Case Studies on Women and Public Policy

By Sally J. Kenney
**Introduction**

Most professional schools use some version of the case method of teaching, training students to derive general principle from concrete example. Whether it is a body with symptoms, a group of ill “ladies who lunch” (a classic public health case), or a contractual dispute between two parties, cases present a real world situation (many law hypotheticals are drawn from pending cases). Law Schools have long used the case method. Their version of the Socratic Method, that is to say, a method that entails intense questioning of students demanding on-the-spot reasoning, aims to teach students the application of legal rules and principles to facts. The aim was, as Professor Kingsfield declared in the television series “The Paper Chase,” to get students to think like a lawyer. Professional schools employ case teaching as they have little time to get students to think like a lawyer, doctor, journalist, or policy analyst.

The Harvard Business School pioneered its version of the case method with goals somewhat different from other professional schools (Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen 1994). Underlying their method was a commitment to vigorous, participatory, discussion-based learning where students discover lessons for themselves rather than master rules and theories from others. Recognizing that business theories are fads that come and go, the HBS hoped to teach students instead problem solving and critical thinking. The public policy schools founded since the 1960s, like Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, broke away from public administration, embraced economics, and adopted the HBS method of case teaching.

Social scientists have long used case studies, an in-depth analysis of one example, to generate theory, trace a theory through an extended example, or identify weaknesses in a theory. Public policy teaching cases, however, are different. The teaching case strips from the narrative all theoretical analysis, presenting only the fable without its moral. It then invites the reader to
supply the meaning. The preferred type is decision-forcing. The story ends abruptly just as the protagonist must make a critical decision. For the case to “work,” more than one answer or course of action must be defensible. If at least two sides or possibilities do not emerge from the scenario, then no vigorous discussion or debate would occur. A second kind of case is retrospective. The episode is over, the protagonist has made her choice, and readers then conduct a postmortem but without all of the drama of having to choose what to do.

**Missing: Gender, Women and Feminism**

Public policy teaching cases serve two important pedagogical purposes for the feminist teacher. First, they offer real stories of the women’s movement or gender issues in a women’s studies field increasingly dominated by feminist theory and comprised of students who know little of the history of feminism. Second, a central tenet of feminist social science calls for examining social policy from the point of view of the objects of policy, giving voice to women’s experiences. Cases invite students to explore the choices of female protagonists or feminist organizations, or apply a gender analysis to policy questions. When I went in search of cases for courses on the politics of public affairs, women and public policy, and feminist organizations, however, I was sadly disappointed. Policy schools have lagged behind the disciplines in integrating women, gender, and feminist analysis into their curricula (Kenney 2001b). The absence of women, women’s issues, gender analyses, and feminist perspectives in policy schools’ curricula is stark, despite the fact that women have been a majority of public policy students for many years (Webster 2003). While feminist sociologists, historians, and political scientists have developed a rich scholarly literature of feminist case studies (Ferree and Martin 1995), they have not converted such materials into teaching cases.

Using the most inclusive classification system I could devise, I searched for cases with a
female protagonist, cases that raised a women and public policy issue (broadly defined), cases about a women’s organization, or cases that gave any indication of gender as a category of analysis. The result was a grand total of less than 1% of existing cases, counting cases at the Kennedy School of Government,¹ the University of Washington’s Electronic Hallway,² and Georgetown University’s Pew Case Studies in International Affairs collection.³ Women characters and women’s concerns fared little better among Harvard Business School cases,⁴ the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business collection,⁵ or the COLIS case clearinghouse.⁶ The Case Research Journal has published a few cases with female protagonists.

Lest one think this paucity of gender cases is a mere anachronism of history that will be rectified seamlessly as women become the majority of public policy students, scholars, and, ultimately, faculty of policy schools, it is important to note that the percentages do not increase when we examine only those cases produced in the last three years. The severe under-representation of gender analysis, women, women’s issues, and feminist organizations is ongoing.

Perhaps even more troubling than the low numbers, is the problematic framing in the few

¹ http://www.ksgharvard.edu/caseweb

² https://www.hallway.org

³ http://data.georgetown.edu/sfs/ecase/

⁴ http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b02/en/cases/cases_home.jhtml

⁵ http://www.darden.edu/collection/index.htm

⁶ COLIS includes the Harvard Business School, the Darden School, and the JFK School of Government. http://www.ecch.cranfield.ac.uk/.
gender cases that do exist. In a 2004 issue of the *Journal of Policy Analysis of Management*, I analyzed some 55 cases with a female protagonist, a feminist organization, or a gender issue. Some cases do treat gender as an analytical category rather than a fixed set of attributes adhering to bodies (Kenney 1996). More often, however, a female protagonist exists without any textual support for a discussion of gender as a relevant social process. Troubling indeed are the international relations cases that inject women protagonists exclusively as the architects of disaster. Other cases frame women as the problem to manage, as, for example, when women enter heretofore male-dominated workplaces. Essential biological differences are too often assumed rather than interrogated. Other cases raise genders issue, such as leaking breast implants or reform of state abortion legislation, but have no women characters or women’s voices in the case. Others fall short by defying case writing conventions about openness, lecturing readers about the appropriate course of action, or by creating a protagonist where none exists.

Happily we have some progress to report in addition to the cases I praise in my *JPAM* survey. UCLA Public Policy School Dean Barbara Nelson has a new *Casebook on Leadership and Diversity* with seven cases, all available free on the web, which includes her excellent case on how the YWCA added “eliminate racism” to its mission of “empower women and girls.” The Aspen Institute has cases for business school teachers which include some on gender and diversity more broadly (and its journal, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, is beginning to


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7 [http://www.spa.ucla.edu/leadership/template1.cfm?page=casebook.cfm](http://www.spa.ucla.edu/leadership/template1.cfm?page=casebook.cfm)

8 [http://www.caseplace.org/topics/topics_list.htm?attrib_id=4845](http://www.caseplace.org/topics/topics_list.htm?attrib_id=4845)
publish gender cases). Marieka Klawitter, Associate Professor at the Evans School of the University of Washington, has approximately ten new diversity cases in process to be posted soon on the Electronic Hallway, including an outstanding case on the Intersex Society of North America.

Chetkovich and Kirp offer an indictment of the most frequently used Kennedy School of Government cases that feminist case writers could take to heart, criticizing the cases for the way they conceptualize politics, for their focus on elites, and for their excising of the political and historical contexts of policy making. I am particularly interested in developing cases that do more than merely insert a woman into a leadership position but consider social movements and the discursive aspects of politics.

Feminist scholars have, by and large, rejected a narrow definition of politics and taken a bottom-up rather than top-down approach to politics. For example, as Geske and Clancy do in their case on sex tourism in Cuba (2000), feminists tend to start with the women affected by policies as important theorists of how the world works. Feminists more often focus on leaders drawn from everyday life, rather than constructing history as the moves in a game played by great men. Furthermore, early second wave feminists in the U.S. pronounced that there are no personal solutions to social problems, only accommodations. Rather than trying to figure out the perfect retort to silence the sexual harasser, or the right clothes to wear to break through the glass ceiling or to avoid sexual assault, feminists tend to favor large, structural changes and collective action. While we do want to disseminate “what works” and applaud successful experiments, it would be misguided to believe that a naval officer is going to “solve” sexism or racism or even create an oasis of non-discrimination through his individual actions and good intentions alone (as in the Tailhook case). One can learn from approaches and strategies, but it would be a mistake to
think managers or policy analysts could read a 10-page case and find the magic bullet to make an unsuccessful job applicant vacate one’s seat or placate disgruntled firefighters. Rather, one hopes that a lesson students take away from the case is the complexity of the issues and that the case provides a window for exploring that complexity through vigorous class discussion.

The Center on Women and Public Policy’s Case Program

Operating on the assumption that it is easier to teach feminists how to write cases than it is to teach case writers how to think like a feminist, the Center on Women and Public Policy embarked on a project to produce case studies in the summer of 2000, pulling together scholars, activists, and Extension educators from many different disciplinary backgrounds. We produced eight cases, which are freely available on our web site.9 A Professor of Rhetoric prepared a case on how direct entry (or lay) midwives in Minnesota strategized about how to secure the benefits of state licensing without having to give up procedures they routinely performed under the radar of legal and medical control. An historian described Emily’s List’s quandary over whether to endorse Geraldine Ferraro or Elizabeth Holtzman for the 1992 U.S. Senate race in New York. A political scientist looked at how feminist activists joined in coalition to secure the appointment of the first woman to the Minnesota Supreme Court in 1977 and mobilized to help her win the ensuing judicial election where she faced three male challengers. The business manager of the Minnesota Women’s Press recounted the drama of how a bank officer’s refusal to allow it to make good on its promise to distribute profits to low-wage workers nearly led to the demise of the enterprise. A sociologist described how the deadlock over a development plan for Morocco, which included divorce reform, polarized French-speaking elite women reformers and Arabic-

9Http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/wpp/.
speaking fundamentalist women, dividing those who had previously found some common
ground. An Extension educator recounted how African-American settlement house workers
leveraged their networks of white supporters to advance the educational careers of African-
American women in times of strict segregation. A Professor in Public Health narrated the
trauma and subsequent litigation arising when the management of a home for developmentally
disabled adults refused to respond to repeated sexual assaults on women caretakers. And a
Women’s Studies Professor and creative writer analyzed how two rural women transgressed
traditional gender roles to develop the legal expertise necessary to prevent farm foreclosures in
rural Minnesota.

In the summer of 2003, we produced six more cases on women’s human rights. A
scholar of non-profit management and social policy explores the decision of a Latina battered
women’s shelter, Casa de Esperanza, as it decides whether or not to stay open as a shelter or to
focus its activities on serving the Latina Community. A human rights lawyer explores
Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights’ partnership with feminists in Bulgaria seeking to pass
the first order of protection law in Eastern Europe for women seeking protection from domestic
violence. Another human rights lawyer explores the machinations as the Campaign for Gender
Justice works for the creation of the International Criminal Court, the recognition of crimes
against women as crimes against humanity, and the appointment of women judges on the ICC.
A political scientist explores the mixed messages conveyed to the Argentine military government
by U.S. officials during the first year after the military coup in March 1976. Ambassador Robert
Hill attempted to communicate his concerns about human rights violations while Secretary of
State Kissinger encouraged the Argentine government to “get terrorism over with quickly.”
Another political scientist explores the crisis facing a battered women’s shelter when it is
revealed that one of the counselors is a fugitive, on the run with her children, and is unmasked by another shelter volunteer. The case explores the difficult management issues facing an organization and individuals in crisis as opponents of the shelter seek to “clean it up.” Lastly, a former mayor of Minneapolis documents the successful efforts of a bi-partisan group of women activists who cleverly strategized to work together to elect a woman mayor.

In the fall of 2004, I taught a 3-credit graduate course on case studies on women and public policy where we ran cases each class period and students wrote a case. Eleven usable cases resulted, and we are in the process of revising them to post on our web site. They include:

- A homeless youth shelter must decide whether housing male-to-female transsexual youth with young women will make them feel unsafe.
- The mayor of Minneapolis must decide whether or not to veto a pornography ordinance that may well be unconstitutional.
- A Japanese feminist group tries to get a full airing of a documentary on “comfort women” and the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery on public television over the opposition of conservatives.
- A Republican-turned Independent legislator must decide with whom to caucus.
- The Governor of Massachusetts, Jane Swift, seeks to cast a favorable light on her efforts to balance executive office and motherhood, giving birth in office twice (once to twins).
- A Hmong Women’s Organization must decide whether to cancel its leadership awards banquet once it discovers that 70% of its funds are missing.

10 For syllabi and relevant publications, see http://www.bhh.umn.edu/people/skenney/index.html
• Low-waged union clerical workers at the University of Minnesota must decide whether to strike or to accept cuts in their pay and health care benefits.

• A plaintiff, a government attorney, and a lawyer in private practice agonize over when the price to be paid for challenging sexual harassment in Eveleth Mines becomes too high.

• President of the National Organization for Women, Patricia Ireland, must decide whether to make opposing welfare reform an organizational priority over the objections of some of her members.

• Planned Parenthood of Minnesota and South Dakota must decide whether to create a fund to allow it to endorse candidates for elective office, or whether doing so will brand it as a Democratic political organization rather than a non-partisan health care provider.

Conclusion

Cases have many virtues. Through story telling, cases present lessons of public policy making, bringing to life the dilemmas faced by real people. They convey the wisdom to be gleaned from successes and failures, compensate somewhat for the lack of experience on the part of students, and facilitate not only vigorous participation and engagement by students, but critical thinking. Cases breathe life into theory by showing its relevance, even for students who are practically oriented and just want the “tools.” Nevertheless, these stories, when read carefully, reveal the underlying theoretical orientations of the case writers. Cases, like the policy schools that produced them, have almost completely ignored women’s issues. The paucity of case materials on gender is unacceptable. Yet, even when they are not directly about women’s issues, or even if the protagonists are not women, cases contain powerful messages about gender—messages feminists wish to expose and challenge.

We need women protagonists in more than 1% of the cases, regardless of the topic. We
need cases on women and public policy issues, and there has been no shortage of them on the public agenda, from abortion restrictions to violence against women. We need cases that highlight the dilemmas faced by women’s organizations, be they battered women’s shelters or NGOs working on women’s international human rights. And we need cases that explore how gender shapes public policy. Cases whose texts have many shortcomings may still provoke lively and fruitful discussion. But, I think particularly for cases that explore gender as a conceptual tool and the dilemmas facing feminist organizations, we need case writers who are immersed in the scholarly literature on the topic to provide some exemplars. That has been the goal of the Center on Women and Public Policy’s case project. I urge the knowledgeable—scholars and activists with stories to share and lessons learned—to answer the call. We cannot afford another season of silence and distortion in the policy schools.
References


______. 2001c. “Thank you for being ready: Minnesota’s First Supreme Court Justice, Rosalie
Wahl.” Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, Center on Women and Public Policy case studies (http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/wpp/case_studies.html).


