2 The Basis for Autonomy: Equality in the Public Sphere

Although ultimately gender autonomy would not value the traditionally male-dominated public sphere any more than participation in the traditionally female private sphere, it initially requires significant equality of women’s participation in the public sphere in order to challenge the existing primacy of public sphere. However, in the course of attempting to transform the value ascribed to the public sphere, women themselves may become transformed and therefore perpetuate, rather than alter, the primacy of the public sphere. Certainly, the smaller the presence of women in the public sphere, the more likely they are to experience pressure to conform to the system in order to survive in it; while the larger the presence of women, the more they are likely to feel legitimately able to frame issues from women’s perspectives.\(^1\) Of course, a numerical increase alone in women’s representation in the public sphere is not sufficient to transform the sphere; qualitative changes are also needed.\(^2\) Nevertheless, although the aim is ultimately not strict numerical equality, at this juncture the larger the presence of women in terms of both quantitative and qualitative (material resources possessed) participation, the more they will be able to demand a re-evaluation of the different values assigned to market and non-market work – public and private duties – and, therefore, further the process of gender autonomy.

This chapter examines women’s participation in the public sphere defined here as representation in political institutions and participation in the labour market since they are the main components of public life.\(^3\) Arguably, women’s participation in areas such as the judiciary, civil service, and the police are also relevant in terms of interpretation, implementation, and enforcement of the codes that give primacy to the public sphere. However, these areas are in a sense intermediate between the poles of politics and the labour market which together already comprise a gargantuan field and have been themselves narrowed down to peak indicators. For example, although it is assumed that women’s political interests are adequately taken into account if the composition of elected institutions mirrors the composition of women in society (50 per cent),
other non-institutional factors such as protest movements may also affect the degree to which their interests are taken into account. With due recognition of the multi-faceted nature of women's public sphere participation, this chapter limits itself to broadly covering three areas. Section 2.1 covers women's representation in political institutions. Section 2.2 covers national levels of unionisation and female shares of union membership to gauge the incorporation of female interests. Section 2.3 examines women's participation in the labour market in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Finally, section 2.4 summarises the chapter.

2.1 PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Many suffragettes simply assumed that women voters would demand and vote for women candidates, thereby ensuring that women would be represented proportionally to their numbers in society. The continued low representation of women, however, attests that the liberal notion of a formal legal right to enter the political world has been insufficient. Constraints to parity in political representation include factors such as conservative cultural attitudes regarding women's participation in the public sphere, shouldering family responsibilities, alien and aggressive culture of politics, as well as to institutional impediments such as electoral systems, recruitment policies within political parties, party ideology, etc. As such, women's representation in political institutions captures, to some degree, the broader social context surrounding the process towards gender autonomy and therefore serves as a useful benchmark. This section examines women's representation in political institutions in terms of both numerical representation as well as quality or the degree to which their participation is accepted across the ideological spectrum and across the federal to local levels. Subsection 2.1.1 covers women's representation in the national legislatures. Subsection 2.1.2 covers women's representation in political parties across the ideological spectrum since this indicates the breadth of acceptance for their participation. Lastly, subsection 2.1.3 covers women's representation at two divergent levels, non-national elected bodies and national cabinet posts, in order to gauge further the breadth of acceptance for their political participation.

2.1.1 Representation in National Legislatures

The percentage share of seats that women hold in the national legislature may be affected by numerous factors such as cultural conservatism or