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A Critical Analysis of Gender Mainstreaming

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By definition, gender mainstreaming is the process by which a gendered perspective (male and female) is integrated into the fabric of our communities, institutions, and lives (United Nations 1997). We live in a society defined by our values of equality, social justice, and opportunity. In order for these values to permeate into our everyday lives, we must address issues of "separateness" that still seem to prevail in our institutions, particularly in our political science curricula. Di Stefano (1997, 204) presented gender as "a socially constructed and politically enforced notion of what it means to be male or female" and argues that this gendered lens is "political because it has the power to impose meaning and value to our activities and social relationships." Mainstreaming is a transition from a male-defined curriculum to a more gender-balanced curriculum that better reflects the improved status of women in society.

Almost 20 years ago, Githens (1994, 722) suggested that "the purpose of mainstreaming is to move away from stereotypic thinking and broaden the student's term of reference." Gender mainstreaming in political science allows students to see themselves not just in the present, but also how they are, in many ways, the product of the history of past political events and how they can contribute to future endeavors. The use of gender as

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an analytical and theoretical construct can help students gain a deep understanding of the meaning and consequences of diverse perspectives.

Given universities' efforts to promote diversity in all aspects of campus life, it would stand to reason that gender mainstreaming would add value to such efforts. Parker (1009, 723) suggests that "whether we like it or not, race, gender, and sexual orientation play an important role in the individual student's thinking." Incorporating diversity in the political science curriculum adds value not just for symbolic reasons, but also because the world for which we are preparing students demands it. If students are to be successful in their chosen field, then they must be able to understand and navigate the unique challenges that they will encounter. By highlighting the gender-related assumptions inherent in modern society, we give students those navigational insights.

In the United States, women are more than 50% of the population and, in the last presidential election, were more than 56% of the electorate. Yet women are only 17% of Congress (Center for American Women and Politics 2012). If gender is treated as "other" in political science courses, then is it also "other" in the political arenas that are the subjects of political science inquiry? Elison (1997) suggests that the concept of gender is just as important in our modern political system as are the topics given wide exposure in our textbooks. Once that concept is mainstreamed, the likelihood of it being accepted as the norm increases exponentially. This could make the field of politics more accessible and comfortable to women. This accessibility, in turn, could result in an increased number of women in the political arena, particularly in increasing the women's political ambition.

Exposing students to gender as an analytical construct in lower-level political science courses has its advantages and its challenges. With the increased number of democratic societies promoting the value of the individual, illustrating points of intersection between politics and gender adds value to the curriculum and to students' understanding of their role in democratic societies. "The rules of democratic political participation are learned through classroom discussion, committee projects, student government, and school club activities" (Patrick 1967, 27). Since the classroom environment reflects broader socialization patterns, transforming the small environment will have consequences for the larger society.

Berheide and Segal (1985, 268) argued that the decision to incorporate gender into the classroom is clearly a political act: "someone is choosing to teach or not to teach a set of values, ideas, assumptions, and pieces of

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information" about a certain group. Education, long held in thrall by dominant groups and interests, omitted other perspectives: the intentional inclusion of gender into the curriculum benefits society by providing a gateway for discourse about each group's place and contribution to the society in general.

Pearson and Rooke (1993, 416) asserted that if it "is legitimate to have separate women's courses, it is also appropriate to mainstream core courses" because doing so eliminates "imbalances that are perpetrated by sex role stereotyping and sex biases." For example, significant numbers of women continue to seek civic jobs, like school board and county clerk positions, that can be perceived as extensions of their gender role, and these stereotypes point to an inherent problem with gender role stratification (Lublin and Brewer 2003; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Gender mainstreaming is essential to changing attitudes about gender from the ground up. The key term here is *change*. In order to change attitudes toward gender, gender must be seamlessly integrated into core courses and introduced in such ways that promote equality.

Hawthorne (2004, 121) has argued that mainstreaming gender "has led to the demise of many autonomous women's studies programs and to the watering down of feminist research." Critics of mainstreaming argue that it diminishes much of the work done by early feminist scholars and allows institutions to "quiet the rowdy feminists" (123). But mainstreaming advocates argue that it can result in "strengthening, not diluting" political science (Kramer and Martin 1988, 139). Berheide and Segal (1985, 275) argue that courses that disregard gender are not only "incomplete and inaccurate," but also "not professionally current." By integrating gender, we are teaching our students to have conversations about representation in our political system that naturally include the perspectives of women and the contributions they have made to the policy agenda. Leaving women's perspectives out, on the other hand, perpetuates women as "other."

Of course, integrating gender into political science courses confronts some challenges. Mainstreaming can enrich the classroom environment, but it can also polarize classroom discussions if not implemented properly. According to Kramer and Martin (1988, 133), "Teaching gender in a mainstreamed context is more difficult than teaching a course on gender because the most hostile, or uninterested students tend to select themselves away from a specialized course." The very topic invites particular opportunities for misinformation. The authors suggest that continued dialogue — "instructor to instructor, student to instructor,

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student to student" — both inside and outside of the classroom is necessary in order to combat disinterest as well as linking "individual anecdotes" to the course's framework (139). Additionally, as suggested by Berheide and Segal (1985, 277), it is important that students are "empowered and encouraged to participate by engaging their everyday experiences, and acknowledging and working through emotions that the material raises." Guided discussions can mitigate polarization in the classroom. Further, Kramer and Martin (1988) noted that a number of challenges were not limited to the subject matter itself, but also to the student population, given the sex, age, and student's sexual orientation. The authors suggest that the continuous sharing of ideas, particularly in issues dealing with gender, is beneficial regardless of the experience of the instructors or the speakers involved.

Additionally, Silverberg (1994, 718) makes the argument that mainstreaming gender and [race] in the classroom does not work by using an "add and stir approach." Rather, mainstreaming must be integrated in such a way that it enriches the discussions by "educating everyone," not just a certain group (718). The main idea asserted by Silverberg is that mainstreaming works best when gender and race are used through a theoretical and analytical lens for classroom discussions. This is done by highlighting the significance of the collective identities and sources of social solidarity of gender and race in the creation of our political processes and institutions, stressing the differences they made.

There is some resistance in many political science departments to the integration of gender into their curriculum. Gruberg (1994) refers to this resistance as a "blind-spot" to the integration of women's studies within the curriculum. This "blind-spot" permeates the department in that unless there is an apparent "natural fit" for the course (e.g., courses on American government, introduction to law, human rights, civil liberties, etc.), then no attempt is made to achieve parity. Elison (1997, 204) argues, in contrast, that gender can be integrated into any course as long as the instructor is willing to explore ways that are enriching to the content and add value to the instruction and that "gender is a concept that underpins the modern political system just as other areas that are given wide coverage in popular textbooks."

The improved status of women has changed the political world. It is important that the political science curriculum does the same. Our classrooms are the optimal environment in which gendered notions can be addressed. In fact, some researchers believe that the classroom environment has a direct link to political participation. Given that our

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political science curriculum transmits knowledge about political structures, institutions, and processes, the provision of a balanced perspective is important. Gender mainstreaming in the political science curriculum can build capacity by highlighting our realities as well as empowering more students to become more involved in our political system.

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