

WOMEN IN THE OKLAHOMA LEGISLATURE: THE EXPERIENCE OF TOKENISM

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Women are more prominent today in Oklahoma politics than in days past, yet the state's long heritage of social conservatism and traditionalism remains an impediment to women's success in legislative politics. As a result, women in the Oklahoma Legislature face the kind of performance pressures that organizational scholar Rosabeth Moss Kanter describes as "tokenism" (Kanter, 1977).

Women first joined the ranks of lawmakers in the state House and Senate in 1921, though for an 11-year period during the Great Depression (1930-41), no women served in the Oklahoma Legislature. Until 1942, Oklahoma's Constitution specified that only men were eligible to be governor or to serve in certain executive offices (Darcy, Brewer, and Clay, 1984). In the 1990s, women achieved success in major statewide offices, but like other border and deep South states, Oklahoma women continue to be elected to the Legislature in much lower numbers than in other states. After the 1996 election, women comprised a fraction more than 10 percent of the legislative membership, which placed Oklahoma 48th among the states in terms of percentage of women lawmakers and at less than half of the average proportion of female members in the 50 states (Gordon, 1995).

Of the 101-member House of Representatives, only nine women serve among the prototypical suits and cowboy boots. In the House committee rooms in 1997, only six of the 27 committees have more than two women members, while eight committees have no female members. Only two standing committees are chaired by women, and two other women chair standing subcommittees of the Education Committee. Only three women sit on the 40-member Appropriations and Budget Committee.

The Senate is not very much different. Six of the 48 members' desks are occupied by women, and on the 19 standing committees there are typically seven men to every woman. Nine committees have only one or no female senators at the table. Women chair only one of the eight subcommittees of the Appropriations Committee and just three of 19 standing committees.

These small numbers lead to what Kanter in her now classic study, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, described as tokenism, a set of conditions that produces performance pressures on those individuals who differ on some significant characteristic

from the dominant group. The token individual often finds her behavior defined or interpreted in stereotypes and her acceptance as a member subject to heightened scrutiny and visibility.

Kanter defines token conditions as any situation in which a socially distinct group constitutes 15 percent or less of an organization's membership. Kanter also notes that token individuals often lack power, and this circumstance is also evident in the Oklahoma Legislature. No woman has ever held a top leadership post — presiding officer, majority or minority leader. Women have not been elected from rural districts that continue to wield a disproportionate share of legislative power. Women legislators tend to represent districts based in the two major metropolitan areas and the university communities of Norman and Stillwater. Only four of the 15 current female legislators represent predominantly rural constituencies.

In addition to numbers, female legislators in Oklahoma experience the conditions associated with “tokenism.” Kanter identifies three factors that impact behavior within an organization: 1) tokens have greater visibility which leads to pressures on their performance; 2) differences between tokens and the dominant group tend to be exaggerated; and 3) as a consequence tokens try to assimilate by taking on stereotypical gender roles (1977: 210-242). The examples, which Kanter uses from the corporate world to elaborate on these conditions, might have been drawn as easily from the committee hearings and personal experiences of Oklahoma committee chairs

Visibility imposes an extraordinary responsibility to perform faultlessly and introduces symbolic expectations that the token woman represents the category of all women. State Senator Bernice Shedrick's recollections of her first term in 1981 as the lone female senator reflect this burden of public symbol. She told a reporter, “I felt a challenge because I knew I was quite visible. If I made a mistake, there was no hiding behind any other female. I was challenged to do my very best and to make certain I studied the issues very carefully, read every bill and tried to be as well-informed as I possibly could” (McShane, 1987: 1). These pressures are not only self-imposed but also generated by others. (The author interviewed legislators and staffers in 1994 and 1995.) After expressing frustration about the performance of a newly elected lawmaker, a veteran female staff member added this comment in a personal interview: “When there are so few women, you really want them to be good.”

These comments reflect the “double-edged sword of publicity” (Kanter, 1977). By being visible, the token may reap notoriety while most dominants escape critical judgement. Female Oklahoma Legislators often experience such visibility. The woman, who violates the legislative norm of collegiality, is variously described as a “loose cannon,” “not a team player” and “flaky and unpredictable.” The female who sponsors a wide variety of bills and speaks often on the floor violates the norm of specialization and is described as a “loudmouth” and “know-it-all.” A promising and capable new chairwoman attracts more than her share of heavy assignments and then is judged harshly if she “can't handle it.” While men might be similarly described, they avoid the glare of the limelight that comes with token visibility.

In response to visibility, Kanter argues tokens often “work twice as hard to prove

their competence.” This strategy has been adopted by many Oklahoma women chairs.

“I have tried to establish my reputation as being very knowledgeable. I sometimes have to give members the nod, and I need to know the issues. I read more than most members. I find myself in the staff mode, reading, studying, developing my knowledge and expertise as opposed to being a member who is dependent upon staff.”

Other Oklahoma women lawmakers have earned positions of power or exercised considerable policy influence by dint of sheer effort and hard work. For example, the landmark education reform legislation, HB1017 of 1989 proved the mettle of three women — State Superintendent Sandy Garrett, House Education Chair Carolyn Thompson, and Senate Education Chair Bernice Shedrick — in the all-male world that previously dominated the appropriation of education funding.

Second, Kanter emphasizes the exaggeration of differences between dominants and tokens. Kanter identifies exaggerated “displays of aggression and potency: instances of sexual innuendos, aggressive sexual teasing and prowess-oriented ‘war stories’ ” and sports laurels. Such displays subconsciously underscore the social camaraderie of men and the exclusion of women.

Again women in the Oklahoma legislature encounter such experiences. On being appointed to chair her committee in 1995 and forewarned of its tough issues, one woman was told by her presiding officer that “this is the committee where you have to have really big. . . .” Exaggeration of difference can be observed in social exchanges in committee meetings. For example, in one committee where a bill on prostitution was being considered, the men joked, exchanged knowing looks and watched for a reaction from the female chair when one of their colleagues commented: “I don’t think anybody at this table is in favor of prostitution” (Committee Hearing, February 14 1995). In such instances, as Kanter notes, the token “functions as audience for dominant cultural expressions.”

Exaggeration of differences also can be seen in reaction to women’s policy initiatives. During a 1997 debate on child support enforcement, conservative male senators opposed revocation of fishing and hunting licenses for parents who are in arrears on their child support payments. They argued that such a policy was nothing short of a threat to American values (Oklahoma Senate Debate, March 6, 1997). In 1994, a proposal to hang plaques for a women’s hall of fame in a state building prompted backlash proposals for a men’s hall of fame and a state license tag motto: “In Honor of Men.” When they present their bills for floor debate, female lawmakers complain “an automatic radar goes up” among the male members.

Female committee chairs generally choose to ignore such comments or provide only tacit acknowledgment. As one chair commented, “I don’t feel picked on or put down, but we still have some members with red rings around the collar.” Another woman added, “Sometimes you just have to let the sexist remarks roll off you.”

The result is what Kanter calls “boundary heightening,” the increased contrast of differences and a separation between tokens and dominants. It does not matter that

such social behavior is practiced by a limited segment of the dominant group. What is critical is the social distance perceived by the token, as reflected one chairwoman's description of her committee, "They [male colleagues] will gig me a lot, calling me 'queen bee.' I am very formal, a hard charger, but you have to be with that crowd. . . it's a survival mechanism."

The final condition of tokenism is assimilation, the process of adopting stereotypical characteristics that fit preexisting generalizations about the token group. In effect, stereotypes define comfortable, but very limited roles that allow the tokens and the dominants to fall back on familiar expectations and modes of action. Assimilation minimizes the discomfort of differences.

Assimilation is clearly a condition in the Oklahoma Legislature. In interviews and published reports, the female committee chairs frequently adopt gender archetypes to self-describe their legislative styles. For example, there is the member who adopts a "grandmotherly" role of warmth, geniality, a touch of absentmindedness, and a disarming approach in dealing with other members. Another described her initial legislative style as the "bratty kid sister" (better than "playing the dumb blond") who asks too many questions and tends to push issues people do not want to hear." A third woman found success by being what Kanter calls the "Iron Maiden" — a style emphasizing dominance over issues, an aggressive presentation of her position, and a tough approach to engaging other members on issues. Acting the role of "flirt" also can be used to advantage:

"I have been pinched more at the Capitol than anywhere else. . . . I judged Representative Q very critically for putting up with the sexism. I didn't like seeing it with her. But I have learned not to put up a fuss and to go along with the kidding. I've even used it on occasion to sidle up to one of the guys to ask him if he's going to vote for my bill. I don't get offended when they ask what I'll do for them in return."

Alternatively, one chairwoman told a reporter women legislators find it helpful to "play the wife. You make them think it's their idea" to win support on an issue. A senior staff person also recalled this tactic in two former committee chairwomen. One, an acknowledged and unabashed feminist, invited committee members to dinner and assumed the role of wife-homemaker to put the members at ease. The other woman built alliances with other members by cultivating friendships with their wives.

In sum, the Oklahoma Legislature has proven a hard club for women to join. Their status as tokens makes them lightning rods for attention. Token visibility, exaggerated differences and assimilation combine to distort behavior and thus make it difficult for tokens to be themselves or to be perceived without imposition of gender stereotypes. For all leaders, adaptation to organizational processes and culture can be a challenge, but that may be doubly so for women in the Oklahoma Legislature.

References

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