

Women, Gender, and Religion

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Does the Personal Become Political?

The Political Leadership of Women Clergy on Discrimination Issues

Sue E. S. Crawford, with Kristin Zurek, Creighton University

Introduction

Clergywomen have a special responsibility to articulate their politics in particular ways because we stand on the shoulders who have stood before us. Women who are ordained are here not only because of a calling from God, but because of a hard fought struggle of those who have come before us (Personal Interview, 4 May 1998).

[1] While other chapters in this volume discuss evidence of female ordination in the early Christian church, this chapter zooms forward hundreds of years to examine the political lives of contemporary Christian and Jewish ordained women in the United States of America. Specifically, this chapter examines whether experiences of discrimination by these women in their own Christian and Jewish communities heighten their concern about discrimination as a political problem and whether these experiences heighten clergywomen's political action on discrimination issues. Does personal experience of discrimination in the clergy profession for these women become political through increased interest in discrimination issues or increased political action to fight discrimination?

[2] Scholars have documented problems with women being accepted by congregations, gender differences in pay and promotion, and dissatisfaction of women clergy who feel constrained by gender discrimination (Chang; Carroll, Hargrove, and Lummis; Culver; Gonzalez; Lehman; Ice; Nesbitt; Schmitt; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang). Other studies have noted the strong liberal and feminist agenda of women clergy in many religious traditions (Crawford and Guth; Crawford and Braun; Deckman, Crawford, and Olson; Guth et al.; Nesbitt; Olson, Crawford, and Deckman). These two well established patterns suggest that experiences of personal workplace discrimination may foster in these women commitment to feminist politics.

[3] An important shared narrative among many American clergywomen claims that they are more aware of discrimination issues and more in-tune with sacred texts that discuss the oppressed or outcasts because of their experiences as women (Crawford and Braun; Olson, Crawford, Deckman). “I think that the experiential factor makes a difference. Having experienced discrimination, I think the issue [discrimination] isn’t abstract. It is personal in my life. But that gives me a real sense of what other women go through, live with, and I think it also has given me more of an identity with other rights issues, around race, around sexual orientation” (Personal Interview, 3 August 1998).

[4] In addition to socialization into this shared feminist narrative, female and male clergy in Protestant and Jewish traditions that ordain women tend to experience strong social justice socialization that creates a religious imperative for inclusiveness (Carroll et al. 1997). The following quote from an Episcopal minister resonates with what one often hears from male and female clergy in these traditions: “I think there is a strong sense, in our baptismal vows, to respect the inherent worth of every human being that really drives the church’s social justice and political involvement . . . Anytime there is injustice, and inequality and mistreatment of human beings, then we are called to be involved” (Personal Interview, 24 March 1998).

[5] While male and female clergy in these traditions share strong social justice socialization, those women who experienced gender discrimination have a socialization experience that differs from other women and from their male colleagues. This chapter hypothesizes that female clergy who have specific stories of gender discrimination to tell will be even more likely to list discrimination-related political issues as top concerns. Those women with discrimination experiences may account for the stronger liberal attitudes and actions of women clergy. Alternatively, the shared feminist narrative may mobilize women clergy such that no significant difference exists between those women who tell personal stories of discrimination and those women who do not.

[6] It is more difficult to hypothesize about whether women with gender discrimination stories would also be more politically active on discrimination issues. On the one hand, that they have reason to care about discrimination and to perceive a personal stake in discrimination issues leads to a theoretical expectation that they would be more likely to act on discrimination issues. On the other hand, these women may feel more constrained about political action because they fear the possible repercussions of political activity on discrimination-related issues (e.g., racism, women’s rights, homosexual rights), which can be divisive in religious organizations (Cadge; Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson; Hadden; Quinley).

Religion and Gender in Political Mobilization

[7] Studying the relationship between women clergy's professional experiences and their political interests and actions contributes to a larger study of the impact of religious political mobilization and to the study of how religious dynamics in religious community impact broader social interactions and political realities. It also bridges analysis of workplace political mobilization and analysis of religious political mobilization.

[8] Sapiro's finding that adult socialization affects the political attitudes of women gives reason to suspect that the adult workplace experiences of women clergy might also affect their political attitudes. Schlozman et al. provide further evidence that workplace discrimination has political implications. Looking at the effects of workplace experiences on political participation, they find that the perception of discrimination on the job has a small positive effect on the political activity of women. They also find that the higher the job level and the fewer number of other women present in the job, the more likely women are to perceive discrimination (Schlozman et al.: 43). Because women clergy make-up approximately 10% of the clergy workforce (Chang) and the position often requires an advanced degree, there is reason to expect women clergy to be cognizant of discrimination based on the Schlozman et al. results.

[9] As highly educated leaders of a large social network, clergy are ideal "elite participants" for political mobilization (Rosenstone and Hansen: 29). The type of mobilization most relevant to the hypothesis that women who face discrimination are more likely to act on discrimination issues is that of "issue mobilization," a push toward political activity because of an interest in a particular political issue (Rosenstone and Hansen). One key element of issue mobilization is the sense that an individual has a personal stake in a particular issue. The theory of issue mobilization suggests that women who have personally experienced discrimination would be more likely to act on issues of discrimination because they would more likely see themselves as having a personal stake in such issues.

[10] Commitment to discrimination issues could also come from ideological commitment. Clergy who express a commitment to a liberal political ideology, for example, may have an ideological commitment to addressing discrimination issues. Past research has emphasized the commitment of many women clergy to a liberal ideology (Crawford and Guth; Crawford and Braun; Guth et al. 1994; Olson, Crawford, and Deckman). This liberal commitment, however, appears to mobilize not only discrimination-related issue concerns but also broader economic justice concerns (Olson, Crawford, and Deckman). The broad support for liberal ideology among nearly all women clergy in the studied traditions (Olson, Crawford, and Deckman) also means that ideology does not help to explain important differences in the level of political interest and political action by some women clergy. Since these women vary little on ideology, ideology provides little help in sorting out those with discrimination agendas from those without.

[11] Social theology, the way the role of the church in the world is viewed, affects the political attitudes and actions of clergy (Guth et al 1997). One important dimension of social theology that influences political action concerns the extent to which clergy see social justice or personal morality and moral reform as central (Guth et al 1997). Those with strong social justice commitment would be expected to gravitate to discrimination-related issues

regardless of their personal experience with discrimination. This suggests that analysis of the influence of personal experience of discrimination would need to adjust for differences in social gospel commitment. Here again, however, the homogeneity of women clergy from mainline Protestant and Jewish traditions is rather remarkable. A national survey study of women clergy from nearly the same set of religious traditions (Olson, Crawford, and Deckman: 21), asks clergy to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that social justice is at the heart of the gospel. Out of the 669 women clergy responding to this question, over 80% agreed or strongly agreed that social justice is at the heart of the gospel. Therefore, we can expect broad support for social justice theology to encourage attention to discrimination-related issues among the clergywomen in these traditions regardless of their personal experiences of discrimination in their religious communities. In discussions with male and female clergy in these traditions, the strength of this social justice emphasis is striking. Quite often these discussions emphasize racial and economic inequality. “It’s [racism] tied in as well with economic inequality, but I think racism is a huge piece of it . . . I feel a really hot sense of injustice when I see someone treated unfairly, everything from innuendo in stores, to housing, education, institutional racism in schools” (Personal Interview, 30 July 1998).

[12] Personal experience of discrimination, ideological commitment, and theological commitment all entail individual commitments that may mobilize political action. Religious communities act as socialization agents providing teachings and experiences that lead to individual commitments and attitudes that then yield (or fail to yield) political commitments and actions. Attention to gender in these studies reveals the ways in which these socialization experiences differ because of the gender of the individuals (that is, the ways in which women experience gender discrimination) as well as the ways in which values taught in socialization implicitly or explicitly shape understandings of gender roles. In terms of this latter dynamic, the emphasis on social justice and inclusiveness in most of the religious traditions that ordain women is in harmony with much feminist ideology and theology, including the feminist emphasis on tackling oppression of all types (racial, economic, sexual orientation). This match between social justice religious teachings and feminist theory bolsters the legitimacy of feminist values and feminist socialization for clergy in these traditions. This kind of feminist socialization, which may mobilize political concern and attention to discrimination issues, does not depend on distinct personal experiences of discrimination. If this latter type of socialization drives political leadership among women clergy, then we may find little difference between those women who have distinct personal experiences of gender discrimination and the other women who experience feminist socialization and more subtle forms of discrimination.

[13] Another way in which religious communities mobilize political action is through organizational structures that facilitate political action, that is, organizational mobilization (Crawford, Olson, and Deckman; Rosenstone and Hansen). Denominational and affiliational organizations in mainline Protestant and Jewish traditions include offices that provide political advocacy resources and generally include various regional and national committees that involve clergy and lay leaders in political education and mobilization (Olson 2002; Steensland; Veter). For example, one female minister notes, “the Episcopal Church has been one of the key players in the Interfaith Conference here, and the Episcopal Church in the

city . . . is increasingly a player in figuring out how not to leave out our most marginalized citizens” (Personal Interview, 30 July 1998). A rabbi’s praise of her affiliation office in Washington D.C. illustrates the kind of organizational support that these religious organizations provide for political action and the social justice political agenda. “It [the national office] has a well-trained political staff, and they provide Jewish congregations . . . with well-trained, well-researched assistance. A good part of the agenda they promote deals with helping or supporting the underdog in society” (Personal Interview, 18 March 1999).

[14] An important flip side of the study of mobilization is the study of demobilization, or the factors that depress political activity. One possible demobilizing factor for women clergy is organizational demobilization – demobilization due to explicit or implied pressure not to be “too political” or “too feminist” from the organization (the congregation) in which these women clergy work (Crawford, Olson, and Deckman; Olson, Crawford, and Deckman). Personal experience of professional discrimination may very well cause those women who experience it to be particularly sensitive to organizational demobilization, and thus restrict their political activity. The hypothesis that women clergy who experience discrimination will act *less* on discrimination issues (despite the fact that they might care about them more) is based on the theoretical concept of organizational demobilization.

Data

[15] Data from in-depth interviews with women clergy provides an opportunity to test whether women clergy who report stories of specific personal discrimination differ from their colleagues in terms of the priority that they place on discrimination issues and their actions on discrimination issues. The data cited in the analysis of the relationships between personal stories of discrimination and political priorities and actions, including the quotes from women clergy, come from a study of the political attitudes and participation of women clergy in Omaha, Washington D.C, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee in 1998 and 1999. All women studied held a clergy position with a congregation at the time. The sample includes women from the following denominations: the American Baptist Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, as well as Reform Judaism and Conservative Judaism. This set of traditions includes most of the larger Christian and Jewish religious traditions that ordain women in the United States, but does not include women clergy in Pentecostal or independent traditions or the women clergy who remain in the Southern Baptist Convention.

[16] Limiting the sample to a small set of cities enabled us to use in-depth interviews in addition to surveys to gather data on the political attitudes and actions of women clergy. The small size of the population of women ministers from the selected denominations in each city yields a fairly small sample (N=54). However, our response rates were quite high (87% for the interviews and 79% for the surveys) and our random stratified sample is well over half of the population; therefore, the data is an accurate reflection of mainline Protestant and Jewish women clergy from the four cities.

[17] The homogeneity of these women also facilitates quantitative analysis despite the small sample size. All the women come from religious traditions with an emphasis on a social

justice theology. The ideological homogeneity of the women is evidenced by the fact that 80% of the women identify themselves as liberal and over 90% identify themselves as Democrat or Independent leaning Democrat. All of the women also chose to enter a predominately male-dominated profession, which suggests a shared acceptance of a worldview that sees women as viable religious leaders despite the possible lack of role models and the possible socialization of some of these women to believe otherwise. All the women also come from religious traditions that require advanced education for ordination. Few women in the sample have doctoral degrees, so the sample is very homogeneous in terms of education. Consequently, the composition of the sample reduces the need for many of the control variables that would otherwise be necessary and allows for reasonably valid direct analysis of the relationships between personal experience of discrimination and political attitudes toward discrimination issues and political actions on discrimination issues.

[18] The data is drawn from in-depth interviews with the women. The core question that provides evidence of discrimination as a top political priority is: “What issue or set of issues concerns you most in this day and age?” Each woman provided at least one answer to this question. If a discrimination-related issue appeared in the top three answers, a woman was coded as having discrimination as a political priority. Each woman was also asked, “What specific social or political projects have you been involved with lately?” If any of the first three responses involved work related to discrimination, then the woman was coded as engaged in political action on discrimination. The issues that count as discrimination-related issues include references to women’s rights, civil rights, human rights, racism, intolerance (race, gender, or sexual orientation), homosexual rights, and multiculturalism. The dependent variable for analysis of political attitudes is whether or not women list a discrimination issue as one of their top three concerns. The dependent variable for analysis of the political actions of women clergy is whether women clergy list a political action related to a discrimination-related issue as one of their top three activities.

[19] The use of open-ended questions provides a good test of whether the women prioritize discrimination issues. There were no prompts or response sets that would lead them to be more likely to indicate discrimination-related issues. Likewise, there was no specific prompt that asked women if they had personally experienced discrimination. The interview questions included one asking women to talk about the challenges facing women clergy, with a follow up prompt that asked them whether any of the challenges they had discussed impacted them personally. This was the place in the interview where women were most likely to discuss personal stories of discrimination, but we watched for such stories in the responses to other questions as well.

[20] Nineteen of the women (35%) told personal stories about professional discrimination that they faced at some point in their career. One woman told a story about a situation in her prior position: “The personnel committee head of the church had made a bet that they would have me out of there in less than 6 months, and this was the person who was supposed to be my support person.” She said that she stayed there for 2 years, but it was very hurtful (Personal Interview, 13 April 1998). Another woman told a story of how her files and the files of several other women were “conveniently lost” by a particular administrator in the denominational hierarchy (Personal Interview, 22 April 1998). One rabbi identified the more subtle discrimination that some women discussed, arguing that the

challenge to her authority limits the effectiveness of what she does: “I think that I am free to say what I want. However, there is some question in my mind about whether it is seen with the same authority as a male” (Personal Interview, 24 April 1998).

[21] Many women talked about discrimination in the abstract. For example, one woman stated, “I think that there is still an issue of complete acceptance. I don’t know that women have the same opportunities to rise as men do” (Personal Interview, 4 March 1998). However, only those women who discussed discrimination in the first person were coded as having a distinct gender discrimination story. The following analysis compares the political attitudes and actions of the 35% who discuss personal experiences of discrimination to those of other women clergy in these religious traditions.

Results

[22] The initial analysis shows little evidence of a relationship between women clergy’s workplace experiences with discrimination and their concern for discrimination-related issues in general. The percentage of women who care about discrimination among those who tell personal stories of discrimination (61%) is only slightly higher than for those women who do not (57%). The relationship has a very low Chi Square value (.07) that does not approach statistical significance. Women who discuss personal gender discrimination in the interview are not significantly more likely to list discrimination-related issues as a concern overall.

[23] There is also no strong evidence for a link between personal experience of workplace discrimination and political action on discrimination-related issues. In fact, the results suggest that women in this sample who have personal stories of discrimination are less likely to act on discrimination issues. About 41% of the women who discuss personal experience of discrimination report political activity on discrimination-related issues, while 50% of those who do not discuss personal stories of discrimination report activity on discrimination issues, a difference that is not statistically significant.

[24] These initial results, then, indicate that in terms of their commitment to or their action on political discrimination issues women clergy with personal gender discrimination stories do not differ significantly from their colleagues who have otherwise similar religious socialization including social justice theology and feminist narratives. The fact that personal experiences of discrimination do not appear to translate into interest in discrimination-related issues does not necessarily mean that this professional discrimination has no political implications.

[25] One might argue that the assumption that gender discrimination leads to issue interest in discrimination issues in general is too large of a jump; that women who face discrimination would most likely see *gender* discrimination as salient and would most likely be mobilized to act only on issues related to *gender* discrimination. One woman noted, “as a woman, I have been aware of gender issues in a way that I had not ever realized, and because of the things that I have experienced at times, I hope that has made me more sensitive to how other people are treated, including by me, because of the nature of the structures that we live in” (Personal Interview, 9 June 1998). In fact, 33% of the women who discuss personal discrimination list gender rights or gender discrimination issues as concerns,

compared to 23% of the other women; therefore, there is evidence that personal discrimination translates into more concern for gender-related discrimination issues for this sample of women. However, this 10% gap is not sufficient to make the relationship statistically significant (Chi-Square significance = .41).

[26] One might argue, on the other hand, that looking for discrimination-inspired issue mobilization through a focus on discrimination issues is too narrow. Women might translate professional experience of discrimination into political attitudes or actions in ways other than concern for discrimination-related issues. After women listed the issues that concerned them most, they were asked, “Do any of these issues concern you more because of your gender?” A much higher percentage of the women who discuss personal gender discrimination respond “yes” (83%) than do other women (55%), and this relationship is statistically significant at the .05 level. Women who have experienced professional discrimination are more likely to say that the political issues that they care about are influenced by their gender.

[27] The interview transcripts permit us to see which issues appear to be more salient to these women because of their gender. Several women connect their experiences of exclusion to the current exclusion that they see homosexuals facing in their denominations and in the larger society. In this regard, one woman who faced personal discrimination notes, “as a part of an oppressed minority, I have a certain understanding and sympathy” (Personal Interview, 29 March 1998). Similarly, another woman observed, “I think that the racism and sexuality issue affect me more because I am part of a gender that for a long time was excluded, particularly from the ordained leadership in the church” (Personal Interview, 01 April 1998).

[28] Testing for a relationship between gay rights as a political priority, specifically, and personal experience of discrimination does yield a strong and statistically significant relationship. Only 18% of the women who do not tell personal stories of professional discrimination list homosexual discrimination as a top priority, while 53% of the women who do tell stories of discrimination include it in their top priorities (Chi-Square and Fisher Exact Test significance = .01).

[29] Gay rights, then, is the one discrimination issue for which there is a distinct difference between women who relate specific personal gender discrimination stories in their interviews and those who do not. This was also the most controversial of the discrimination issues at the time of the interviews (1998 and 1999). It appears that personal experiences of discrimination make these women more likely to see this controversial discrimination issue as salient. This issue may also be most salient for these women because it is the most contested discrimination issue within their own religious institutions. Within these institutions debates rage over the ordination of gay clergy and the appropriateness of same-sex commitment ceremonies (Cadge). A year prior to these interviews, for example, a male United Methodist minister in Omaha was disciplined for conducting a same-sex ceremony (McCord).

[30] In turning to analysis of mobilization on gay rights, a first look seems to indicate no difference between women who have gender discrimination stories to tell and those who do not. About 30% of both groups report political action on homosexuality issues. However, a different picture emerges when we examine the relationship between political concern about

homosexuality issues and action on those issues. As previously noted, those who tell stories of gender discrimination are much more concerned about homosexuality discrimination as a major problem facing the United States today. And yet, the women who tell stories of gender discrimination appear to face organizational *demobilization*, as their level of overall action on gay rights lags nearly 20% behind their interest. Over 50% list gay rights as a top political concern, but only 32% act on that concern.

[31] This gap between concern and action for women with stories of discrimination raises the question of whether this demobilization on gay rights exists due to their particularly controversial nature. Analysis of the differences between concern and action on general discrimination issues provides a way to answer this question. This analysis shows that a similar 20% gap exists between concern for discrimination issues and action on those issues (61% and 41%) for these women. Meanwhile, the gap for other women is only 7% with 57% listing discrimination as a top political concern and 50% reporting political action to address a discrimination issue.

[32] On the other hand, we see evidence of organizational mobilization on gay rights issues among the women who do *not* tell gender discrimination stories. The percent of these women who act on discrimination issues (29%) exceeds the percent of these women who list gay rights as a top political concern (18%). So, despite the controversial nature of homosexuality debates at this time, a sizable number of women clergy feel compelled to act on gay rights issues even when this is not one of their top political concerns. This may reflect the strength of the feminist narrative for these women as well as the salience of gay rights issues in politics at this time.

[33] Analysis of national survey data a few years after these interviews reveals that women clergy in mainline Protestant Christian traditions speak out about gay rights more often than do their male colleagues (Deckman, Crawford, and Olson). Therefore, gay rights activism by women clergy in these Christian traditions is not solely the result of the social justice socialization found in the tradition. The gender experiences of women clergy in these traditions foster higher levels of concern and attention to gay rights than those of male clergy who have otherwise similar social justice theology socialization.

Conclusion

[34] Personal experiences of discrimination among women clergy do not offer a compelling explanation of the support for discrimination-related issues by women clergy in the studied traditions. Their shared social justice commitments, shared liberal ideology, and shared narrative of the challenges that women face in their profession mobilizes a high support for discrimination issues among not only women with personal stories of discrimination but also those without such stories. The shared narrative of the challenges facing women in the ministry emerges quite strongly in the interviews. Over 80% of the women spoke of specific challenges facing women clergy, with acceptance, legitimacy, and upward mobility topping the lists. Women who did not tell personal stories about discrimination were often as eloquent, if not more so, in identifying the challenges that women faced in the ministry and the ways these challenges influenced their political beliefs.

[35] However, personal experiences of discrimination do have political consequences for these women. Those women who report such experiences do in fact differ, in issue commitment and action, from their similarly liberal and social justice-oriented peers. Specifically, these women are more attuned to gender in politics and much more concerned with gay rights issues. Unfortunately, their personal experience of discrimination also results in the organizational demobilization of these women. Among these women there is a significant gap between levels of interest in discrimination-related issues and levels of action on these issues, while women who do not have these stories experience levels of political action that match or even exceed their concern for discrimination-related issues.

[36] The findings of this paper call for deeper probing into the political implications of the experiences of women clergy as they enter and impact a male-dominated religious profession. This chapter provides one tool for analyzing demobilization related to gender discrimination, namely analysis of gaps between interest and action on political issues. In this study, analysis of political interest alone and analysis of political action alone yield little difference between women with personal gender discrimination stories and those without (except in the case of gay rights interest). However, a clear difference emerges when analysis shifts to the relationship between political interest and political action. A significant gap emerges for discrimination issues in general and gay rights issues in particular for those women with gender discrimination stories, while no such gap exists for those women without those stories.

[37] Much work has been done on demobilizing factors that depressed the action of clergy on behalf of civil rights issues in the 1960's and 1970's (Campbell and Pettigrew; Hadden; Quinley; Stark et al.; Wood). This chapter identifies one demobilizing factor for some clergywomen as they consider how to respond to current gay rights debates in society today. Clergywomen in these more religiously liberal traditions act on gay rights issues much more than might be expected considering the controversial nature of the topic (Olson, Crawford, and Deckman). They also speak out on gay rights issues much more frequently than their male colleagues in these same traditions (Deckman, Crawford, and Olson). However, as the evidence in this chapter indicates, those women for whom personal gender discrimination hits close to home engage in political action on gay rights issues at a rate that lags far behind their passion for this political issue. This demobilization demonstrates the impact that gender experiences in religious communities have on the political actions of women clergy in society.

[38] The women discussed in this chapter come from a select subset of religious traditions in the United States. Much remains to be known about the political mobilization of women leaders in other religious traditions that have various levels of support for women's ordination. Some Pentecostal traditions ordain women (Lawless), for example, and some Southern Baptist women are ordained despite the recent ban on women's ordination in that tradition. Catholic sisters have extensive institutional resources that may well have important political implications as well (Quinonez and Turner).

[39] The impact of gender-based organizational demobilization may well be manifest elsewhere, for example, in the political mobilization of religious leaders and the mobilization of female clergy and openly gay clergy. Since many Americans participate in congregations,

and since congregational factors play important roles in shaping the political attitudes and actions of American citizens (Crawford and Olson; Djupe and Gilbert; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988, 1990), gender influences on the political attitudes and actions of clergy have even broader implications for understanding the complex relationships between gender, religion, and contemporary American society.

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