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Review of *The Silent Sex: Gender, Deliberation, and Institutions* by Christopher F. Karpowitz and Tali Mendelberg

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REVIEW

I appreciated reading this book during the contentious US presidential campaign, a period during which each major party entertained the possibility of nominating a woman to be Commander-in-Chief. After watching Carly Fiorina end her campaign and Hillary Clinton battle through state caucuses and primaries, I wondered whether the American electorate is ready for a woman president. *The Silent Sex* relatedly explores the disadvantages that women continue to face in political deliberations, considering the style, substance, and perceptions associated with women's speech in observed public discussions of income inequality and educational policies. Determining the gendered inequalities in deliberation might help explain why young women are more inclined to "feel the Bern" as the inspirational slogan of the Sanders campaign encouraged, than vote for an experienced and well-connected feminist.

The Silent Sex makes a broad claim at the outset of the argument: "Women are highly disadvantaged in many deliberative settings, and this disadvantage affects everything from how long they speak, to the respect they are shown, to the content of what they say, to the influence they carry, to their sense of their own capacity, and to their power over group decisions. . . . The problem is not that women are disliked or formally discriminated against; rather, the problem is that while women are liked, they are not given equal authority" (p.5).

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While some might think this argument is too audacious to be supported, I believe that it rings true for many. Many professional women have had the experience of not being heard; a woman raises an example or an argumentative point that is overlooked in a meeting until a man repeats it and is commended for drawing attention to it. Sometimes a woman is not interested in participating in discussions because of the style and tone of the debate. As noted in the book under review, Jane Margolis and Susan Hansen separately reference a study of Harvard female students in social science classrooms; the undergraduates' aversion to "Gov talk" ("depersonalized, focuses on abstractions, and is rationalistic") made them "uncomfortable, depressed their frequency of speaking during class discussion and caused them to be 'unwilling to challenge others' views in public'" (p.79).

Why women don't speak up and why their words are less authoritative are topics that deserve further study. That women's speech lacks authority explains many situations: "this inequality, and injustice, must be understood in light of the gender context and institutional rules within which men and women deliberate" (p.139). Karpowitz and Mendelberg explain the problem--that women speak less and carry less authority than men do in public forums—and offer various accounts of women's "underparticipating." Women have less confidence that their words matter, for they rightly suspect that their contributions to deliberative discussions will not be respected. Women also appear more reluctant than men to engage in the competition or conflict that takes place in political discussions. Lack of participation might also stem from women feeling "more sensitive to social bonds."

Data, analysis, and literature review combine to strengthen the argument that women's speech in deliberations is discounted, if not actively discouraged. The introduction and first three chapters of *The Silent Sex* define the problem of gender inequality in deliberation, point to "sources of the gender gap in political participation," and review scholarship exploring gendered explanations for this phenomenon. A rigorously developed social science treatise, the book can be read profitably by all readers interested in gender, interactions, and institutions, for it makes good on its authors' promise to investigate "how institutions reinforce, or eliminate, social inequalities" (p.4).

The book's middle section provides persuasive evidence by describing results of two studies: one of individuals participating in experimentally constructed groups deciding on income redistribution and the other of observations of school board meetings. Karpowitz and Mendelberg describe their research design for the study looking at redistributing income as "a deliberative justice experiment" recording and analyzing observations of students and community members located at an Eastern university and a Western university. After completing questionnaires, participants in the income discussions were "randomly assigned to one of the decision rule and gender composition conditions, and brought together for two hours" (p.103). They were told "they would be performing tasks to earn money and that the money received would be based on a group decision about redistribution, with the decision based on unanimous rule or majority rule" (p.102).

The investigators analyzed how discussants respond to each other, detailing political attitudes and ideologies: "respondents were asked to consider such matters as what is fair in redistributing income in society (and among themselves) how much the well off should be taxed in order to help the poor, and what are the respective obligations of the individual to get along on their own and of the society to help those who cannot help themselves" (p.99). The study generated observational data about gender

differences related to the assumptions embedded in participants' statements and documented interruptions and the decision outcomes of specific groups.

Discussions of income distribution note women's contributions to deliberation as less authoritative than men's, explaining how egalitarian content of women's speech, gender norming discounting women's contributions, gender composition of groups, and decision rules mattered to the outcomes of the groups. Indeed the communitarian, egalitarian arguments that women are more likely than men to raise in political discussions are often disregarded or overruled if women are in the minority or, even in certain cases, in the majority. Including women in discussions is not enough. Whether deliberations require universal agreement, consensus, or majority rule affects how much women contribute to and determine decisions. Therefore, the authors recommend that gender composition and decision rules be adjusted to maximize equity, to increase the participation and influence of women and "to produce equal voice in citizen deliberation." They offer the following specific recommendations that could be followed in all sorts of meetings: "When women are outnumbered by men, use unanimous rule; when women are a large majority, decide by majority rule. To minimize male advantage, assemble groups with a supermajority of women and use majority rule. To maximize women's individual participation, gender homogenous groups are best" (p.141).

Chapter 10 explains that Karpowitz and Mendelberg sought to compare their "lab" findings (from the artificially constructed groups discussing income redistribution) with real world data. They designed a second research study to code speech delivered at more than 4,000 school board meetings across the U.S., concluding that whether the superintendent and/or the school board chair were women affect women's participation, but men "routinely participate at levels equal to or much higher than their numbers in the group" (p.287). However, "When women comprise a majority of the board, their participation comes close to equality, though it takes a supermajority of women before the voices of men and women are balanced. Thus even among an arguably elite sample of women who were elected *in order to speak up* for their constituents, we find that when women's authority is low, women are the silent sex" (pp. 274-75).

The conclusion of *The Silent Sex* builds on the literature review, original data, and analyses of the two research studies. The authors detail implications and qualifications related to their work, admitting its limitations and disadvantages as well as considering how adjusting different variables (location of meeting, repeated meetings of a group, size of communities) could affect the results. They also note the need to further examine how social differences such as educational level and class, race, age, and culture influence women's participation in public deliberations. These qualifications do not detract from the book's strengths as an accessibly written, carefully researched, and persuasively argued account of why women choose to be silent and why their speech means less in public deliberations.

Circling back to my opening to conclude this review of an admirable book, I wish to apply the book's findings (that women's communitarian, egalitarian arguments in deliberations are often disregarded) to speculation about Bernie Sanders' appeal to women voters in the 2016 Democratic primary race. According to the *Washington Post*, on the eve of the Nevada primary in February 2016, Yvette Williams, chairwoman of the Clark County Black Caucus, found it easy to endorse Senator Sanders, "His message really resonates when he talks about income inequality, race justice and prison reform" (John Wagner, "Bernie Sanders wins backing of African

American group in Nevada's largest county," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2016). Williams' statement aligns with findings in *The Silent Sex*, noting specific issues of interest to minority voters as well as women. Sanders' independent status as well as his communitarian and egalitarian perspective not surprisingly attracts many women who likely see themselves as marginalized in political discussion and who are more likely than men to exhibit concern and caring about others. Thus, Sanders, regardless of his gender, can be seen as articulating feminine positions that are too often discounted as less authoritative, while Hillary Clinton finds it difficult to combine being identified as an expert endorsed by a masculine establishment, speaking in an appropriately feminine register (i.e. not too shrilly or aggressively), and being appreciated for bringing a woman's perspective to politics. Moderating her discourse and espousing policies aimed at reducing social inequality, that is, essentially adopting popular aspects of Sanders' campaign, Clinton became a more feminine and feminist candidate and as of mid-July 2016 appears on track to win the Democratic presidential nomination.