

# TROUBLING THE NOTION OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP: AN EXAMINATION OF EIGHT CANADIAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

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## Research study completed

In recent years our understanding of citizenship has transitioned from a static notion to a more fluid concept. In a world of permeable borders, instantaneous global communication, shifting national identities, and competing claims of individuality and hybridity, the concept of citizenship is becoming increasingly complex. The concept of "active citizenship" has been taken up by educators concerned with the potential for learning to lead to democratic renewal. One way to trouble traditional notions of citizenship is to examine the way in which citizenship is gendered, recognizing at the same time that the way that citizenship is experienced is often related to an individual's cultural, social, and ethnic background. This paper delves into the complexity of understanding active citizenship by focusing on a qualitative research study funded through the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) that uses life history interviews to explore the experiences of eight Canadian women as "active citizens." In addition, four interviews with "key informants", individuals at higher levels of administration and government were carried out, to assess some of the barriers and supports that impact upon women's ability to participate as active citizens. From this, questions around what constitutes a gendered understanding of "active citizenship" are explored from a critical feminist perspective.

## Active Citizenship and Education

Cleaver and Nelson (2006, p. 34) state that "At least in part, the emergence of 'active citizenship' as a frequently mentioned goal, or desired outcome of citizenship education at regional, national and international levels, is a response to the impact of rapid global change on societies". In an increasingly fragmented world that is also characterized by fluidity and change, notions of citizenship have become hotly contested. Debates fluctuate between advocating rights of different cultural/ethnic groups within fractured nation-states to a focus on global citizenship, whereby importance of ensuring peace, human rights, and environmental sustainability are acknowledged as universal responsibilities.

Rennie Johnston (1999) defines four overlapping categories of citizenship which can be considered by educators. *Inclusive citizenship* examines concerns around economic and social policies and practices that impact upon individuals' abilities to fully participate as citizens. *Pluralistic citizenship* focuses more on identity issues, in acknowledging the plurality and individuality of all citizens. *Reflexive citizenship* draws attention to the need to develop the critical reflective capacity of citizens to understand and reflect upon matters of civic and social concern, to negotiate the rights and responsibilities of all citizens. *Active citizenship* provides the opportunity for citizens to work collaboratively across different groups to initiate social change.

Active citizenship is the conscious linking of understanding of the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of citizenship, with purposeful action to initiate change either at the local, regional, national, or global level. Notions of active citizenship are linked with a social justice orientation. Cleaver and Nelson (2006, p. 34) note that

Debates about the meanings, purpose and desired outcomes of an education for citizenship are on the increase, and there is a sense that young people and adults need to be prepared for the opportunities and challenges they will face in their lifetime, and encouraged to become actively involved in their schools, neighbourhoods, and communities. It is hoped that, through active engagement, individuals will come together collectively to affect change, for the greater good of society.

Active citizenship is perceived as desired outcome of a fully engaged citizenry. In order for democracy to work, citizens cannot be apathetic, silent, fearful, or so disillusioned that they believe that they cannot make a difference to the society in which they live. Active citizenship is taken up by individuals in various contexts, but is successful because of the collaborative nature of citizens working together to collectively address social justice issues.

## Women as Active Citizens

The gendered nature of citizenship is frequently overlooked in discussions around the concept of active citizenship. Frequently, the focus on active citizenship is taken up with concerns around youth and education (Cleaver & Nelson, 2006). However, if we accept that as Preece (2002, p. 21) argues, "the concepts of citizenship and governance are gendered", then we approach an analysis of citizenship from a different standpoint.

Women's engagement as active citizens at both the local and global level is frequently linked with their commitments to the homeplace (Gouthro, 2005). To understand women's role as active citizens, the myriad responsibilities that most women attend to while participating in the broader society must be considered. Traditional notions of citizenship sometimes conflate "citizen" with "taxpayer", which is particularly problematic for women outside of the paid labour force. Yet Elliott points out that "entry into the public sphere alone does not ensure 'equality' for women" (2000, p. 15). In addition, women in minority positions have multiple challenges in attaining equity and recognition.

Feminist scholars have challenged critical theoretical discourses around citizenship as not addressing adequately gendered differences in experience and interests with regards to how this impacts upon our understanding of citizenship. For example, in her well known essay on "What's Critical About Critical Theory?," Nancy Fraser (1995, p. 32) points out that a Habermasian critical analysis of system/lifeworld divides categorically reinforces gendered differences in men's and women's life experiences. One of the ways it does this is by failing to acknowledge that "there is another public-private separation at the level of the "lifeworld", namely, the separation of the family or private lifeworld sphere from the space of political opinion formation and participation of public lifeworld sphere". Within the context of the lifeworld, Habermas (1989) discusses the concept of the public sphere, and in later work (Habermas, 1996) the importance of civil society. Within the public sphere that is located in the lifeworld realm, Habermas (1989, p. 327) argues individuals are able to come together to discuss ideas, so that "in the communicative practice of everyday life, cognitive interpretations, moral expectations, expressions, and valuations have to interpenetrate and form a rational interconnectedness" which forms a sort of "communicative infrastructure". The public sphere is an important arena for citizens to come together to debate ideas, consider alternative perspectives, and make political decisions. It is out of the public sphere that we see the evolution of civil society, whereby individuals form grassroots associations to advocate collectively for social change. In addition, the public sphere is an integral component of a democratic society, as it is within this realm that citizens can participate actively in shaping social and political discourses within the lifeworld, which may impact on the interconnectedness of lifeworld concerns with system structures.

The difficulty with Habermas's failure to differentiate gendered experiences within the lifeworld causes him to minimize or overlook the structural formation of the public sphere in how it has historically excluded the full participation of women as citizens. While acknowledging some of the limitations of the bourgeois public sphere, Landes (1995, p. 97) argues that Habermas tends to see "this as a limitation of actually existing society, not of the model of a universal public according to which pre-existing social inequalities are bracketed".

The problem with this is that he fails to recognize how this reinforces the perception that masculine concerns are "universalistic" while women's concerns are "particularistic" – and therefore, do not need to be taken up in broader political action by all citizens.

The gendered nature of women's lived experience often precludes women's ability to participate as actively as citizens in the public sphere, because women are less likely to have the time, space, and opportunity to engage in this kind of discussion. When women do participate, their interests continue to be perceived as "special interest" issues, rather than as concerns for broader public debate.

Going back to Landes analysis of Habermas's theoretical model, it can be seen that "the structural division between the public sphere, on the one hand, and the market and the family, on the other, meant that a whole range of concerns came to be labeled as private and treated as improper subjects for public debate" (Landes, 1995, p. 98). The concerns that women are often most passionate about often relate to their own lived experiences. In earlier work (Gouthro, 2000), I discuss connections between the homeplace and civil society. When problems arise that impact upon women's families, their communities, and their loved ones, they are often motivated to take action, whether it is at the

local, regional, national, or international level. In addition, feminist scholars have long noted that issues that relate specifically to the experiences of being a woman in society – such as childbirth, contraception, sexual assault, and women's health issues are continually treated as peripheral, "particularistic" issues that do not need to form the substance of broader social debate. Yet women comprise over half the population of the planet, and most men are impacted by "women's" concerns. If, for example, a woman has breast cancer, or is sexually assaulted, this will also affect the lives of her loved ones. Therefore, it does not seem "rational" to consistently relegate these concerns to the periphery of social and political action.

Taking these factors into consideration, the discourse around active citizenship must be expanded to consider the gendered nature of experience, and how this needs to be addressed in educational ventures to promote active citizenship. We need to consider whether the barriers, supports, and motivators are the same for men and women, or if there are significant differences that must be taken into account. In addition, we need to ensure that our understanding of active citizenship is not limited to a masculine worldview that precludes, diminishes or marginalizes women's experiences and concerns.

## **Methodology**

This study uses detailed life history interviews with eight Canadian women considered "active citizens" because of their involvement in government and/or local, provincial, national and/or international projects that have a justice oriented focus. In addition, four "key informants" – individuals who are in a position of leadership in government or the non-profit sector were interviewed to ask their perceptions about the supports and barriers that may impact on women's abilities to participate as active citizens.

The participants in this pilot study are from the province of Nova Scotia. The project may be expanded in the future to include participants from other regions in Canada. Atlas-ti is used to do a qualitative analysis of the transcripts.

The project was designed to train four graduate students so that they would develop the skills required to carry out all aspects of a research study. As the lead researcher, my role has been to write the proposal to obtain funding, and then to guide and mentor the student team through all the different stages of the research project. These stages have included writing the proposal for the ethics review (a standard requirement in all Canadian universities for research involving humans), researching background information and identifying potential participants, which includes both "active citizens" and "key informants". After the initial contact that I made as the lead researcher, the students followed up with participants to set up and conduct interviews. They have also been involved in analyzing data, and presenting at conferences on the research. In addition to the interviews, photographs were also taken of the "active citizens" and images that related to their particular work or volunteer involvement to develop poster presentations. Since this research grant just runs across the academic year for the students, they finish their involvement with the project in the late spring of 2007. If they wish to be involved in using the data for future research they may do so, provided they first gain my approval (since as lead researcher I am ultimately responsible for overseeing the ethical use of data).

## **The Canadian Context**

The group of "active citizens" involved in this research project are scattered across the province of Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia has a land mass about the same size as England, but instead of a population of over 49 million there are only about one million inhabitants. Within the province there is the capital city of Halifax, that has approximately 350,000 residents, a smaller city, Sydney, located at the top of Cape Breton island, and then a range of small towns and communities scattered mostly around the 3600 miles of coastline.

In a recent trip to Belgium I spoke to a class of graduate students who were interested in the topic of citizenship, and a question was asked regarding the differences between European and North American experiences. The professor, Danny Wildemeersch, commented that there were some speculations that perhaps some of the differences had to do with the transitive nature of North Americans, in that they often live in many different places instead of staying in the same communities. In thinking about this, I responded that one factor that I think is fundamental to the sense of Canadian identity, and thus citizenship, is the wide expanse of space. In Europe you do not see the endless

miles of hills and forests that characterize our province. This space tends to set our communities and people apart, even as we connect across distances. Generally speaking, the people in rural communities traditionally have not tended to live in a lot of different places. The impact of globalization, however, has created economic pressures caused by the loss of mining, fishing and other resource based industries. As a consequence, rural areas and small communities are diminishing in their population base. There is increasing out-migration, often to Alberta – one of the richer provinces. As the population of Halifax is estimated to double in size over the next decade, other communities languish.

Therefore, the population flows that may impact upon citizenship are often linked to external factors, such as global economic conditions. The combination of an aging population and low birth rates has caused the Canadian government to actively support immigration, and we are seeing the effects of this particularly in urban areas, such as Halifax. Increasingly, issues of diversity and identity become central to citizenship discourses.

Historically Canada has acknowledged a dual English and French heritage, demonstrating a commitment to protect to a greater or lesser degree in the different provinces the Francophone language and culture. Within the Aboriginal communities there are demands for self-government, based on the belief that as members of "First Nations", indigenous people have certain citizenship rights that must be acknowledged and respected. Within the African-Nova Scotian community, citizens have advocated for greater acknowledgement and representation of their interests within the educational and government sector. Canada has become one of the leading countries in recognizing legal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals in allowing marriage and entitlements to benefits for same-sex partners. Yet concerns around racism, discrimination, and exclusion of minority groups continue to be raised. All of these different factors impact upon the kinds of work that women in Nova Scotia have taken up as active citizens.

While recognizing that by selecting only eight participants for life history interviews, we could hardly begin to represent the range of experience of women engaged as active citizens in Nova Scotia, we decided to try to bring in as diverse a group of participants as possible. With this in mind, our participants included individuals from the Aboriginal, African-Nova Scotian, and Acadian (Francophone) communities. We also included participants from rural as well as urban areas, and included women with a wide range of experience and education, across a varying age span.

## **Preliminary Findings**

To understand what motivates women to become engaged as active citizens, it is often helpful to take a more holistic approach in terms of understanding their broader life contexts. In doing life history or biographical research, it becomes clear that both the motivators and the deterrents that impact on a person's interest and/or ability in becoming actively engaged as a citizen are often linked to a wide range of personal experiences. These may relate back to childhood memories of inequality, the influence of parents in terms of developing personal resiliency and self efficacy, and the challenges and supports that each individual may face in the homeplace, workplace, and larger community.

For example, Krista Hanscomb, one of the women interviewed for this study, talked about the confidence that her Aboriginal mother instilled in her, to believe in herself and not let discriminatory attitudes of others diminish her. Krista said that her mother firmly believed "no one can make you feel bad about yourself unless you let them". At the same time, her mother modelled this strength of conviction in her own actions. Krista tells the story of how her mother, who worked in a hotel resort had one very offensive guest who kept calling her "squaw". She courteously warned the man twice not to call her that, and then went back to tell the manager. The manager tried to soothe her, and suggest she just let it pass. Instead she said, "I'm just letting you know he's had two warnings. If he does this again, I'll deal with it." So she did. The man made a comment about how "squaws" made him hot, so she poured a pitcher of cold water over his head to cool him off. When he complained to the manager, the manager just replied that he had been warned, and so that was it.

This ability to take power into her own hands and confront unfair situations seems to have been an inspiration for this younger woman. Krista was able to go on and complete her post-secondary education, even though she got pregnant in her first year. Throughout her childhood her parents, particularly her mother, stressed to her the importance of obtaining an education, recognizing that it

would give her a chance for greater job security. In a society where employment is often linked with "taxpayer" notions of citizenship, and where Aboriginal people often suffer high rates of unemployment, the opportunity for regular, meaningful work is crucial. The importance of education as a means of fully participating in Canadian society is something that has continued to motivate her in her work with Aboriginal students. Although she began as a volunteer tutoring other Aboriginal youth, this has led to full time paid employment as an Aboriginal Student Advisor in a Canadian university. In her work, she continues to provide students with both practical support and emotional encouragement to succeed in university.

One of the other participants, Debbie Oulette, dropped out of school after grade eight to take care of her mother, who was ill. Although she later obtained high school upgrades and a college certificate as a care provider, it was concern around her family and her children, rather than the connections to formal learning that motivated her to take action. Living in the economically depressed region of Sydney, Cape Breton, she was one of the unfortunate residents of Frederick St., a quiet residential street that has gained national notoriety in Canada for being located next to the Sydney tar ponds where toxic waste had been disposed of from coke ovens, contaminating the soil and ground water with hazardous amounts of arsenic and lead. She became a vocal activist who joined with other residents to contact the media and petition the government to address the serious health and environmental problems caused by the irresponsible waste management practices. Debbie explains that before the coke oven site was disturbed, she wasn't an "active citizen" – she went to work, looked after her kids, paid her bills, and looked after her property. But once the site was disturbed, causing visible toxins to leech out, contaminated dust to rise into the air, and almost immediate health repercussions "headaches that were so bad, I thought I had a brain tumor", she joined with other residents in protest. Then, "I was like a bear...protecting my kids, because I did not know what I was living next to...so that's when I got active as a mother because my kids were very important to me, and my husband, and our pets." Within three years, eight dogs on Frederick St. died of cancer, including Debbie's beloved pet, Queenie.

In challenging the government for not having behaved more responsibly in her statement to the Panel Hearings that were eventually held, she asks, "Why do we have a Department of Health, a Department of the Environment, a Department of Fisheries and Oceans? Why are they allowing the owners of the coke ovens and tar ponds who contaminated our fish and water in Sydney Harbour daily and for years – why are the owners not being charged heavy fines for doing so? Who do they protect?"

This is an eloquent appeal for justice, and Debbie and the other citizens who joined her were eventually able to make some progress and gain some compensation for their homes, that became valueless, and to ensure that the clean-up would be done more responsibly. It was concerns from her homeplace – where toxic waste was leaking into the actual basement and contaminating the soil in her backyard so that the children could not play there, that led her to the provincial and national stage as an activist. She continues her work today, because she firmly believed that no one should have to deal with what she and her family went through.

These are just two of the stories shared by our participants, that reveal the interconnectedness between social action and personal, lived experience, that frequently shapes women's involvement as active citizens. Recognizing, and validating these experiences, is an important first step in creating educational contexts that support active citizenship for women.

### **Critical Feminist Analysis**

Our understanding of the purposes of lifelong learning shifts if we address the need to sustain learning in all realms of life – from the homeplace to civil society organizations. Drawing upon a combination of critical and feminist theoretical frameworks, taking into account the post-structural influences around issues of identity, fluidity, and diversity, provides a more comprehensive framework to assess the experiences of the "active citizens". Recognizing that power can simultaneously be encoded and challenged within the arena of active citizenship raises important considerations for the role of adult educators in addressing and questioning shifting concepts of citizenship within lifelong learning discourses.

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