# Reimagining Policy Spaces: Toward Accessible and Inclusive Public Engagement

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**Abstract**

This study interrogates the potentialities of policy spaces with the aim of bringing marginalized groups more concertedly into the centre of public policy engagement. By taking a feminist intersectional approach to examining the limits of classical public policy and conventional modes of public engagement, we propose a more fluid and generative understanding of policy space that encompasses both physical and social aspects and their interrelations. We then apply this understanding to our experimentation with two public engagement exercises held in Nova Scotia: a workshop and panel for disabled and Deaf women, and a podcast for rural women. Both were part of a larger project aimed at acquiring in-depth, nuanced policy feedback from several historically marginalized groups. Through our experience with these exercises—including notable successes and failures—we propose an approach to theorizing policy spaces informed by the contributions and interests of the groups in question and with an awareness of intersectional power dynamics, positionality and place.

*Keywords*: feminist intersectionality, policy spaces, public engagement, Deaf women, women with disabilities, rural women

**Résumé**

Cette étude explore le potentiel des espaces politiques dans le but d'amener les groupes marginalisés de manière plus concertée au centre de la participation aux politiques publiques. En adoptant une approche intersectionnelle féministe pour examiner les limites des politiques publiques classiques et des modes conventionnels de mobilisation du public, nous proposons une définition plus fluide et fonctionnelle de l'espace politique qui englobe à la fois les aspects physiques et sociaux ainsi que leurs interrelations. Nous appliquons ensuite cette définition à notre recherche avec deux exercices de mobilisation du public tenus en Nouvelle-Écosse, soit un atelier et un groupe pour les femmes handicapées et sourdes, ainsi qu'un balado pour les femmes en milieu rural. Ces deux exercices faisaient partie d'un projet plus vaste visant à obtenir des commentaires politiques approfondis et nuancés de la part de plusieurs groupes historiquement marginalisés. Grâce à nos observations de ces exercices (y compris d'important succès et échecs), nous proposons une approche théorique des espaces politiques éclairée par les contributions et les intérêts des groupes en question, tout en considérant les dynamiques de pouvoir intersectionnelles, la positionnalité et le lieu.

Mots-clés : intersectionnalité féministe, espaces politiques, mobilisation du public, femmes sourdes, femmes handicapées, femmes de milieu rural

## Reimagining Policy Spaces: Toward Accessible and Inclusive Public Engagement

In a boardroom in Ottawa, thirty "experts" sit around a table sharing ideas about how to improve a policy field. All day these academic researchers, medical professionals, and lawyers fervently discuss the governance of reproduction, guiding policy analysts in their next iteration of regulations to come.

In a classroom in Saskatoon, a student writes an op-ed that is subsequently published in her local paper, articulating concern about the lack of funding for the care of children with autism over the age of six. Policy-makers not only read her piece but invite her to the legislature to share her views, and ultimately, the subsequent provincial budget includes new funding that explicitly addresses her concerns.

In a community centre in Halifax, residents gather to hear from municipal councillors and staff about new plans for neighbourhood development. They are given the opportunity to ask questions and their expectation is that their concerns in relation to urban design and the use of city spaces will be taken into consideration in future planning processes.

When studying public policy across Canada, these are some of the typical scenarios that come to mind when we think of policy spaces. These scenarios raise several issues about how policy-making includes voices outside of government. For example, is consultation with "experts" sufficient? Can op-eds and letters from lay people compel decision-makers? And are citizens not only heard, but listened to, in an array of government-sponsored public fora? This article asks what happens if we expand our notions of where, as well as by whom and how, public policy is conceptualized and made.

Conventional research on public engagement in policy-making, especially in the discipline of political science, tends to focus on the "how" (i.e., the activities) of public consultation, and who is "at the table," rather than where the table is located, what it represents, and for whom. Yet the actual spaces in which public engagement occurs can shape who is there and what is discussed, as well as how seriously the insights of those being engaged are taken and acted upon (Levac & Wiebe, 2020). Reimagining these tables, these spaces—both virtual and physical—in which policy gets made, may be necessary to ensure that they are more accessible to marginalized groups.

Thus the questions that lie at the heart of this study are: what are "policy spaces"? And, given long-standing research suggesting that such spaces systematically fail to include marginalized groups, how can we make them more responsive? To answer these questions, we reflect on our efforts to develop four public engagement exercises in Nova Scotia involving historically unrepresented, under-represented, and misrepresented groups of women. The first exercises were: (i) an interactive game to politically engage young women and girls; and (ii) a sharing circle involving diverse Indigenous women (for a discussion of these first two exercises see Cattapan et al., 2020a); followed by (iii) a workshop and panel discussion with women with disabilities and Deaf women; and (iv) a podcast highlighting the concerns of rural women. In this

article, we primarily focus on and assess our third and fourth public engagement exercises (for a discussion of all four engagement exercises, see Cattapan et al., 2020b). Using feminist, intersectional analysis and building on place-based policy studies (both elucidated below), we argue that unconventional approaches to public engagement that are actively created with an acute awareness of intersectional power dynamics, positionality, and location (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Levac & Denis, 2019; Levac & Wiebe, 2020), not only contest what comprises a conventional policy space, but also work to build inclusion and relevancy in policy-making.

The article begins with a review of the nature and forms of traditional public policy, its attendant spaces and publics and their limitations. We then consider policy space vis-à-vis positionality and place, through the lens of feminist, intersectional politics and place-based policy-making. This is followed by a description and analysis of some of our attempts at greater public inclusion in policy-making encompassing alternative policy spaces. In the end, we advance the view that more expansive, fluid, and generative approaches to policy spaces—premised on the active engagement of oft-excluded groups and involving both the "physical" and "social" aspects—can both address limited views of policy spaces and offer more promise when it comes to ameliorating long-standing exclusions. This view of policy space, we contend, is more attentive to structure and agency, and especially the agency of those belonging to long-excluded groups.

## Policy Spaces: Traditional Accounts and their Limitations

### *The 'Space' Of Public Policy*

Political scientist Thomas Dye's (1972) classic formulation that public policy is "anything a government chooses to do or not do" (p. 2) informs most definitions of public policy as they tend to revolve around actions (or inactions) of state officials and focus on intentionality. From this view, the agent of public policy is the state official, and the state is the site—*the* policy space, singular—where decisions occur. It is also at the level of the state that we find the policy cycle, the standard heuristic comprised of *agenda setting, formulation, decision, implementation,* and *evaluation* (although other variations exist) that is understood as the conventional path to public policy-making (Gamble, 2002, pp. 291–292).

These institutional, instrumental portrayals tend not to meaningfully consider the larger context (i.e., social, economic, and broader, non-institutional, and/or informal political) in which policy decisions are made or the possible constraints put on the choices that are available and who is legitimized to make them. The policy cycle also gives rise to multiple queries including what or who informs the agenda, formulation, and ultimate decision? How are relevant decisions implemented? What "non-decisions" are made? And is a policy true to what a government says it is and does it produce the desired outcomes? Experience tells us that there can be a plethora of intended, and unintended, effects and so what counts as an action (or inaction) and what makes a policy recognizable and legitimate is neither simple nor straightforward.

Moreover, with conventional approaches, little attention has been paid to the unpacking of *where* public policy is made (i.e., policy spaces) and what it can tell us about who counts as an

actor in the policy process—that is, who has agency therein. These notions of space can be geographic, virtual, and theoretical, and understood in different ways in different policy literatures.

For international political economy and development studies, policy space (e.g., in relation to international trade agreements, transnational governing institutions and corporations and/or [neo]colonialism) refers to the scope of potential for negotiation, and a virtual space among fixed possibilities for decision-making, and the room (or lack thereof) that nation-states have to maneuver among a constrained set of policy options (Kentikelenis, et al., 2016; Page, 2007). In the multi-level governance literature, policy spaces refer to scale and sector, i.e., the interrelationships between local, subnational, national, regional, and transnational governance and how they intersect with public and private sectors (Findlay, 2014; Lawn & Grek, 2012; Smith et al., 2017) and encompass movement between geographic locations and socio-economic sectors as sites of analysis (e.g., transborder decisions around climate change involving local and global influences from business interests with economic clout, to social movements mobilizing more amorphous discourses, emotions, images, symbols and even gestures).

The concept of policy space also acts as a counterpart to more conventional notions of policy community. Meltsner (2000) outlines the former as "more inclusive" and helpful in understanding a broad problem area such as health or education through the inclusion of "overlapping policy spaces" that involve both "attentive publics [that] dominate the policy space" and "actors whose specific policy preferences are ambiguous" (p. 89). The "space" in this literature is more theoretical: an intellectual broadening of issues and communities to speak to the overlapping and often messy domains in which policy gets made (for an apt illustration, see also Lawn & Grek, 2002, p. 15)

Although understandings of policy space differ across fields of study, they still tend to share certain characterizations of state-based policy-making that contain linear, and/or compartmentalized and cohesive processes that fail to convey the realities of more fragmented and diversified contemporary governance. The intricacies of policy debates in a global age include multiple centres of power, and less autonomy, unity, and coherence of states, making it harder to pinpoint how policy agendas are set, from where policies actually come, and how they play out. Moreover, policy spaces, broadly conceived, can comprise all of these approaches: the responsiveness or capacity of state actors; the institutional spatial policy environment on various scales; and meanings systems and power relations that underpin who is included and excluded from the policy process.

What is missing from many of these analyses of what constitutes public policy spaces is an analysis of both physical and geographical location and their interactions with more complex understandings of social location. Public policy spaces are not only about the locations in which policy is made, but also the publics that belong in them, and/or those considered to not belong in them.

### *'Public' Policy Contestations*

If it is taken as a starting premise that public policy is not restricted to the actions/inactions of political elites, and that decisions are made on different, interrelated scales with plurality and locality taken into account, then the possibility of a much wider range of policy spaces, that are potentially more inclusive, emerges. In other words, the "public" in public policy can extend beyond the state itself to comprise citizens, residents, and a plethora of variously situated groups and actors.

To begin with, the line between *who* constitutes the state—"state actors" versus "non-state actors"—is not entirely clear and much can depend on public and government perceptions of the groups and individuals in question, and this can also change across space and time. Of course, governments differ, with some having more fluid relations and openness with certain groups at certain moments, while others are characterized by greater rigidity and closure. Moreover, the "non-state" actors that gain pre-eminence, and the traction of the meanings and discourses that they promote depend on power relations, opportunities and constraints that shift over time. For example, policy spaces activated by welfare state governments—with values of participation and equity—looked very different from those that emerged out of neoliberal rationalization and/or austerity in the 1990s and into the 2000s. In Canada, this change saw not only saw "the delegitimization of women's groups" but also the squeezing out of "virtually all equality-seeking groups" that had long been seen "as relevant voices in the policy process" (Brodie & Bakker, 2007, p. 34).

Who counts as the state's "public" has also varied over time, given the longstanding relegation of marginalized communities to the private sphere rather than the public sphere where conventional public policy is made. To elaborate, scholarship on the western, liberal tradition of the public/private dichotomy has long identified how women (Pateman, 1988) and other marginalized groups have been left out of many policy formulations or were included in ways that disadvantage them, precisely because policies originated in particular places—namely, formal political institutions (i.e., institutional structures from which specific groups were deliberately excluded, and/or included but under-represented). Consider historic struggles for basic voting rights in Canada by women, racialized groups, and Indigenous peoples, or the contemporary assumption that all Canadian citizens over 18 years can cast their ballots, when the law requiring a modicum of polling station accessibility for people with disabilities only came to pass in 1993. Some improvements were made prior to the 2015 election, and efforts to improve accessibility of the electoral process for electors with disabilities continue into 2022.

Even when public policy accounts for women and other marginalized groups, there is often a failure to recognize the relationship between the so-called public and the so-called private, neatly divided. In liberal democracies like Canada, Australia, and the United States, "public" policy takes place in many "private" spaces. In Canada, the policing of sexuality in private bathhouses (Tremblay, 2015) is one example, as is the surveillance of the shopping, cleaning, and childcare activities of mothers on social assistance (Little, 1998, 2008). Further,

much public policy relies on unpaid labour disproportionately done by women in the private sphere (Bakker, 1996). As a result, the divisions between the public and private are never clear, and public policy extends to, is shaped by, and relies heavily on, aspects of social life historically understood as private.

The consolidation of neoliberalism is critical to these blurred lines between public and private. In 1970s and 1980s, early forms of neoliberalism called for a limited state and drew clear lines around what constitutes the public (the state) and the private (social and economic concerns). As the state removed itself from elements of private life where it had previously provided support, the family (disproportionately women) and voluntary sector were left to pick up the slack. By the 1990s and into the 2000s, citizens were not only treated as customers and consumers in typical neoliberal form, but they were also increasingly individualized, regulated, and made responsible and accountable for matters previously dealt with by the state in an earlier era of social citizenship (Dobrowolsky, 2009), further calling into question private and public distinctions.

Federal states complicate matters even further. In Canada, for example, "even though most social policies are technically the responsibility of the provincial/territorial governments, and are generally thought of as 'public services,' the reality is a mishmash of federal, provincial/territorial, municipal, First Nations, public, private (market and family), and voluntary sector involvement" (Findlay & Johnston, 2017).

Thus, conventional approaches to public engagement grapple with the varied and ever-changing notion of "public", and therefore the question of who to engage and how remains a challenge. The strictures of conventional "public" policy both in theory and practice need to be unbound to recognize the complexities of multiple, multi-faceted publics that can shift over space and time, trouble the lines between public and private, and deal with the power differentials at play. Theorizing public engagement and policy space must at once account for the diverse geographic, virtual, and theoretical ways that the sites of policy-making are understood and contest the historically contingent and artificial lines between the public and private, as well as the state and its citizenry.

## An Alternative: Place-Based Feminist Intersectionality

### *Feminist Intersectionality*

There are significant limitations, then, of conventional approaches to theorizing policy spaces. Yet these limitations, both the difficulties of accounting for expansive, inclusive views of "space" and the limited understanding of the "public" involved, might be addressed through feminist, intersectional approaches, that build on advancements made by recent place-based studies.

Briefly, the term intersectionality was introduced by critical Black feminist scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), as an approach to recognizing the ways in which multiple forms of oppression come together to shape peoples' experiences. Intersectionality underscores that experiences of oppression are not additive, but rather co-constructed with one form enabling

another. Following Hankivsky (2012), "intersectionality is not only applicable to advancing understandings of marginalized or so-called disadvantaged groups in order to promote social justice but explains how social organization shapes all of our lives" (p. 1713). Current approaches treat intersectionality as relational, see it as focused on identity, or on positionality/social location, or both (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

In public policy studies, feminist interventions have led to the increased recognition of the gendered aspects of policy research, whereas intersectionality allows for the recognition of multiple axes of identity including, but well-beyond, gender. While intersectionality does not assign primacy to any particular dimension of social location or identity, feminist intersectionality "suggest[s] that gender is a dimension of inequality that must be examined in any feminist analysis of intersectionality (rather than being either ignored or assumed), but that a priori assumptions about which dimensions of inequality and power will be most relevant should be avoided" (Levac & Denis, 2017, p. 5). Feminist intersectionality recognizes that sexism and misogyny are related to the social exclusion of the person or group in question, in particular circumstances, and begins with gender as a site to interrogate how exclusion occurs.

Feminist intersectionality is a theoretical lens that is particularly well-suited to interrogate inclusion in policy spaces, not only because of the historic and ongoing exclusion of women from halls of power, but also because women experience forms of exclusion that differ substantially based on other aspects of their identity and social location. Within policy studies, intersectionality remains a "relatively innovative approach" but a necessary and pressing one, given the contemporary challenges including "the rise of the neoliberal and often conservative state, demographic shifts, environmental changes, conflict and violence, policy brutality, human rights violations, and importantly the responses of those who are most often oppressed…" (Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery, 2019, p. 2).

As white feminist professors, and diverse graduate and undergraduate students with different lived experiences (see our note on positionality in the acknowledgements), we are scholars with interests that are sometimes included effectively in policy debates and at other times are omitted completely. The development of the engagement exercises we conducted, as described below, started with the recognition of the marginalization of different groups of women from policy spaces, with a focus on groups that experience exclusion on the basis of Indigeneity, location, ability, and age. Intersectionality, and feminist intersectionality in particular, also enable a recognition of researchers' and participants' relative experiences, and the configurations of privilege and power that impinge upon and constitute one another in the research encounter. In these ways, this approach helps us to articulate a broader and deeper understanding of policy spaces and one that considers positionality.

### *Place-Based Policy Studies*

In policy studies, some attention has been paid to the role of place, examining policy as an expansive "space" of negotiation, as well as to the physical and social locations in which policy is made and debated. For example, Bradford (2005) adopts a place-based perspective that takes into consideration "physical infrastructure [including] … powers and resources … and social infrastructure, such as civic participation and inclusion networks" (p. 3). He sees place-based approaches as capable of blending knowledge *of, about,* and *for* communities (pp. 5-6). Place-based frameworks understand space as both geographic and social and go beyond individualized solutions to address the needs of the whole community (Centre for Community Child Health, 2011, p. 1). From this perspective, "[p]laces are no longer viewed in the nostalgic terms of traditional, homogeneous communities, nor as mere locations on a map. They are conceptualized as dynamic locales—with their own diversity and power relations—where the larger forces and flows that structure daily life are contested and given meaning" (Bradford, 2005, p. 7). This foregrounding of diversity, dynamism, and power is critical to an expansive and flexible conception of policy spaces.

Place-based policy advocates also prioritize its potential (with public resources and capacity-building) to engage communities through collaboration and partnerships, in the planning and delivery of services (Centre for Community Child Health, 2011; Robinson et al., 2018). For Bradford (2005):

> [P]lace becomes a locus for the mobilization of collective action, generating a community of meaning and practice for those living there. With economic innovation, the process typically involves *promoting the place* as a knowledge center. In environmental sustainability, the project is often to *defend the place* against ecological harm. For social inclusion and citizenship, the focus of mobilization is to *democratize the place* by expanding economic opportunity or validating diverse cultures. To nurture the sense of belonging, citizens mobilize to *plan the place* such that there are public spaces for participation and dialogue. (p. 8)

What is valuable here is the understanding that policy spaces are actively created and must meet people where they are, in both the planning and delivery stages. In meeting people where they are and conceptualizing place as dynamic and agentic itself, it is possible to imagine new ways of being and relating.

Nonetheless, it is our contention that place-based insights can be enriched with the analysis of power dynamics offered by feminist intersectionality and practice reflecting "a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 788).

More nuanced feminist formulations of scale provide guidance in this regard. For example, policy spaces (as physical and social places) that are constructed through social relations and power hierarchies, and understood through an intersectional framework, are found in Giesbrecht's (2012) work that accounts for the multiple spaces (national, international,

voluntary, familial, community) in which care policy and care work is located in neoliberal times. Scholars researching climate change have demonstrated how "social characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, location, and age [can] influence differential, context-specific experiences of climate hazards" in ways that emphasize the relationships between the micro and macro scales of understanding the global and local (Walker et. al. 2019, p. 7). And while political economists and critical geographers use the concept of scale to "describe 'the focal setting at which spatial boundaries are defined for a specific social claim, activity or behaviour" (Findlay & Stienstra, 2017, p. 151), feminist geographers explore the congruity between intersectionality, scale, and space, with Valentine (2007) arguing that intersectionality allows us to "map geometries of oppressions" (p. 10) and contest "these dominant spatial orderings that define who is in place/out of place, who belongs and who does not" (p. 19).

In sum, with feminist intersectional analysis as a starting point, combined with the contributions of place-based policy studies, we place primacy on identity, social position and location, to propel a reimagination of policy spaces.

**Reimagining Policy Spaces: Methods and Intentions**

To explore the possibilities of what policy spaces can comprise and how they might amplify particular voices, we pursued a series of engagement exercises—collaborations with women from communities rarely, or poorly, included in conventional policy spaces in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada (Conrad, 2003; Gahagan et al., 2007; Manicom et al., 2005). Our approach to policy space took up geographic, virtual, and intellectual conceptions of space, recognizing that the women we were engaging with were often excluded physically from participating in decision-making, their concerns were understood to be individual and private—outside of the purview of the state—and they were simply not viewed as part of a public whose input mattered.

These engagement exercises were part of a larger research project on gendered engagement and public space, and we formed the Nova Scotia-based team (for details, see the acknowledgements below). Within the province, our goal was to work with underrepresented communities of women to identify possibilities for how future participation and engagement might occur, and how policy spaces might be expanded to fit their needs. This work draws on, as we describe elsewhere, a broader commitment to contesting conventional approaches to public engagement in policy-making and how feminist contributions can disrupt exclusionary approaches (Cattapan et al., 2020a, 2020b).

After a series of conversations with community members, and an initial exploration of possibilities for collaboration, we ended up focusing our efforts on collaborations with Indigenous women, young women, rural women, and disabled and Deaf women. We received research ethics approval to co-develop policy engagement exercises with these groups from our respective universities. As discussed elsewhere (see Cattapan et al., 2020a) our first two engagement exercises were with Indigenous women and with young women, and these engagement exercises included, respectively, a sharing circle focused on the experiences of

bringing a commemorative art installation to Nova Scotia, and an interactive game based around experiences of oppression at a Girls' Conference.

Building on these initial efforts, we began developing two additional engagement exercises, one with women with disabilities and Deaf women and another with women living in rural areas. As described below, each experiment in deepening and broadening policy spaces not only revealed untapped potentialities but also came with important challenges and lessons learned.

***Creating Policy Spaces with Disabled and Deaf Women***

Our decision to focus on disabled and Deaf women stemmed from research conducted in Nova Scotia that revealed disabled women's exclusion from public policy processes. This exclusion occurred in multiple ways that ranged from the limits of using statistical data to estimate the effects of policy, to marginalization that occurred due to policy decisions based on inaccessible and inadequate public consultation (Findlay & Stienstra, 2017).

Drawing on recommendations from this earlier work, we initiated a collaborative process led by our team member, Julianne Acker-Verney, who identifies as a woman with disabilities and has longstanding networks in the local disability community. She began building an advisory committee composed of disabled and Deaf women who would co-develop the engagement exercise, with members of the research team suggesting prospective participants who were then contacted via email. The emails included information on the research project (written in plain language) and invited the women's participation, including potential roles, responsibilities and opportunities for those who would like to be involved in the advisory committee (for this, they would receive an honorarium).

Our research team committed to providing advisory committee members with the supports required to participate. For example, the project paid the cost for personal attendants, but the latter were engaged by the individual women who hired them to provide assistance. This respected the established employer-employee relationships between individuals and limited the power imbalance between researchers and participants that may have been exacerbated by a situation where members of the research team recruited personal attendants. Other supports included: covering transportation costs; providing American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters; and using Communication Access Real-time Translation—a means of support for many individuals attending a meeting, including people who are Deaf, hard of hearing or with particular learning disabilities (NAD, 2019).

Five women were recruited for the advisory committee. The women who took part required different access supports to participate in the research. While recruitment targeted individuals who identified as women with disabilities and/or Deaf women, prospective advisory committee members were not asked specifically to disclose their particular disability(ies). Instead, the focus was on determining what supports they would require in order to participate as advisory committee members. This is consistent with a "person first" and strengths-based

approach often missing in attempts to engage with members of the disability and Deaf communities both in research and policy-making (Acker-Verney, 2020).

The advisory committee's work was largely centered on conceptualizing and guiding the development of a public engagement exercise that they also led. Members of our research team provided organizational support throughout this process. Advisory committee members came together four times over two months. The first two gatherings were conference calls focused on identifying issues that would eventually serve as the focus of an engagement exercise, namely a public workshop.

The third gathering was a public workshop organized by the advisory committee and was held on a university campus in a venue that was wheelchair accessible. The women gathered for a final time at an in-person meeting held in the boardroom of a disabled person's organization in Halifax to reflect on their involvement with the project and to debrief after the workshop. Four women attended in person and one used the phone-in option that was made available to accommodate anyone who could not physically attend. This attention to physical space is essential to an intersectional feminist, placed-based policy approach.

The workshop described above was the centrepiece of the advisory committee's work. Entitled *Women with Disabilities and Deaf Women Changing Public Engagement*, the advisory committee planned and promoted it (e.g., setting up and monitoring a Facebook event page, distributing posters through personal networks and email distribution lists). As with members of the advisory committee, those who expressed interest in attending the workshop were asked about disability-related and other supports required for their participation. The advisory committee also identified the workshop's key objectives, namely: to provide an opportunity for women who are Deaf and have disabilities to explore issues of importance "to us, by us;" to identify ways and means to support us to engage in public discussions (such as those relating to housing and health care); and to share ideas and experiences with other women who are Deaf or have disabilities.

The two-hour long event, held on May 12, 2018, included 10-minute presentations from four advisory committee members on topics including:

- engaging with mental health workers on issues affecting members of the Deaf community;
- educating healthcare workers and others about disability-appropriate support and treatment;
- current gaps in supportive housing for women with disabilities;
- recognizing some often-unknown effects associated with housing within long-term care facilities; and
- issues of safety and the right to autonomy.

Fifteen people, including members of our research team and advisory committee, attended the workshop. Event attendees were somewhat diverse (re: gender and participation-related support requests). An event evaluation form was designed by members of the research team and made

available to workshop attendees in their preferred format. Respondents were asked to, for example, gauge and describe the usefulness of the workshop; comment on any new knowledge they had acquired by attending; and identify possible policy developments needed to address key issues raised.

***A Podcast with Rural Women***

Previous work has also identified rural women as a group often excluded from policy spaces (see for example, Manicom, 2005). Recent research on the decline of public services in Nova Scotia indicated that there was a distinct urban/rural divide in accessing public services, with rural and remote areas bearing the brunt of retrenchment, including but not limited to lack of mental health services, emergency room closures, courthouse closures, among others (Johnston, 2017).

Our research team had also initially discussed the promise and pitfalls of using social media in public engagement strategies. While online participatory media strategies have provided governments with distinct opportunities for e-consultations and virtual connectivity, toolkits that have been developed by government continue to utilize procedural, top-down strategies where citizen input has been arbitrarily integrated in the policies they are supposed to inform, rather than informing the process from the outset (Cattapan et al., 2020b; McNutt, 2014; Tomkova, 2009). And so, while policy research has examined the merits of utilizing social media as a tool for civic engagement, social media for public engagement will likely have little value if it is not firmly embedded in a substantive democratic process (Carpentier, 2013). It is also important to note that web-based engagement does not solve all issues related to rural/public engagement as access to technology is bound up with socio-economic status. While most communities have internet coverage, in many rural areas the connection speeds are so low that they only allow for a limited number of uses (Canada, 2018). Indeed, broadband connectivity remains elusive in some parts of rural Nova Scotia. Nevertheless, there are advantages to using online engagement tools. In our case, substantial numbers of individuals living outside the main urban hub (and provincial capital) of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in what is largely a rural province, could still participate, thereby facilitating contact with at least some geographically isolated or dispersed women across the province. Women could also potentially be involved in ways that cross axes of identity (e.g., in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, citizenship status, Indigeneity, age), including those with limited mobility, thereby advancing a place-based, feminist intersectional policy approach.

In early 2018, we began exploring the possibility of developing a podcast series on issues important to rural women. We determined that podcasts had promise as a form of potential engagement, not only given their contemporary popularity, but also because of the ways in which podcasts have served as the basis of curated online communities where listeners and content creators have opportunities to engage and communicate with one another. Moreover, despite their immense popularity—in 2017, nearly 10 million Canadian adults listened to a podcast (Vidler & Ulster, 2017)—podcasts' potential as grassroots, intersectional feminist policy was then largely untapped, with relatively few podcasts in the Canadian context engaging with

feminism and public policy, particularly from anti-oppressive or feminist intersectional frameworks, with some notable exceptions (see *Secret Feminist Agenda*, and its creator, Hannah McGregor's Harry Potter-inspired collaboration *Witch Please*, or other notable efforts such as *Métis in Space*, *The XX Files*, and *Fainting Couch Feminists*). In these ways, podcasts had the potential to embody a fluid, generative policy space.

Our plan was to create and release a podcast series that focused on issues faced by women in rural Nova Scotia and informed by their experiences. Initially, we had hoped to produce three to four episodes that would focus on diverse rural women corresponding to the specific groups that had already taken part in our Halifax-based engagement experiments, and thus potentially providing the basis for some urban/rural comparisons and contrasts. The final episode would take the form of a facilitated conversation between staff (ideally the executive directors) of some of the rural community-based women's centres in Nova Scotia. We constructed a timeline for planning, production, and release in the summer months of 2018, as this was the time when our student project assistant, Jennifer O'Keefe, was available to work on the podcast. She led the planning and production of the podcast, building on her previous experience producing a podcast series, with additional support from another student project assistant, Jewelle Carroll.

During the month of July, O'Keefe conducted interviews with staff members at women's centres based in the towns of Antigonish, Lunenburg and Yarmouth. Each centre serviced three distinctive, predominantly rural areas in both northern and southern parts of the province, distanced from the more centrally located capital of Halifax. Connections were made through the Alexa McDonough Institute for Women, Gender, and Social Justice at Mount Saint Vincent University. Due to various scheduling issues, only two podcast episodes were created, one focusing on an interviewee from Antigonish, and the other from Lunenburg, and both centered on their experiences living in various communities in Nova Scotia. An on-line discussion forum was created to provide a space for reflecting on, responding to, re-evaluating and ultimately re-mixing and/or re-creating the content of the podcast. In these ways, the digital space can invigorate forms of public engagement that are (inter)active and reciprocal.

These two engagement exercises, the workshop and podcasts, aimed to create new sites—that is, new spaces where policy discussions can occur, centered around the experiences of women from historically marginalized groups. The development of the workshop through the collaborative work of the advisory committee enabled the relatively organic development of a policy space for and by Deaf women and women with disabilities in both form and content. Similarly, the focus of the podcast on rural women's experiences, developed and disseminated in a way that focused on the inclusion of rural women, recognized the virtual and geographic limitations of more conventional approaches.

**Discussion/Analysis**

While we aimed for a workshop and podcast that would come together in thoughtful and creative ways, contesting conventional understandings of policy space, the results revealed that it takes effort and care to do so. Ultimately, our experiences with these unconventional engagement exercises reveal some of the ongoing challenges of expanding both the notions of "public" and of "space" in public policy-making and in the practice of place-based feminist intersectionality.

Regarding the organization of the workshop for women with disabilities and Deaf women, we engaged with women with disabilities and Deaf women directly to identify policy issues that they found to be of particular importance to them, to provide support in designing the platform they would use to engage on these issues, and to learn with them based on their experiences with and perspectives on the engagement exercise and larger research project.

All members of the advisory committee reported that they had a positive experience with the project. At the workshop and in follow-up conversations they indicated that they felt good about their roles as members of the advisory committee, in developing the workshop, and in exploring the role of public policy in their lives. They identified issues of particular importance to women with disabilities and Deaf women that may be of concern to members of the public and to policy-makers but are not commonly discussed from their particular perspectives. Throughout the workshop they highlighted that engaging with diverse women with disabilities and Deaf women takes time, intention, and money.

At the same time, the women who participated were disappointed at the relatively small number of audience members at the event and noted the difficulties associated with securing childcare and booking accessible transportation, as well as the challenges of limited income and other factors that can influence whether a woman with disabilities and/or one who is Deaf can attend such a workshop. The challenges associated with planning this event included finding a space adequate for our needs – one that was wheelchair accessible, had frequent bus service and the infrastructure required to support accessible communications (Cattapan et al., 2020b). We were able to support a small number of women with diverse needs and preferences to come together to explore and engage with policy issues, but we were constrained by several factors, among them time and financial resources. For example, the estimated budget for each advisory committee meeting was Can$800 and the estimated cost of the workshop totalled Can$1,200. Financial and in-kind support for our engagement with women with disabilities and Deaf women vis-à-vis the advisory committee and workshop was provided by DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada and Independent Living Nova Scotia. Supports such as ASL interpretation and real-time captioning are not as yet publicly funded so planning for these types of costs in the development stage of feminist intersectional place-based research or policy consultation is essential.

Despite these constraints, the advisory committee's work, and the leadership of its members, demonstrated a claiming of public space. Their discussions, organizational efforts, and the subsequent workshop raised concerns about policy-making for women with disabilities and

Deaf women, facilitating discussion among an oft-excluded group and making clear that although women with disabilities and Deaf women are marginalized in public policy-making, they are a public that might participate more often if spaces were more widely available and accessible. In short, the workshop advanced conceptual notions of policy space and intersectional feminist placed-based policy, albeit with material and geo-spatial limitations.

Our intention for the podcast series was to initiate engagement that would span geographic distance among rural Nova Scotia communities. We wanted to use technology in a way that would be participatory and empower rural women to share their experiences with one another, but what unintentionally occurred was the creation of a hierarchy of voices. Through the compilation, editing and narration of the podcast, the team was represented by the voice of a relatively privileged, urban, white, settler woman who went into communities to ask rural women to identify and explore the issues they face, and she narrated and produced the podcast. We might have done better. In part, this is attributable to the time constraints we were experiencing and the challenges we faced with recruitment, but these are issues within rural communities that we should have taken into account. Whereas the work of the advisory committee and its leadership centred women with disabilities and Deaf women in the development and execution of the workshop, the decision to make a podcast led by a member of our research team meant that there was an inherent privileging of our voices and our perspectives. Beyond the already acknowledged limitations (e.g., availability of broadband networks, access to technology), our mid-summer time frame made recruitment difficult as potential interviewees were often not available during this period. A more inclusive approach would have been one that not only built in more time, but also—like our work with women with disabilities and Deaf women—recruited a committee to drive the process.

Another issue we encountered with the podcast was grappling with the sense that something produced in an unconventional way might also be perceived as unprofessional and/or illegitimate. This was an unanticipated development and particular to the work of producing a podcast. In an effort to make it sound "good" or "polished" and "professional" it ultimately came across as traditional/conventional and less "grassroots" than we had anticipated. However, we do not mean to suggest that grassroots- and community-produced media is inherently unpolished or unprofessional. Rather, it may be an issue of the tension between which types of aesthetics are privileged or invented through the available tools, and what is considered acceptable by the mainstream (see for example, Mandrona, 2016). Also, it should not be assumed that to be from the "ground up" implies a sort of roughness or edginess and thus enhanced authenticity. It may have been equally problematic if, in an attempt to convey authentic rural voices, we maintained the uncut or rough qualities because of perceived notions of what authentic grassroots podcasts sound like. For our team, this raises questions about why we think certain kinds of podcasts, and certain voices, *merit listening to* because of the sound quality and listeners' familiarity with the format. In a way, this concern about sounding like a polished "professional" podcast reveals an underlying issue with all of our engagement exercises. That is, we are more likely to be heard and/or taken seriously when using formats, styles, appearances, approaches, and ways of

"speaking out" that mimic or match the style of those who are more comfortable in a policy space. These ways of "speaking out" also tend to be similar to, or build on, past, accepted more polished and "professional" contributions, in which women are under-represented or misrepresented.

The constraints of time and the finite resources of our research team also put limitations on the number of podcasts that could be completed. While we envisioned a series that included multiple programs, we ended up with two podcasts, and our desire for more interactive opportunities with a broader and more diverse group of rural women (a requirement of true place-based engagement) proved elusive. We are still hopeful, however, that the podcasts we produced will resonate with rural women and contribute to the elevation of their voices in the public sphere. Still, this comes with the awareness that, in the end, we too encountered representational limitations and obstacles with format, time, and resources that have historically kept women, and particularly women belonging to marginalized groups, out of policy spaces.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Policy spaces can include art galleries, pubs, cafes, classrooms, and virtual airwaves. From this perspective, policy spaces can be very different than those described at the beginning of this paper. What if they looked like this instead?

> The users and providers of services in Ottawa co-develop a podcast series featuring disabled women's views on reproductive justice and public policy. Listeners are able to engage with the participants in an online forum and public resources are made available to hold public events in accessible venues in local communities. Funding is provided for personal attendants, transportation costs, American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART).
>
> In Saskatoon, decision-makers are invited to attend a round-table discussion. As guests, they are invited to observe and practice "active listening", while girls with autism and their parents share their distinctive experiences, struggles, and policy solutions. The venue is accessible, and funds are made available to cover childcare and transportation costs.
>
> Residents in Halifax are asked to participate in a collective art project where resources and mixed media platforms are provided to help participants imagine, create and design happy, healthy and thriving communities. Concerted efforts are made to invite immigrant women and African-Nova Scotian women living in less well-serviced areas. Diverse participants work to devise new forms of affordable housing, identify the community supports that are most needed, and map out where child-friendly green spaces should be located.

Elevating the voices of unrepresented and under-represented communities in creative ways can challenge the restrictive parameters of conventional public policy space and inspire the invention of new places of engagement.

We began this project with an understanding of the historical limits of policy spaces—geographic, virtual, and intellectual—and with the conviction that a place-based feminist intersectional approach to analyzing barriers to access would enable a broadening and deepening of policy space to be more inclusive. In an effort to counter the marginalization that occurred due to policy decisions based on inaccessible and inadequate public consultation, not only was an advisory committee composed of disabled and Deaf women formed, but the committee worked to co-develop the engagement exercise, attentive to social and physical space and their interconnections in ways that were most meaningful, responsive and purposeful.

Furthermore, despite the ways in which rural places and people are often defined in popular and government discourse as entities that are simultaneously deficient and as resources available for consumption (in the form of natural resources and migrant labour), we recognize the inherent vitality and creativity of the rural environment and its inhabitants. As policy engagement practices, media productions like podcasts link the global and local through their broad accessibility and can help to articulate the ways in which rurality is made and re-made through an intersection of micro-politics and the forces of state and international political powers. It is perhaps also at these intersections that some of the tensions between professional sounding podcasts and grassroots aesthetics emerge and may actually start to be resolved. As a result of the networked way through which podcasts and related media are created, proliferated, and consumed globally—regardless of where they are made—we posit that it might be less about the final format of the podcasts and more about the concerns and experiences of local rural women.

Even with this knowledge, and as we developed our thoughtful, creative interventions that shed light on meaningful community-led engagement and challenged conventional policy space, we experienced multiple obstacles and missteps. Nevertheless, as our conclusions draw from a place-based feminist intersectional framework, we hope our work attempts to address the various problems attendant with policy-making and public engagement, both conventional and alternative, vis-à-vis multiple physical, virtual, colonial, gendered, racialized, ableist, class-based and localized dynamics.

Our approach, building on place-based studies, with a feminist, intersectional analysis, leads us to an understanding of policy space that:

- expands linear, compartmentalized processes of state-based policy-making reflecting more fragmented and diversified contemporary realities;
- recognizes the shifting nature of and interrelations between "public" and "private" spaces;
- includes both "physical" and "social" aspects and their interrelations;
- reflects context across time, space, and intersecting power dynamics; and
- operates in multiple sites and scales that can be fluid and generative.

In our view, policy spaces must be fluid and generative, elevating the voices of unrepresented and under-represented communities in creative ways that can challenge the restrictive parameters

of conventional public policy space and inspire the invention of new places of engagement. But, to do so respectfully and effectively, policy spaces must be actively created by the subjects in question and with an understanding of where they are, i.e., with an awareness of intersectional power dynamics, positionality and place.

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Given the significance of positionality in this analysis, we would like to acknowledge notable aspects of our own identities. Alana Cattapan is a white settler cis woman who lives in Kitchener, Ontario, on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Neutral People. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Waterloo. Julianne Acker-Verney is a white settler cis woman with disabilities, completing a doctoral degree at Mount Saint Vincent University. Alexandra Dobrowolsky, the daughter of Ukrainian settler-immigrants, is a white, cis woman. She is a Professor in Political Science at Saint Mary's University. Tammy Findlay is a Professor at Mount Saint Vincent University and is a white settler cis woman. April Mandrona is an Associate Professor of Art Education at NSCAD University and is a white, settler cis woman. Jennifer O'Keefe is a white, queer, settler cis woman. Julianne, Alexandra, Tammy, April and Jennifer all live and work in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq Nation. Jewelle Carroll is an Afro-Caribbean cis woman who attended Saint Mary's University as an international student, completing her undergraduate degree. She currently resides in Bahamas and will be called to the Bar in the fall of 2022.

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