

The Symbolic Representation of Gender: An Introduction



Figure 1.1 Defence Minister Carme Chacón inspecting the troops, Spain.

Source: El Mundo.

On 14 April 2008, a seven-months-pregnant Minister of Defence inspected Spanish troops for the first time. This was not only the first time for her, but it was also a first for Spanish women and for the Spanish army. Carme Chacón – the first woman to have inspected the troops in Spain – was appointed minister within the Spanish socialist cabinet of President Rodríguez Zapatero in 2008. The sight of Minister Chacón inspecting the troops on her first day in office, her rounded belly covered by a white maternity blouse, is an image that Spaniards will not easily forget. It is an image that was on the front page of several national and international newspapers. It was an image worth a thousand words.

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Why is this image so powerful, and why did it attract such media attention? At first glance, the picture on the one hand uncharacteristically shows a mother-to-be, a symbol of womanhood, in a position of leadership and command, and on the other hand just as uncharacteristically shows the army, a symbol of masculinity as associated with physical strength and defence, in a state of subordination and obedience towards a woman in a position of supreme authority. The pregnant minister is *invading a space* (Puwar 2004) that tends to be associated with men. The image's attraction could also be due to its suggested clash between life as symbolised by maternity and death as symbolised by the army. The image turned socially ingrained expectations about the role of women and men upside down and it did the same with the hierarchy between the sexes that is still very much present and being perpetuated through dominant cultural codes.

A second look at the picture opens up many more meanings that vary depending on the spectator's perspective. Some feminist political actors interpreted the image as a symbol that women are starting to break through the glass ceiling, setting foot into typically masculine political institutions. The Minister's pregnant body symbolises the female sex's entry in a political environment that has typically been an exclusively male territory, such as the Ministry of Defence. This image powerfully renders visible women's presence in male-dominated political areas and, what is more, it shows a woman in a leading position. Therefore, it 'is an important image precisely because it conveys normality', as the president of the Spanish feminist organisation *Fundación Mujeres* Marisa Soletó said. 'It serves a pedagogic function: it shows that women can be and are everywhere' (Abend 2008). Moreover, the picture challenges the traditionally ingrained idea that women and defence are a contradiction in terms, as protecting the country has culturally been considered to be a man's task and masculinity mainly associated with strength, and – metonymically – with defence. Finally, the image of a pregnant minister inspecting the troops can also symbolise the changing role of the army, which now not only includes military combat but also humanitarian and peacekeeping operations, roles here associated with women. Former Secretary of State for Equality Maribel Montaña suggests this latter meaning when she says that the image of the pregnant Minister of Defence 'shows that the army does not just have to fulfil this masculine role of force, it can be more feminine, more humanitarian' (Abend 2008).

From the perspective of more conservative political actors, the image of a pregnant Minister of Defence raised all sorts of concerns. Newspapers such as *El Mundo* expressed scepticism about the capacity of a pregnant minister – soon to be a mother – to manage the portfolio of defence, and questioned whether she should take the full 16-week maternity leave guaranteed by Spanish law or shorten the leave given her new political responsibilities (García 2008). Right-wing newspapers such as *ABC* and *La Razón* worried that, due to the socialist Prime Minister Zapatero's 'political correctness' in appointing women, many talented men would be excluded from top jobs in Spanish public administration to the benefit of incompetent female politicians (Sanz 2008; J.A. 2008). To these

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conservative voices the image of the pregnant minister inspecting the troops was a symbol of her incompetence and incapacity to deal with the political task that awaited her. The minister's critics also feared she might redirect the army to aid missions rather than military duties because of the supposedly pacifist ideas that her pregnancy symbolised. In this respect, the critics' concern is not only related to the fact that she is a woman, but also to the fact that she is pregnant, which might entail that she has pacifist ideas supposedly not to be associated with the tasks of a minister of defence.

What does this closer glance at the image of the Spanish pregnant minister inspecting the troops tell us? First, the picture is political. What we are discussing here is an issue of representation in politics in general, and of symbolic representation in particular. Second, the debate over the picture's meaning reminds us that there are different interpretations of just what a political image symbolises. A symbol's meaning is contested in political discourses and can mean different things to different people. And third, the image is a gendered symbol. It suggests meanings and beliefs that are associated with women and men, the roles that society has attributed to them, and their socially constructed relationship. Each of these three statements – about the political, contested, and gendered character of the picture – leads us into the theme of this book, the symbolic representation of gender.

In this introductory chapter we define what we mean by symbolic representation and do so in relation to Hanna Pitkin's (1967) definition of political representation. We first clarify our position with respect to Pitkin, and draw up the borders of 'symbolic representation', a concept that is at the same time broad and understudied by scholars in gender and politics, and in politics more broadly speaking. In Section 2 we then discuss who or what is the agent of symbolic representation in this book, the one representing. We thereby introduce a discursive turn in the analysis of symbolic representation within the gender and politics literature. In Section 3 we argue that gender is the principal – the group or matter being represented – in our definition of symbolic representation. We then clarify how this choice of the principal differs from Pitkin's, and refer to feminist studies on gender and nations that have specifically discussed the symbolic construction of women and men. The final section introduces the different chapters of this book.

Symbolic Representation

Pitkin's Definition

Political representation is about making sure citizens or, more specifically, different groups of citizens are 'present' in political discussions for which they are not physically present. In her seminal work on the concept, Pitkin (1967) distinguished four dimensions: formalistic, symbolic, descriptive, and substantive representation. While the first dimension merely deals with the formal rules of

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representation, symbolic and descriptive representation both focus on the 'who' is represented in the issue of representation, describing the ways in which agents (those doing the representing) 'stand for' principals (those being represented), either symbolically or literally. Descriptive representation more precisely refers to the physical presence of an actor as 'standing for' the represented through a resemblance to the represented. Substantive representation refers to the representative as 'acting for' the represented in a manner responsive to them (for a more in-depth discussion of these dimensions see Chapters 7 and 8 respectively). Pitkin herself was most charmed by substantive representation, since it focuses on the act of representation itself, on what the agent *does* in order to represent the principal. According to Pitkin, we can only speak of representing as substantive activity when such actions are involved.

Pitkin defined the symbolic dimension of representation as the representation of a group, nation, or state through an object to which a certain representative meaning is attributed. Or, put in terms of agents and principals: symbolic representation is the representation of the principal through an agent to which a certain representative meaning is attributed. Agents or objects generating symbolic representation include, for instance, national flags or anthems (Cerulo 1993), public buildings and institutions (Edelman 1964), statues, and the design of public spaces and capitals (Parkinson 2009; Sonne 2003).

A symbol is commonly defined as an image or object that suggests or refers to something else, and symbolic representation is indeed a process in which something by association or convention represents something else; much as Marianne symbolically represents France and the circle of 12 golden stars on a blue background represents the European Union (EU). Thus, the particularity of symbolic representation resides in the capacity of the symbol, the agent, to evoke or suggest a meaning, belief, feeling, and value related and appropriate to the principal (Childs 2008; Northcutt 1991; Parel 1969). These symbols themselves 'make no allegations about what they symbolise, but rather suggest or express it' (Pitkin 1972, 94).

We stand with Pitkin in the aspect of her definition of symbolic representation that points out the evocative (but not necessarily explicit) function of symbols as recipients of feelings, as made up of 'beliefs, attitudes, assumptions of people' (Pitkin 1967, 99–100). This includes Pitkin's argument that the link between symbol and principal is arbitrary and relies on people's emotional responses 'rather than on rationally justifiable criteria' (Pitkin 1967, 100). Thus, an important part of Pitkin's definition of symbolic representation we draw from is that the response to the symbol depends on training people and on forming their habits so that certain meanings are associated with a particular symbol and end up generating particular responses towards symbols, as Pitkin's example of showing national pride by not letting the flag touch the ground shows (Pitkin 1967, 100–101).

The connection between symbol and response is a matter of habit and social practice ingrained in norms and values. In Pitkin's example, a political leader such as a king or queen is accepted as a symbolic representative as long as people

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believe in the leader, and to make people believe in their symbolic representative, particular habits and social practices have to be formed. We have seen that the image of the pregnant Spanish minister is out of place as a symbolic representative, at least according to the various different responses it sparked; habits and social practices question the appropriateness for a minister of defence to be pregnant or even female. Due to ingrained beliefs and attitudes, and due to norms and values about what the appropriate roles for women and men are in our society, the image evoked particularly contested meanings and feelings. We will come back to other aspects of both Pitkin's and our own definition of symbolic representation after a brief overview of how the study of gender and political representation has evolved in gender and politics research.

The Cinderella of Pitkin's Dimensions of Political Representation

Out of the four different dimensions of political representation theorised by Pitkin (1967), symbolic representation has long remained neglected in the literature on gender and politics. Scholars in this field have mainly focused on descriptive representation, and more recently also on substantive representation. Pitkin's work has been an important touchstone in this, as Karen Celis and Amy Mazur (2012) underline in their introduction to a series of *Critical Perspectives on Gender and Politics*. Since the early 1990s, a growing body of literature has focused on the imbalance of men and women in politics, the causes of this imbalance and the means to overcome such inequality. At the outset, much of this work was normative and attempted to construct a theoretical argument for why more women were needed in politics. Looking into existing theories on representation and citizenship, it argued why these approaches were wrong and what was needed – a politics of presence or parity democracy – to redress the gender imbalance (Phillips 1995; Mossuz Lavau 1998). In the shadow of this body of thinking, more empirically oriented researchers broke open political systems, unravelling electoral systems and procedures of candidate recruitment, selection, and election. They pointed out the gender bias inherent in institutional structures, rules, and procedures (Rule and Zimmerman 1994; Tremblay 2008). This was the point when gender quotas made it to the political agenda (Dahlerup 2006; Krook 2006; Marques Pereira and Nolasco 2001), first in Argentina, France, and Belgium, and now all around the world.

This focus on women's underrepresentation in politics and the argumentation for an increased or equal number of women in politics led feminist scholars to the question of what exactly is the added value to politics of women and quotas. The argument about the added value of women to politics generated an impressive body of research linking descriptive and substantive representation, and exploring what difference women make in politics and to what extent and under what conditions they are better able to represent women citizens than their male colleagues would (for an overview see Childs and Krook 2008). The results in these scholarly works on the substantive representation of women were mixed, ranging from, 'yes,

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women definitely make a huge difference', to the argument for 'more feminists, not more women' (Tremblay and Pelletier 2000), which implied that feminists could also be male and that men could hence substantially represent women. Studies on substantive representation such as those by Celis (2009) and by Celis et al. (2008) problematised the idea of women's interests, challenging their unitary character, and discussed the role of 'critical individuals' as being more crucial than 'critical mass' in influencing women's substantive representation.

In the wake of this feminist interest, a broader renewed interest in the concept of representation arose, leading to discussions about political representation as a construction (Squires 2008), or as an issue of making claims on behalf of others (Saward 2006; 2010), and about the fact that the principal might not even have elected the one claiming to represent her or him (Saward 2009). The search for a greater quality of democracy, then, not only includes electoral representation as legitimate within a democratic community, but also non-electoral representation such as exercised by NGOs or interest groups. This scholarly interest in a broader concept of political representation that goes 'beyond the electoral game' (Stoffel 2008, 144; 2011; Rehfeld 2006) also opens the door to reflections on the overlooked 'Cinderella' of Pitkin's political representation dimensions, the symbolic one.

Pitkin's symbolic representation has received little attention so far. The few works on symbolic representation within the literature on gender and politics have discussed symbolic representation in relation to descriptive representation. Its appearance in these works is more about what descriptive representation generates at the level of symbolic representation. Leslie Schwindt-Bayer (2010, 6), for instance, refers to symbolic representation in terms of 'what the symbolic consequences of women's election to office are for the electorate'. The way Schwindt-Bayer and others (Childs 2008; Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Stokes-Brown and Dolan 2010; Zetterberg 2009; 2012) operationalise symbolic representation is by looking at the effect of women's presence in politics on public opinion by using surveys and opinion polls, and by studying changes in political attitudes, such as a more positive attitude towards politics or an increase of the perceived legitimacy of political institutions (see also Sawer, Tremblay, and Trimble 2006, 17). This research on symbolic representation looks at the broader effects of women's descriptive representation, relating women's presence in politics to attitudinal or normative changes and vice versa. The focus is thereby mainly on a broader audience of citizens rather than on the direct relation between the agent and the principal.

This Book's Approach to Symbolic Representation

In this book, we stick close to Pitkin's understanding of symbolic representation concerning the agent as 'standing for' a principal, while at the same time adopting the more recent idea of political representation as a construction. As the example of the Spanish Minister of Defence has shown, we consider that 'women' and 'men'

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are both relevant political symbols. As a (pregnant) woman, Carme Chacón stands for something, much the same as a row of soldiers does; and as we saw earlier, the two symbols do not necessarily match. The main way we approach symbolic representation in this book, therefore, is by analysing the symbolic representation of gender through the *construction of women and men as political symbols*, as we will explain in the next two sections.

As we saw, symbolic representation has so far almost exclusively been studied in relation to descriptive representation. Schwindt-Bayer (2010, 7), who also developed an integrated model of women's representation with William Mishler (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005), reminds us that – according to Pitkin – representation cannot be disaggregated into its dimensions and rather needs to be considered as a whole. Now while we are interested in how the different dimensions of representation relate to each other, we nonetheless deem it necessary to first look at symbolic representation in itself in order to come to a fuller understanding of its scope and impact.

Indeed, the picture of the Spanish pregnant Minister of Defence inspecting the troops touches on issues related to descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation. By being a woman, she mirrors the existing female constituency, in this respect reflecting an improvement in descriptive political representation – as we saw from Soletó's statement that the image symbolises the normality of women's physical presence in all political domains. Especially through her pregnant body, the minister evokes a shift in symbolic representation, as the typical characteristic that society has attributed to military leaders is being male. This change at the symbolic level is advocated by actors defending gender equality and contested by actors defending the maintenance of traditional gender images and roles in political institutions. From the perspective of substantive representation, the image of a pregnant minister of defence has been interpreted as a symbol of pacifism, which is then positively or negatively assessed depending on the actors' ideology. The extent to which the minister pursued a more peaceful approach or acted for women would need to be investigated empirically. What however can be said for certain is that Chacón was one out of eight female ministers within the first parity government in Spanish history, which was a symbolic act with both descriptive and substantive implications for political representation. It not only mirrored the gender constituency of a society half composed of women and half of men but was also presented as a first step in the representation of gender equality issues as a priority on the new government's agenda.

While this example shows the interaction of symbolic with descriptive and substantive representation, it also shows that symbolic representation is more than a simple effect of descriptive representation at a more symbolic level and that it deserves a thorough analysis in itself. A number of reasons feed this approach. First, symbols are of utmost importance in politics. The political space, political processes, activities, language, public policies, and the communication around them are full of symbols. Secondly, such symbols have an impact and an

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effect. The agent in symbolic representation does far more than simply ‘stand for’ a principal. Through what the symbol embodies and evokes, it represents the principal in one way or another, and it does so in a setting that reaches far beyond electoral politics. And the question is not only how the principal is represented but also what this actually means, as the debate over the meaning of the picture of a pregnant Minister inspecting the troops illustrated.

The discussion of agents and principals in the next two sections will show that symbolic representation is not just political representation through symbols; the question actually is what an agent in the form of a symbol actually does to the principals by standing for them. This issue will be further elaborated in the next chapter, where we discuss the functions of symbolic representation. We need to study symbolic representation in itself to understand what it does, and this is what we aim to do in this book. We want to conceptualise what symbolic representation is in great detail so as to be able to grasp its full scope. To further clarify our aims in this book, before discussing the agent and the principal, we would like to draw attention to the understandings of symbolic representation to which this book does not subscribe.

Symbolic representation can mean *political symbolism* in general – in the sense that flags represent a particular nation or ideology – and in this respect definitions of symbolic representation such as found in this book belong to the wider family of political symbolism. We, however, prefer to use the term symbolic representation rather than political symbolism because we are not only interested in exploring symbols and their political meaning, but also in their representation of the principal and what the agent means to the principal. In order to grasp this relationship we need to focus on the concept of representation – symbolic representation to be specific – rather than on political symbolism.

Symbolic representation can also mean *window-dressing politics and policies*. Symbolic here is used in the sense of not being effective. Its achievements are but marginal (if this kind of symbolic action achieves anything at all). In Mazur’s (1995, 2) analysis of French equal employment policies, for instance, she uses the term to say ‘symbolic reform occurs when policies designed to address certain social problems fail to effectively solve those problems’. Symbolic policies serve a symbolic purpose of ‘image making’ for politicians, but they ‘appear destined to have little real impact’ (Mazur 1995, 2). Symbolic is then seen as the opposite of substantial, as nothing substantial is achieved. Gender quotas often face similar opposition, calling it symbolic rather than substantive, and we will discuss this in Chapter 7. Although we will pay attention to the limits of symbolic representation in this book, we mostly do not analyse this window-dressing interpretation of politics and policies. We rather believe that, while window-dressing politics and policies can be empty rhetoric in practice, this rhetoric can still be seen as representation at the symbolic level, a specific discourse standing for a political entity (Baker 2007, 297) because of the meanings it produces.

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A Discursive Turn in the Analysis of Symbolic Representation

Recasting the Agent of Symbolic Representation

Symbolic representation, as we saw in Pitkin's definition, entails the representation of a principal through an agent who is attributed a certain representative meaning. But who or what is this agent? Though objects and images such as statues or flags are commonly cited as agents, the picture of the Spanish minister inspecting the troops is also an example of such an agent. The principals of this latter agent could be women (or even all citizens) and, depending on different perspectives, its representative meaning can change from being a symbol of equality to being a symbol of incompetence.

In this book, however, we will not analyse such visual portrayals but *discursive agents*. Pitkin did not consider that symbolic representation can also be discursive and based on the use of language (Bondi 1997; Bourdieu 1991). For instance, not just flags but also national anthems symbolically stand for nations and states, and their lyrics are at least as important as the music. By exploring the issue from a discursive politics approach, the conceptualisation of symbolic representation in this book expands on, and differs from, Pitkin's conceptualisation. We argue that looking at discourse as the agent in symbolic representation is particularly helpful to capture and make explicit the (in our case) gendered meanings and norms that symbols suggest or evoke, revealing meanings that could otherwise remain invisible. The discursive turn in the theory on symbolic representation that we propose here implies adopting a perspective that pays attention to the meaning of the agent and what that implies for those being represented, the principals.

We are interested in analysing the symbolic representation of gender through the *discursive* construction of women and men as political symbols, in finding out how women and men are discursively constructed, and in how symbols stand for or symbolically represent gender. By discursively constructing women and/or men in particular ways, these discourses reflect or represent an underlying conceptualisation of gender. It is this conceptualisation and its expression through discursive constructions we are interested in.

While adopting a discursive approach throughout the book, we more particularly rely on the method of Critical Frame Analysis (CFA) when focusing on how the agent *affects* the principal. The qualitative methodology of CFA was developed within the European research projects on gender equality policies in which we participated as researchers, MAGEEQ (www.mageeq.net) and QUING (www.quing.eu). CFA is a particularly fitting tool to grasp the different meanings of the symbolic representation of gender, as it can make explicit how policy issues are framed and reveal what the underlying norms and values of policy discourses are. We will analyse policy discourses in empirical cases chosen for their relevance as illustrations of particular policy framings. The data on political discourses we analysed through CFA is mainly used to explore a number of functions of symbolic

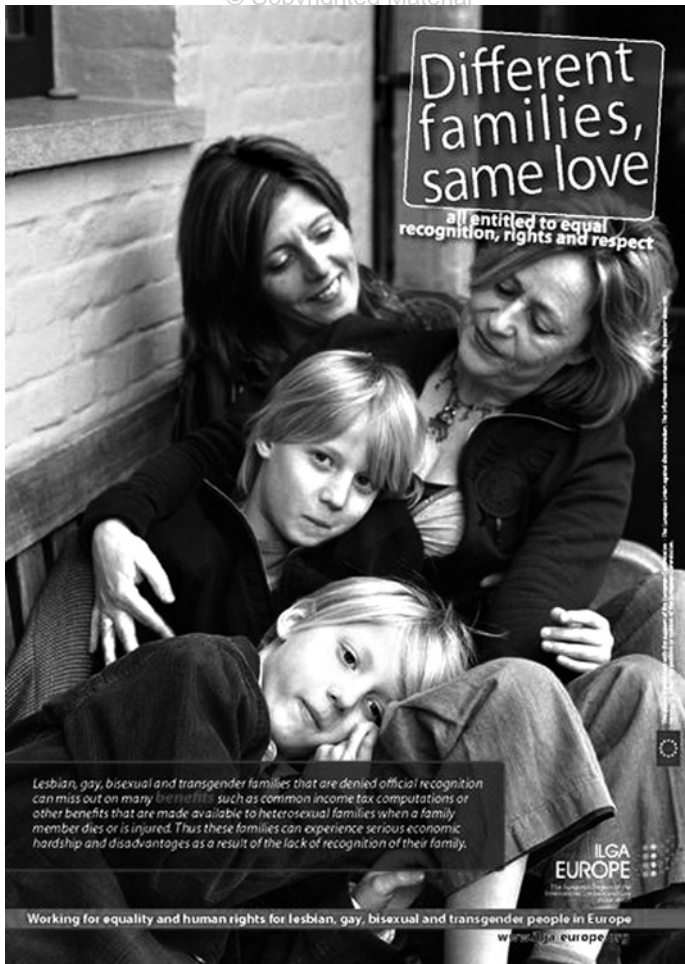


Figure 1.2 Campaign ‘Different families, same love’.

Source: ILGA-Europe

representation that will be introduced in Chapter 2. The details of the methodology are discussed in Chapter 3.

Studying Contestation and Change

Discursive approaches to public policies, including those on gender equality, underline the impact of these policies’ specific normative constructions of men and women have on the furthering of gender equality (Bacchi 1999) through the labelling of specific groups as having problems or as being problematic, while other groups appear as setting the norm, showing which role to play or whose

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behaviour to follow (Verloo 2007). For instance, family policies have mostly associated the concept of family with a man, a woman, and children, rather than with two women, or two men, with or without children. The prevalence in political discourses of associating family with a heterosexual constellation can be read as the response to hegemonic heteronormative habits, social practices, and norms and values formed in processes of socialisation.

While symbols fix meanings and norms that are difficult to change – think of the perpetuation of traditional gender roles – symbols are also contested by a variety of actors (Ferree et al. 2002) who attempt to propose new symbols to change traditional constructions of, for instance, women, men, families, or citizens. One example is Nicole Doerr's analysis (2010) of digital images created and spread by social movement protesters at EuroMayday events, which, as Doerr makes clear, constructed a shared transnational public space. These images show that official visions of the flexible mobility of EU citizens can be challenged, instead suggesting a European citizenship that includes migrant subjects and has solidarity as a key value. Images shared by transnational activists, such as those opposing precarity and the EU's harsher migration policy, thus not only broaden the political meaning of European citizenship compared to the conceptualisation proposed by EU politics, but they also construct a public space for a dialogue 'nourished by activists' internal disagreements on representations of citizenship, migration and precarity in Europe' (Doerr 2010, 23). Apart from visual symbolic alternatives to citizenship, there are also visual and discursive symbolic constructions that are an alternative to the traditional 'heterosexual couple and child' family, such as the ILGA-Europe 'different families, same love' campaign on the occasion of the 2010 Europride, showing pictures of a family as made up of two mothers, two fathers, two mothers and children, or two fathers and children in an attempt to change the traditional symbolic imagery of what a family is (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3). One of the pictures in ILGA-Europe's campaign shows two fathers and a child sitting on a park bench and is accompanied by the slogan 'children first' (see Figure 1.3). This poster reverses the meaning of a typical slogan used in homophobic discourses that oppose homosexual parenting with the argument that it is in children's best interest to have a heterosexual pair of parents.

It is particularly the contestation and renegotiation of symbols – which ultimately means contesting and renegotiating norms – that can be fruitfully grasped through discursive analysis. In the previous section we mentioned that the theory on political representation has broadened beyond electoral politics through work such as that of Michael Saward (2006; 2010). Focusing on the concept of claims in political representation, Saward has challenged the idea that elective representative claims are the only ones that can be accepted as having democratic legitimacy, suggesting that non-electoral representation, as it is exercised by NGOs, interest groups, or even individuals, should also be considered as legitimate democratic representation. Our approach to the study of symbolic representation participates in this broadening of the concept of political representation by

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adopting a discursive focus on symbolic representation that allows us to approach broader sets of actors participating in (the construction of) representation instead of the traditional elected representative we normally talk about when discussing political representation.

The Symbolic Representation of Gender

Gender as the Principal

The use of discursive politics perspectives is particularly important when approaching issues of gender equality, where the construction of differentiated and hierarchical social roles for women and men is a key element in the creation and perpetuation of inequalities. Feminist literature has extensively studied the different constructions of an unequal gender order; the values, practices, and institutions that contribute to creating and maintaining inequalities in societies; the assignment to women and men of roles set in a power hierarchy in which men have normally enjoyed a privileged position; and the variations that occur depending on how gender intersects with other inequalities. The meanings assigned to women and men are, as we learnt, expressed through different images or discourses that are not 'simply given' but rather socially constructed. These images and discourses, then, have meanings at the symbolic level. The image of the pregnant Spanish minister inspecting the troops that has accompanied us along this chapter, for instance, is one such gendered symbol; it suggests meanings – and in this case unsettles beliefs – that are associated with women and men, and with their socially constructed roles and relations.

Gender – or the categories of women and men as socially constructed and their underlying relations – is the principal represented in political discourse that we have chosen to study. Women and men are important symbols in politics, involving a conceptualisation of gender and thus its symbolic representation. In the representation of the nation, for instance, Nirmal Puwar (2004, 6) argues that 'women feature as allegorical figures that signify the virtues of the nation. It is men who literally represent and defend the nation.' The symbolic association of women and men with specific characteristics and roles thus has political consequences for women and men, mostly to the advantage of the male subjects. As Carol Pateman writes, 'the political lion skin has a large mane and belonged to a male lion, it is a costume for men. When women finally win the right to don the lion skin it is exceedingly ill-fitting and therefore unbecoming.' (Pateman 1995, 6; quoted in Puwar 2004, 77) Yet not only are men and women symbols of something, political symbols also suggest meanings, feelings, and values that are then attributed to the principal. The symbolic representation of gender thus also has implications for women and men in real life, shapes a particular representation of gender that then affects the lives of men and women.

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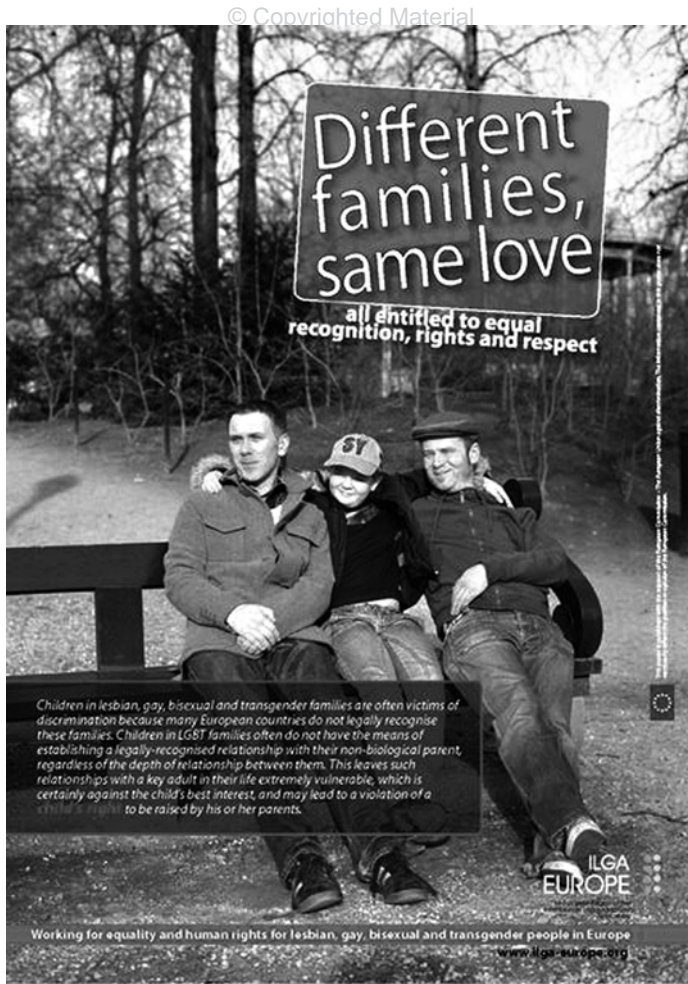


Figure 1.3 Campaign 'Different families, same love'.

Source: ILGA-Europe.

By choosing gender as our principal, our definition of symbolic representation partly differs from Pitkin's. While we take a concept as the principal, Pitkin tends to refer to citizens as the principal. We have decided to explore the symbolic representation of gender as a constructed social relation between women and men, rather than as a social status, a process, or a performance – which are different ways in which the concept of gender has been studied. Exploring the symbolic representation of gender as a constructed relation means finding out how gender relations are expressed in the discourse and just what women and men are symbols of. In this respect, our conceptualisation of symbolic representation does not explore the political representation of citizens. Our interest in the citizen is

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more indirect and concerns itself with what the symbolic representation of gender means for women and men in their everyday lives.

Pitkin, however, seems open to multiple interpretations of symbolic representation as the representation of citizens, on the one hand arguing that human beings can be symbols representing particular concepts, as in the case of a king symbolising the unity of a state, and on the other hand also stating: '*Repraesentare* means to make present something that is *not* in fact present. A piece of cloth may in that sense represent a vast power complex, or the Stars and Stripes the United States of America' (Pitkin 1972, 92).

It is not only about people representing other people, then, but symbolic representation could also still be understood as a matter of political symbolism only, instead of a matter of political representation. Yet the added value of maintaining Pitkin's definition of symbolic representation consists of the potential it offers beyond the political value of a symbol, as we argued earlier; it maintains that the agent and the principal are related, and that this representation at the symbolic level may have important effects. Symbolic representation, in our view, can thus also be about discursive agents symbolically representing particular relations between people (as in gender relations) and thereby representing these people and affecting them.

The Discursive Construction of Gender

The main question in our discursive analysis of gender as the principal is how women and men are discursively constructed. Specifically, this means asking questions such as: how are women and men constructed in political discourses? What meanings do women and men suggest or evoke? Subsequently, what does that actually mean in terms of gender, its symbolic representation, and the implications thereof for men and women in their everyday lives?

A great part of the literature on the symbolic construction of women and men, and the implications of this construction of meanings for women and men's positions and lives can be found in studies on gender and nations (Nagel 1998; Yuval Davis 1997; Yuval Davis and Anthias 1989). These studies focus on how nations or states symbolise women and men, and what the creation, perpetuation, and use of gendered symbols means for the (re)production of a gender order. They show, for instance, how men, due to their physical strength and the social value assigned to it, are awarded the more important role of defending the country while women are constructed as the supportive citizens (Yuval Davis 1997; Yuval Davis and Anthias 1989). These studies reveal how the male role in the construction and maintenance of nations and states is typically metonymic; 'men are contiguous with each other and with the national whole' (McClintock 1995, 355). They discuss how women are more easily framed as symbols of nationhood in passive and controlled roles, such as that of the 'volksmoeder' – mother of the people, used by white settlers colonising South Africa – icons of motherhood, gender containment, and domestic service (McClintock 1995). These studies' focus on the

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social constructions of gender and their political meaning makes them important background literature to the analysis of the symbolic representation of gender and will therefore be discussed at greater length in Chapter 2.

Feminist studies of states and nations not only show how women and men have been symbolically constructed according to particular roles and values, but they also shed new light on Pitkin's assumption that symbols do not resemble the principal they represent, unlike descriptive representation, in which the composition of parliament mirrors that of society. Pitkin underlines that symbolic representation is not an issue of resemblance; the fact that symbols might share some characteristics with the principals they represent is misleading. While there might be some resemblance – as in the case of the United States' flag, where the different stars represent the different states of the federation – we cannot speak of any real resemblance, she (Pitkin 1972, 94) argues. According to Pitkin, symbols are proxies for what they represent, nothing more. However, this argument can be questioned, as it depends on how resemblance is understood, and on what we understand the inherent evocative or suggestive capacity of symbols to be.

What we actually see, hear, or feel when confronted with symbolic representation is meaning. Now, to what extent could specific *meanings* ascribed to women and men imply a relationship of resemblance between the symbol as an agent and the principal it stands for? When women or men stand for something, this leads to a particular symbolic representation of gender, and the characteristics thus ascribed to men and women then extend that particular meaning to men and women as symbols in politics. All the qualities and values associated with Marianne as a woman are also assigned to France – though they are not the only ones.

Similarly, the discursive construction of men and women symbolically portrays – and represents – them in a specific way. There is therefore a resemblance between the agent and the principal in symbolic representation, at least at the level of gender as a social construction and the symbolic meaning it has. In that respect symbolic representation is an issue of resemblance, and this resemblance is an important contributor to (re)producing gender power structures and relations.

In sum, we are interested in how men and women are constructed in policy discourses, what symbolic representations of gender this generates, and what this means for men and women in their everyday lives. In this respect, the book draws on – and wishes to contribute – to gender theory, because it aims to explore gender relations, the social construction of women and men, and especially the way one sex compares and relates to the other, addressing its intersections with other inequalities where relevant.

This Book

This book explores symbolic representation, more particularly the symbolic representation of gender, and takes a discursive approach to the issue. It starts from Pitkin's definition of symbolic representation, redrawing its borders to adapt it to a

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concept of symbolic representation whose agent is discourse and whose principal is gender. In this respect it circumscribes the broad topic of symbolic representation, limiting its analysis to gender and policy discourses. The book explores symbolic representation both theoretically and empirically. It conceptualises the issue of symbolic representation, feeding this theoretical exploration with empirical illustrations. It examines the functions of symbolic representation, or the different ways in which symbolic representation can work, in the hopes of proving the salience of using the notion of symbolic representation to studying political and societal discourses around gender. This book also relates symbolic representation to descriptive and substantive representation, showing in greater depth how they relate to each other and thereby revealing the range and scope of symbolic representation in itself. In this way the book will add several pieces to the unsolved puzzle of symbolic representation, a subject of utmost salience that has so far been understudied. In this, the book will also contribute to our understanding of gender, its constructions and representations in political discourses, the ways it gets shaped and reproduced, and they way it works through policy discourses.

Chapter 2 further unravels the concept of symbolic representation by relating it to the construction of gender. It places the symbolic representation of gender as we defined it in this introduction within the broader literature on symbolic representation, drawing attention to the way it involves the activity of creating and shaping symbols and how this in its turn implies the constructed nature of symbols, and thus also that of agents in symbolic representation. Drawing on the construction of men and women in gender and nation studies, the chapter sets out how symbolic representation creates gendered meaning. From there the chapter develops the argument that symbolic representation, while merely being a way of standing for a principal without acting on his or her behalf, still communicates meaning, which means that it deserves to be studied for its content just as we tend to do with substantive representation. This helps us to develop in greater detail how the symbol, the agent in symbolic representation, *affects* the principal by standing for him or her. This allows us to distinguish and introduce a number of functions symbolic representation fulfils, specifically those related to the construction of identity, legitimacy, and political control.

Chapter 3 introduces our discursive turn in the study of symbolic representation. It addresses how symbolic representation not only contains a visual but also a discursive dimension, which can be found in frames, underlying norms, and values that are expressed in policy discourses. It discusses the rationale for employing a discursive approach to study symbolic representation, with the main reason being that it renders visible the construction of specific meanings and norms attributed and attached to a particular principal that would otherwise be at risk of remaining invisible. The chapter also explains the qualitative methodology of Critical Frame Analysis that will be applied to Chapters 4, 5, and 6, each of which tackles one of the functions of symbolic representation set out in Chapter 2 in greater detail.

Chapter 4 discusses the function of identity construction related to symbolic representation. It theorises the concept of identity as a construction of specific

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social roles and relates it to the construction of gender roles in the public and private spheres. To do so, it analyses public policies on the organisation of labour and other care issues in the EU, studying how men and women get constructed in relation to different social roles, and how this leads to unequal gender relations.

Chapter 5 turns to the second function of symbolic representation that will be considered in the book, the legitimisation of subjects. To analyse the function of legitimacy we explore the issue of intimate citizenship with particular reference to public policies on partnership and reproductive rights in Belgium and Italy. The chapter discusses the extent to which the construction of subjects in the discourse legitimises particular families or citizens, and indirectly provides information on the type of social order supporting and reproducing the legitimacy of some citizens versus the illegitimacy of others.

In Chapter 6 we focus on the function of symbolic representation related to political control. We theorise the function of political control and relate it to the issue of gender-based violence. Through the construction of policies on gender-based violence – including domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking, and honour crimes – we analyse how politics exercise political control over men's and women's lives and their personal integrity. The cases selected are policy discourses on gender violence in Italy and Spain. We discuss the consequences of the constructions of men and women for the symbolic representation of gender and the political control exercised through it.

After having dealt with symbolic representation in detail, we then turn to the other dimensions of political representation and discuss how they relate to symbolic representation. Chapter 7 connects descriptive representation to symbolic representation. While, according to Pitkin, agents in both symbolic and descriptive representation 'stand for' principals, the research since then has mostly looked at descriptive representation. Former research that looked into the relation between descriptive and symbolic representation conceived it as unilateral, with descriptive representation able to contribute to symbolic representation. The chapter first discusses this literature and develops the argument that symbolic representation is more than symbolic politics. It then looks into the similarities and differences between descriptive and symbolic representation. While both share a focus on content, they differ in that descriptive representation is a literal reproduction of the principal, while symbolic representation is a figurative production. The chapter then discusses what descriptive representation contributes to symbolic representation, and – a novelty – what symbolic representation contributes to descriptive representation, drawing on the various types of gender quotas found in Belgium, as well as on their discursive constructions.

Chapter 8 tackles similar questions, but then connecting substantive and symbolic representation. The chapter starts by underlining that – while the relation between descriptive and symbolic representation has been studied to a limited extent – the relation between substantive and symbolic representation has not received any particular attention. The chapter then develops the argument that, while Pitkin argues that substantive representation is the most important

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dimension of representation as it deals with the content of representation, symbolic representation also contains a focus on what content is represented when a symbol stands for a principal. From there it develops the differences between these two dimensions of political representation, analysing what substantive representation contributes to our understanding of symbolic representation and vice versa.

Chapter 9 looks into the relationship between political representation and power. Political representation, be it descriptive, substantive, or symbolic, is ultimately an issue of power. Drawing on the theorisations of power by Steven Lukes, Amy Allen, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault, the chapter explores how – analysed from a discursive politics perspective – power is present in processes of symbolic representation, thus connecting the discussion of power with that of the other dimensions of political representation. The mentioned theorisations of power offer us lenses to spy where power is located and how it intervenes both in the different functions of symbolic representation and in the descriptive, substantive, and symbolic dimensions of political representation.

The concluding chapter wraps up the major issues of the book within a broader reflection on the role and importance of symbolic representation for the understanding of political representation, at the same time recognising the challenge of studying an issue difficult to exhaust and capture in words such as symbolic representation, and pleading for increased attention to the symbolic dimension of representation in scholarly work on political representation.

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