation took off and passed the 20 percent threshold.³ The UK case is based on a 'snap-shot' of self-reported

³ In Iceland this was later, in the 1980s.

‘impact claims’ by gender and politics scholars as captured by a government audit of Universities in 2014 (Dunlop 2017).

We draw a distinction between direct and indirect impact, even as we recognize the interactions between the two. We further suggest that *involvement* by politics and gender scholars is important in itself, and that by documenting this, we are able to include cases, where impact in its strict sense is uncertain, or difficult to quantify. Indeed, we are confident in the claim that gender and politics scholars have indirectly contributed to increases in women’s descriptive representation, even as we contend that *indirect impact* is likely the hardest to measure systematically. First, we point to the importance of *extensive knowledge production* over the last 30-40 years: documenting historical developments and changes over time, opening up the ‘black box’ or ‘secret garden’ of party selections within countries (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2017, 211); comparative research that illuminates variation across national and regional cases; and the production of abundant knowledge of quota design, implementation and diffusion (see for an overview Dahlerup 2018; Kenny 2014). Nordic studies that have had particularly wide reach and significance, and which were initiated and financially supported by the gender unit of the Nordic Council of Ministers (Dahlerup, 2015, 4-5), include Haavio-Mannila et al (1983), along with Dahlerup (1988); Bergqvist et al (1999); and Niskanen (2010). Specifically these influenced other academic studies and political actors by: (i) enhancing country specific studies by revealing otherwise invisible national structures; (ii) legitimizing claims for women’s descriptive representation through media dissemination, which was especially important since the high Nordic representation tended to make people disregard structural discrimination; (iii) generating the discursive turn from ‘blaming women’ to critiquing institutions lack of inclusion (Dahlerup 2018); (iv) supporting the formalization of party nomination processes (no less than fifty-fifty women and men on the selection committees); and (v) engendered inter-Nordic competition - ‘playing the Nordic card’.⁴

⁴ Ulrik Kjær (1999) established that amongst local recruiters and voters in Denmark, 30 percent women was considered ‘equality’: “Saturation without Parity” (1999); In Sweden Lenita Freidenvall (2006) found this percentage was considered insufficient.

Secondly, indirect impact is achieved via *dissemination*. We take this to refer to the transmission of academic knowledge beyond the university. This may occur via public lectures and talks, the production of briefings and pamphlets oriented to the more general reader or political actors, a direct or indirect presence in the media, as well as the publication of data in open fora. In respect of the latter, the Nordic countries all have Centres for information on Gender Studies (www.kvinfo.dk; www.mark.hi.is; www.kjonnsforskning.no; www.genus.se in addition to a pan-Nordic one www.nikk.no). In the UK, Queen's University Belfast's Centre for the Study of Women and Politics has played this role (www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/). Through such dissemination efforts gender and politics scholarship has without doubt been influential. Key theories about women and political power have become part of everyday political discourse. Norris and Lovenduski's (1995) 'supply and demand side model' is frequently heard beyond academia in the UK, and more widely. Ditto, the 'shrinking institutions' theory ('women in: power out' or 'power out: women in') (Skjeie 1992). Another example is the Nordic critique of the 'time-lag' theory of women's representation. In its place is the claim, based on a general gender power system theory, that male dominance tends to reproduce itself. The concept of critical mass is, however, undoubtedly the 'success story', notwithstanding theoretical and methodological problems it causes (some) scholars in the academic context (Childs and Krook 2008; Dahlerup 1988). A global discourse, it is routinely articulated by feminist activists and party political actors to: (i) highlight the importance of increasing women's presence; (ii) mobilize feminists and women in civil society, especially during democratic transitions; (iii) defend women representatives from critics (including by feminist scholars) who hold that they have failed to act for women; and (iv) shift the focus from women's alleged lack of qualifications to a critique of the conditions women face when present within political institutions (Dahlerup 2016; Randall 2014, 21).

Thirdly, *major discursive changes*. These are of course related to knowledge production and the diffusion of gender and politics analytic frameworks and empirical findings, but it signifies a more profound transformation in how the question of politics and gender is commonly understood. The first example is the problematizing of women's under-representation and the normalization of the claim for women's greater, and later equal, representation. Today many international organizations as well as national governments

and regional organizations have signed up to the principle of women's full participation in politics, seeing this as a fundamental indicator of democracy (e.g.

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality>).

There has been in such acts an acceptance of the democratic legitimacy argument articulated by gender and politics scholars. This argument was directly taken up by the Swedish leader of the European Women's Lobby (2008) *No Modern European Democracy without Gender Equality* (www.womenslobby.org). The second major discursive change, following the Beijing Platform for Action, 1995, is the shift away from 'blaming women' for their under-representation and marginalization in politics, to questioning the representativeness and inclusiveness of political institutions (Dahlerup 2016). Here political institutions (i.e. political parties and parliaments) are held responsible for the ways in which they exclude and marginalize women (Lovenduski 2005; Dahlerup 2018;).

Fourthly, indirect impact refers to *influencing actors directly involved in politics* who then in turn seek to bring about direct changes. Much of the UK 'impact' summarized in Table 1 (below) can best be categorized in this way – as influence on political actors. British based gender and politics scholars' work has been cited by, and individuals have been commissioned to write reports for, Commissions, public bodies, government and parliament, political parties, civil society political and feminist organizations. There is also some policy co-production, with public bodies, NGOs and activists. Such indirect impact is obviously difficult to assess. This might especially be the case as political actors instigating changes are frequently at one remove from the academic and politicians may not always give credit to the scholar.

Table 1 about here

Turning to ***direct impact***, and with the qualification of a lack of systematic data once again emphasized, we nonetheless acknowledge two main ways that gender and politics scholars have acted in our cases. First, *participation as members of political parties*. This is particularly notable in the Nordic countries (although see Perrigo 1986, 1995; Russell 2000, 2001). In Norway one of the leading figures behind the so-called 'Women's Coup', when a majority of women were elected in a number of local councils in 1971, was the feminist

scholar, Berit Ås, mother of the well-known theory of ‘techniques of male dominance’. Later, she became leader of the Left Socialist Party. In Denmark, and in a unique move, a group of grassroots feminists including feminist academics collectively entered the Socialist People’s Party, leading later to the first female majority in any parliamentary group, 1979-81 (Dahlerup 1998, 2013). In Iceland many feminist academics were involved in the successful Icelandic Women’s Party (1983-94), which managed to change the agenda of the very traditional Althing (Styrkársdóttir 2013). Box 1 below details the role of feminist academics acting alongside women journalists in Sweden. Threatening the establishment of a ‘women’s party’, their intervention generated a positive response from the Social-Democratic Party; two years later the most radical party quota, the zipper-system, was introduced.

Box 1 about here

Direct impact refers, secondly, to *consultancies and advisory roles* with National governments, government agencies, parties, women’s NGOs, INGOs, and international organizations (e.g. United Nations, Inter-Parliamentary Union), and national development organizations working on women’s political empowerment (e.g. DFID, the UK’s Department for International Development; SIDA, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; and NORAD, Norwegian Organization for Development Cooperation). Such bodies will likely have their own motivations - strategic, symbolic and, or substantive (Dahlerup 2018, 87) - but we contend gender and politics scholars’ consultancies come about in part because we have produced, disseminated knowledge about, and transformed societal understandings of gender, democracy, and representation.

Nordic State Feminism engendered close relations between academia and formal politics (which may be less true elsewhere) as gender equality has been a stated goal of all governments and most parties since the 1970s and 80s (Dahlerup 2004). Individual gender and politics scholars have been appointed as expert members of Women’s Policy Agencies; included in public law-preparing commissions dealing with gender equality; contracted as consultants to Parliament (Lenita Freidenvall, Sweden) and to associations of local governments and the regions (Beatrice Halsaa, Ingrid Guldvik, Ulrik Kjær), as well as to

various labour organizations and parties. Most recently, leading Nordic politics and gender scholars Anette Borchorst, Hege Skjeie, Lenita Freidenvall have run large public investigations into the impact of gender equality legislation, including women's political representation in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

Reviewing UK 'impact case studies' submitted as part of the Government audit in 2014 (Table 1 above) we see evidence of a range of direct impact.⁵ There is one clear case of *legislative change*. Yvonne Galligan's research and advocacy transformed the content of The Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Bill (2011). This saw the adoption of a gender quota in the Republic of Ireland. Used for the 2016 election this resulted in an unprecedented increase in the numbers of women representatives, from 16 to 22 percent. The UK Labour party's adoption of a party quota for the 1997 gender election constitutes a clear case of a *transformation in the rules* determining women's political recruitment. Here, Joni Lovenduski's interventions were critical to the wider Labour women's intra-party mobilization that gave rise first to the new party rule and later to legislation, The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002.⁶ Childs' discussions with a senior Conservative woman activist in 2005 constitutes an example of *the creation of a new gender organization* (Jenkin 2017). Women2win acts to increase the supply of Conservative women, and through training and mentoring, prepare them for candidate selection and election (www.women2win.com).

Being – or seeking to be – an Academic Feminist Change Actor

In reflecting on our own experiences as feminist change actors, we recognize that our role as consultants constitute particularly privileged positions; a status that itself requires self-reflection. That said, we recognize as feminist institutionalists Chappell and Mackay (2017, 33-4) make clear, 'the features and context of institutional settings act to constrain the capacity of actors to design, bend, and interpret the rules of the game and ultimately can limit their capacity to influence outcomes'. To this we also add concerns drawing on Bustelo et al (2016), about the ways in which gender and politics scholars risk facing resistance, as

⁵ This constitutes the 'most complete' albeit imperfect measure of impact (Amery et al 2016, 3).

⁶ Meg Russell's work fed directly into this legislation, although this was not documented in the gender and politics impact case studies.

well as co-option and de-politicization (Prügl 2016; Kunz 2016; Fraser 2013). Accordingly, we reconsider the opportunities and constraints we faced and explore how we sought to exploit the former and negotiate, if not fully negate, the latter.

Sarah Childs was 'seconded' to the UK House of Commons from September 2015 and published her Report, *The Good Parliament*, in June 2016. Informed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Gender Sensitive Parliaments framework, this was a 30K report that contained 43 recommendations. Independent of the Parliament or Government, Childs' goal was to identify reforms that would, if implemented, transform the UK House of Commons from a gender *insensitive* institution into a 'diversity sensitive parliament'. She would at the time of the Report's publication, also recommend to the Speaker of the House of Commons, the establishment of a body of male and female MPs from across the House. The 'Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion' meets monthly when the House sits.⁷ A number of these reforms have since been enacted, whilst others remain under live consideration by the Group and other actors within the House.

Dahlerup has been repeatedly invited to act as a quota consultant on the international scene. She has worked during the last decade as an international gender quota consultant in Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Bhutan (twice), Kosovo, China, Tunisia, Egypt (twice), Kenya and Ivory Coast. She has consulted for numerous international organization, including the UN, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and national development organizations or feminist NGOs. Her typical consultancy starts with preparations at home, followed usually by a week of consultations in the country. This would normally include consultations with women's NGOs, political parties, women's caucuses in parliament and other stakeholders, a large conference on women's political empowerment and interviews with the media. Most national quota discussions tend to start from scratch and it is for the consultant to provide information about experiences from other countries and systems. A written proposal for reforms is expected to be delivered by the Friday - in Muslim countries by the Thursday. In

⁷ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/reference-group-representation-inclusion/> Childs' data includes notes made during the secondment, vignettes written either at the time or that were reconstructed since, and interview data following a formal conversation with Claire Annesley (Sussex).

many cases, the contract includes a written report to be delivered on return home. In terms of method, it is essential, first, to understand the political context, and identify why the demands for quotas have emerged. Secondly, quota advocacy should refer to prior commitments, e.g. a constitutional clause (however vague), a national report to the CEDAW Commission (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), or national Millennium Development Goals or Sustainable Development Goal- plans. Thirdly, and given that there will always be strong, outspoken or silent, resistance to the adoption of effective measures to change women's under-representation, it is important to identify allies: feminist NGOs, feminist legislators or ministers, often the National Women's Commission or the Minister for Women's Affairs, who might have initiated the consultancy, and should include influential male stakeholders. Finally, it is crucial to come up with a quota proposal which is transformative, but at the same time compatible within the political and electoral system. A reference to neighbouring countries with a successful quota system is most effective (see Box 2).

Conducive Factors, gendered and non-gendered

Over and above any personal feminist imperative, and notwithstanding conflicting pressures of academic careers and disciplinary developments (Randall 2014, 18), recent trends pressing universities' interaction with wider society have increased the value and legitimacy of impact efforts by academics, feminists and others (Campbell and Childs 2012).⁸ As Gender and Politics has become more well-established within universities all over the world our academic status should give us expert credibility beyond the university. To our further advantage, gender and politics scholars - at least formally and mostly - face a *globally favourable context*. As noted above, women's descriptive representation is widely supported, rhetorically at least, as evidenced in international declarations. Gender and politics scholars may have *pre-existing relationships* with various insiders and thus be part of Piscopo's (2017) quota networks. Hence are well placed to exploit opportunities rather than struggle for access. During international consultancy, however, such alliances have to be made on the spot. In general, however, the aforementioned favourable opportunity

⁸ The academic community is, however, right to maintain that it should not be judged primarily by the societal impact of its research – especially not in terms of any simplistic measurement or quantification.

structures characterize most of Dahlerup's experiences in post-conflict and transition countries. For the foreign academic expert direct access to important stakeholders is usually ensured. Sometimes the consultant acts as an informal broker between various stakeholders, including government and opposition. In cases when you are invited at the point in time when the new electoral law is to be quickly decided upon (as in Tunisia and Egypt) access to this 'engine room', with those who really know the details of electoral systems, is critical.

Favourable conditions in terms of process, do not however guarantee a specific outcome. As a consultant, you do not make the final decisions. In the Bhutanese case, summarized below in Box 2, the recognition of the responsibility of the political parties for the recruitment of women as candidates has not yet resulted in a quota law, as it is still under discussion. In the Tunisian case, the advice may have been successful – removal of the exemption clause – because important members of the Council themselves had some doubts about freeing the political parties from the responsibility to find the required numbers of female candidates.

Non-Gendered Constraints and Resistance

So far, the discussion paints a mostly optimistic picture. Yet, as feminist institutionalism reminds us, re-gendering is not easy (Kenny 2010; Mackay 2014, 2010). Whilst both of us can point to instances of significant change, gender and politics scholars will likely face institutions' general tendencies to resist change (Mergaert and Lombardo 2017), and in some instances, resistance specific to, or enhanced for, the gender and politics scholar. Seemingly non-gendered constraints and resistance include generalized perceptions of *academic knowledge as unrealistic or impractical* (Bustelo et al 2016). This might require the academic actor to translate the academic form to make it more palatable (Campbell and Childs 2013).

Academic change actors almost always, even when temporarily made 'insiders', retain an *outsider status* which risks not seeing or perceiving what is really going on or going on behind the scenes. This might be particularly true of the informal rules, norms and practices that inhibit descriptive representation of women (Kenny 2010) and which are identified as critical by feminist institutional approaches (Kenny and Bjarnegård 2017). In turn the

researcher might then be less able to identify the appropriate intervention or reform. Other mediating constraints might include, where politics is highly partisan, being limited to act in respect of issues regarded as non-partisan, and to rule out those perceived as biased towards one or more parties, even if the gender and politics literature identifies them as critical to the overall levels of women's descriptive representation. The special 'stickiness' of electoral systems may also prevent the consultant from suggesting more radical electoral reforms. When working in Cambodia for example, Dahlerup experienced that the UNDP, embedded in the national parliament to further democratic reforms, was ejected from parliament for other reasons, and her report had to be distributed through a Cambodian women's NGO.

Resistance to Feminist Reforms

Resistance may be related specifically to our *gendered and, or feminist analysis* and, or our status as *feminist actors*. The feminist academic of old would have often been perceived as politically biased and hence unworthy of the respect normally accorded to academics (Agocs 1997). In some instances, such views may linger still, as in some of Childs' personal experience. In making ourselves and our agenda more palatable we might decide strategically to look less radical (by our intellectual demeanor and, or our personal style, for example). In the House of Commons Childs explicitly sought to create institutional support through groups of MPs and officials who would champion her work. She also worked closely with a 'feminist in residence', a mid-career woman official with whom she had worked informally in the past, and through senior male allies, including the Speaker of the House and male clerks, who protected her as 'their' feminist interloper.

We might also witness resistance in the form of little or no action following a consultancy. This is because the causes of women's descriptive representation are frequently more structural in nature, in contrast to the formal exclusion of women in the past (Dahlerup 2018). Accordingly, our reform agenda is likely to go beyond the 'everyday' liberal feminism that may characterize the views of actors and institutions upon whom we wish to effect change. Childs, having secured access to the UK House of Commons by the independent

Speaker – a self-invitation that was formally accepted on the basis of previous relationships⁹ - met both types of resistance. First, she found herself, challenged by a senior Conservative male MP who disputed her ‘right’ to be on the Parliamentary estate and queried the Speaker’s authority to approve her access. The term Childs used to describe her time in Parliament – secondment - was moreover perceived by this senior MP as giving her unwarranted authority and was mis-represented as her being ‘instructed’ by the Speaker, and hence a ‘player’ in an institutional competition over who made decisions in, and about, the House. Childs’ *academic (in)credibility* was related to her known-identity as a feminist academic, with longstanding relationships with women MPs. She also found herself accused of being ignorant of Parliament – on the grounds that she was not a legislator - and biased because she was a feminist, and hence too easily swayed by a minority of women MPs who themselves ‘mis-read’ the House. At other times, Childs was considered a ‘stooge’ of the parliamentary officials who were said by some politicians to have their own agenda. Lastly, she also suffered from a right-wing media who represented her as a radical feminist.¹⁰

Such resistance, as Childs undertook the preparations for her report, were in part about a generalized resistance to change but it was also very frequently about the particular feminist challenge that *The Good Parliament* Report would be seen by some to embody. In seeking to limit such resistance, Childs would claim membership of the ‘parliamentary club’, emphasising her reputation amongst officials, via her role in a Parliament/Academic network, and through her reputation amongst MPs as a non-partisan who had longstanding and successful working relationships with all the main parties. She would also provide academic and internal House research and draw on international norms and other parliaments’ best practice, and consciously downplay her feminism by presenting herself as ‘grounded’ in Parliament. In this she worked with officials to draw up reforms that ‘fitted’ with the House’s traditions, akin to Dahlerup seeking transformative gender quota reforms that complemented the specificity of individual cases. Childs also shifted the frame of her reform agenda from the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s ‘Gender Sensitive Parliaments’ to ‘Diversity Sensitive Parliaments’. This was a conscious strategy that sought to depoliticize

⁹ Childs had been a specialist advisor to the Speaker’s Conference on Parliamentary Representation (2008-10).

¹⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4186814/How-long-nappies-changed-Dispatch-Box.html>

the political context within which she was seeking to bring about change whilst explicitly protecting the feminist content of her Report.

Even as it makes good feminist sense to use our expertise to contribute to redressing women's under-representation in politics, the question of outcomes, and more critically, the charge of *co-optation* comes to the fore. At best, we contribute to processes of democratization; at other times there may be little difference. But is there more disconcertingly the risk of being counter-productive? In the UK case, this latter possibility was addressed head on. The suggested reforms were not ranked or limited in their number, when some internal to the House requested a 'short-list' of the three 'most important' reforms. Nevertheless, some reforms were strategically presented as medium or longer term, and those that faced especial criticism from either women MPs normally supportive of efforts to increase women's descriptive representation, or which had garnered substantial negative media coverage, were minimized. 'Red lines' related to candidate quotas, maternity/paternity leave for MPs, and freedom to breastfeed for Members. These were included in the final Report because they were considered fundamental to any understanding of gender-sensitive parliaments and which, had they been excluded from the Report, would rightly have received criticism from both the gender and politics community and from feminist activists. Breastfeeding however was downgraded: to be considered as part of the recommendation on maternity leave.

Conclusion

In this article we have discussed the potential role of feminist academics as direct and indirect change actors in respect of women's descriptive representation. We have sought to document, in the Nordic countries and the UK, important contributions by gender and politics scholars that have transformed understandings, practices, and outcomes of women's descriptive representation beyond the academy. Frames about gender and politics have shifted amongst elite political actors and the wider public over the last 30 years or so and mechanisms, not least quotas, to increase the numbers of women in politics have been successfully introduced. Admittedly the dimensions and magnitude of gender and politics scholars' transformative effects are not yet systematically documented in respect of our two

cases, or more widely; other factors and actors are very much part of any account of change over time.

A number of observations from the Nordic/UK comparison prompt further consideration and lay out a framework for a new, comparative, research agenda. We would very much welcome other gender and politics scholars' accounts in their countries. (i) At the macro and meso levels, the nature of political and state structures, civil society/state organizations, and the wider political culture constitute the opportunity structures for gender and politics scholars. Specifically, the Nordic 'quest for equality' (Haavio-Mannila 1985) has made these countries more conducive than the UK, *ceter paribus*. The 'stickiness' of established political institutions, including the formal as well as the informal rules and practises is noted. Feminist academic actors may have limited power to create windows of opportunity for change but seem to have the best chances for contributing to the necessary reforms in times of electoral instability and renewal, and during crisis, or in post-conflict situations (see also Krook and Mackay 2010).

At the micro level, (ii) the capacity to re-frame arguments to resonate with the interests of other political actors for whom the descriptive representation of women is not their most important political goal *without* conceding too much of the feminist project of gender equality in politics, is critical. Here we suggest that despite successes such as moving to wider acceptance of the claim for 'gender parity' in electoral politics, the 'merit' argument used against quotas is one critical debate that gender and politics scholars have so far failed to de-throne, even if it has been overcome in practice in the Global South, and especially in post-conflict countries. (iii) The nature of gender and politics scholars' pre-existing and on-going relationships with women and feminists inside and outside of the state, and how these facilitate and maximise potential effects is significant, not least in whether these are systemic and institutionalized. (iv) How we, and, or our insider feminist political allies, interact with political gatekeepers and key decision makers is also highly relevant. If these relationships are individual and contingent, they may be powerful only in the short term, unless more feminist politicians are placed in important positions as has been the case – with variations - in the Nordic countries. Consequently, and following feminist institutionalism, permanent institutional changes to the gendered 'secret garden' of politics

should be a goal of gender and politics consultancy. (v) Questions about the relationship we have with feminists and women movement activists must not be forgotten. It is not clear in the contemporary period whether the goals of impact-seeking gender and politics scholars in respect of women's descriptive representation match the political concerns of younger feminists on the ground and or, address some of the concerns fashionable in contemporary academic feminism (Evans 2015).

The necessity of demolishing male dominance in politics remains, and gender and politics scholars are rightly responding to this with their expertise. Driven by the feminist imperative, the potential to achieve real world rewards are often compelling. And we should acknowledge also potential research benefits gained through access to the normally closed corridors of political power as we engage as potential change actors. Yet, as we seek to change politics, it is clear that we may not necessarily be engaging with others (individual, organizations and institutions) favourably disposed to feminist analyses. We must, as Lombardo and Mergaert suggest (2016, 57), embrace resistance 'with openness and preparation'; arm ourselves with 'knowledge and skill, personal courage, commitment to the change project and an instinct for survival'. Impact work may detract from our core academic roles – may constitute yet another dimension of the academic workload that threatens work/life balance and caring responsibilities. With social media, it can open us up to psychological and physical harm.

Our feminism may be challenged and so almost certainly we will need to compromise in substance and or reach as we seek to effect change. We should do so in a conscious, strategic and accountable fashion. These are both substantive and feminist questions. Feminist 'red lines' will undoubtedly be necessary. These will likely be case specific, but might there be a role for feminist academia and or feminist movements more widely in determining them, to hold the gender and politics scholar accountable to something larger than ourselves? In the consultancy context, allies should be identified as quickly as possible, and we should always require meeting with women's rights organizations and regard these as potential critical actors. Yet balancing academic feminism and women's movements demands may not be easy (Davis and van Eerdewijk 2016, 81). At some point, gender and politics scholars will have to respond to the claim that we risk become part of governmental

power with its attendant political and ethical implications (Prügl 2016, 39 cf Dunlop 2017, 14-5). At its baldest, this is the danger of acting against feminist interests (Fraser 2013).¹¹ Vicky Randall reviewing gender and politics sub-discipline ‘sense[d]’ a lesser dialogue with radical forms of feminism (Randall 2014, 28), suggestive of a liberal feminist, or incrementalist and reformist approach.¹² This might very well enhance gender and politics inclusion or access but at the same time distance or rupture a relationship with women in civil society and women’s movements. Our position, in line with Bustelo et al’s (2016, 157, 170-1), is that the feminist gender and politics change actor is – or should be - seeking a ‘transformative agenda, rooted in a structural approach to gender inequality’, committed to intersectionality, and will not seek to ‘drop’ its feminism or seek to ‘get it in through the back door’, even as it recognizes the necessity of compromise and negotiation.

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¹¹ Addressing Prügl’s (2016) ethical challenge lies beyond the remit of this article.

¹² NB. This approach may be a determinant of the success of academics’ impact efforts (See Chappell 2013).

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