Gender, Democracy and Multilevel Governance:
Early Childhood Development Roundtables in British Columbia[1]

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Introduction

Multilevel governance has become an influential framework in public policy and administration, stressing that modern policy-making involves a complex set of jurisdictions, governmental, and non-governmental actors (Bradford 2005). But the relationship between gender, political architecture, and multilevel governance has thus far been an underexplored area of inquiry (Haussman et al. 2010). My paper argues that the lens of multilevel governance is particularly suited to feminist analysis in public policy and administration. Less focused on traditional forms of representation, this conceptualization of governance is compatible with the longstanding feminist insistence that a broader definition of politics is necessary in order to understand policy processes and outcomes. Multilevel governance provides an opening for much-needed feminist analysis in the field of public policy and administration. My paper demonstrates this using the case study of governance in early childhood development (ECD). In this policy arena, since the early 2000s, community infrastructure has been created in British Columbia (BC) to facilitate collaboration between public (municipal and provincial government, health authorities, school boards) and community (NGOs, advocates) partners. A unique case of feminized governance arrangements, where women are numerically dominant, these ECD roundtables present an opportunity to extend the reach of feminist influence beyond research on formal institutions and electoral politics to a consideration of the gendered nature of administrative and community-based structures.

The paper begins with a brief overview of multilevel governance as a conceptual framework, followed by a discussion of its relevance to feminist policy analysis. I then consider how a feminist multilevel governance approach can advance an analysis of community partnerships in ECD policy in BC.

Multilevel Governance

The concept of multilevel governance (MLG) was first applied to the European Union (EU) where shared responsibility and decision-making characterized the policy context. It drew attention to the interaction between an array of actors, including EU member states, the European Council, the European Commission, the Court of Justice, European Parliament, subnational governments and non-governmental actors (Mahon et al. 2007). MLG has since been applied elsewhere, as increasingly policy emerges through cooperation of several levels, or scales, of government, and often a web of non-governmental actors (Bradford 2005; Mahon et al. 2007).[2]

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[2] Mahon et al. (2007) prefer the language of 'scale' over 'level' of governance, arguing that the latter maintains a hierarchical understanding of the relationships between governments, while the former complicates power relations and centres macro political economy in the analysis.

Many public policy scholars have found MLG to be a valuable analytic tool, as it is able to account for less hierarchical relations between governments and non-state actors at local, subnational, national and transnational levels, and the simultaneous upward and downward transfer of power and responsibilities (Sawer and Vickers 2010). As Sawer and Vickers (2010) explain,

> [i]nstead of conceptualizing hierarchically-arranged states with rights to authoritative decision-making, the multilevel governance literature conceptualizes a broader range of decision-makers operating both inside and outside government and nation-states. There is an increased focus on cooperative problem-solving among levels, but also with the way in which decision-making is diffused among multiple public and private decision-makers (8).

Similarly, Gray (2010) cites the description provided by Stein and Turkewitsch, who view MLG as

> an increasingly complex pattern of policy making and authoritative decision-making … encompassing the broader scale and scope of current decision-making, the marked increase in numbers and types of decision-makers (including private sector actors such as corporations and unions, non-governmental organisations, members of social movements, and individuals in society), and the multiple levels and tiers of decision-making (29).

In the above passages, it is clear that MLG goes beyond the focus of traditional federalism research, spanning federal to unitary systems, formal and informal divisions of power, and incorporates the shift from government to governance (Gray 2010; Sawer and Vickers 2010; Bradford 2005) in which "governments work collaboratively and horizontally with other governments and with voluntary and private sector partners" (Phillips 2003 17). Thus, central to multilevel *governance* is not only the changing interface between governments, but also the new roles and responsibilities of civil society or the voluntary sector in public policy. As Phillips (2003) emphasizes,

> these organizations are redefining their relationship with governments, forging new intrasectoral alliances, learning new virtual realities, adapting decision-making styles, and altering their behavior to respond to these shifting imperatives. Together with their counterparts in government and the private sector, nonprofit sector leaders are trying to position their organizations strategically to fulfill their mandates and missions while negotiating an increasingly complex set of relationships within their own sectors as well as among the three sectors (58).

Therefore, MLG has been embraced by many who are seeking a comprehensive understanding of the policy process. Indeed, that potential does exist, but it has not yet been fully realized.

Gendering Multilevel Governance

While there is much concentration on MLG in policy studies, until recently, there has been little analysis of MLG and gender (Sawer and Vickers 2010 Gray 2010). With their edited collection, *Federalism, Feminism and Multilevel Governance*, Haussman, Sawer, and Vickers begin to fill in a major gap in feminist and public policy scholarship. In the introductory chapter, Sawer and Vickers (2010) begin to enumerate how MLG is gendered:

> [o]ur book stresses the importance of differing institutions, practices and discourses at the various levels of multilevel governance systems. It explores the influence of political architecture on how women's movements organize and the language they use when they make gendered claims. It focuses especially on how changes in political architecture affect women, whether these changes involve downloading, uploading or off-loading. It also observes the importance of timing in the creation of new institutions and whether processes such as devolution or regional integration occur at a time of feminist mobilisations inside and outside of political institutions (3).

Much of the book examines the advantages and disadvantages of MLG for women. Some are quite optimistic about the political opportunities provided by MLG, highlighting the democratic benefits of

devolution, the "subsidiarity principle" and local governance, the multiple entry points for social movements and the potential for policy experimentation at local, subnational, national, and international levels (Sawer and Vickers 2010). If one government is unsympathetic to a citizenship claim, it is argued, MLG allows for a second resort and for political leverage (Gray 2010; Chappell 2002; Brennan 2010). Some even maintain that MLG permits a form of "dual citizenship," "double-democracy," or "forum shopping" (Sawer and Vickers 2010 5; Gray 2010 21).

Others are less hopeful, pointing out that gendering MLG requires looking at the very origins of political institutions. For instance, in many federations, the constitutional division of powers was created before women had political rights, and constitutions are difficult to change (Sawer and Vickers 2010 4). Cameron (2006) has shown that in Canada, social reproduction, or "the recreation of the population from one generation to the next" (45), is central to understanding the gendered underpinnings of federalism. The constitutional division of powers reflects the prevailing assumptions of the gender order at the time of Canadian confederation, based on the public/private divide. Chappell also refers to Helen Irving's observation about federalism in the Australian context. Irving says that "[f]or the most part, the domestic and familial – the sphere which constituted the greatest sources of interest to women activists – is left to state jurisdiction, often meaning in this period, to the private sphere. The nation, it might seem, is public and male, and the state the sphere of the female" (Chappell 162). For women's movements, like in 'English' Canada, that have a distinct preference for national social policy and standards (over the 'patchwork'), this presents a significant challenge (Sawer and Vickers 2010).

And from this viewpoint, such a challenge is not outweighed by the benefits of "double democracy" or "forum shopping" discussed above (Sawer and Vickers 2010; Mahon and Collier 2010). This is because forum shopping treats collective organizing as simply a tactical 'choice' or 'rational' political calculation (Mahon et al. 2007) and requires that feminists abandon their national project based on fundamental values of universal citizenship (Sawer and Vickers 2010). Sawer and Vickers (2010) also expose the gender-blindness in the notion that MLG "offers citizens the right of choice and exit," noting women's lack of mobility (7). In addition, forum shopping requires substantial resources (Sawer and Vickers 2010), is not always easy, and in Canada, has reaped few rewards (Mahon and Collier 2010).[3]

Furthermore, feminist sceptics have long been critical of the exclusionary, closed-door style of intergovernmental relations in Canada; and the sidelining of gender through a political preoccupation with territorial identities (Sawer and Vickers 2010).

While there is a lot that is useful about each of these approaches, neither are entirely adequate, as MLG appears to be much more contradictory and greater consideration of social forces and power relations are necessary. The 'optimists' tend to downplay the gendered democratic deficits that exist across institutions at all levels of government and remain quite committed to a neo-institutionalist approach. Smith (2010) indicates that

> traditional approaches to the study of political institutions can be used to provide foundational insights into the dynamics of change for social movements based on gender or sexual orientation. However, these approaches do not assist us in understanding how institutions themselves are gendered in the sense of how institutions specifically encode gender relations; rather they treat institutions as mechanisms and tools with which activists must contend (109).

Feminist institutionalism certainly works to uncover the ways in which institutions are gendered, but with MLG, those institutions continue to be treated largely as given -- "as mechanisms and tools" that women's movements have at their disposal. There is a political shopping mall from which to browse and choose.

In her work on the nonprofit sector, Kathy Brock (2010) has distinguished between descriptive and normative classifications of the relationship between the state and the social economy (131). The optimists above present a description of the options available to feminist activists in their interaction with states, but offer little judgment about whether these options are adequate, or what specific configuration of MLG would be more desirable for women's equality. In terms of the 'pessimists', they clearly put forward a normative assessment of the relationship between women's movements and state institutions

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[3] Mahon and Collier (2010) make this point in reference to child care advocacy in the provinces (outside of Quebec) and through international instruments. Brennan (2010) also points out that in Australian child care, "tactical agility does not always result in policy success" (49).

in MLG. Yet they often over-emphasize MLG as the *cause* of the challenges for feminist advocacy. Gray (2010) warns that MLG should not be viewed in isolation from political party conflicts and powerful interests (Gray 2010 24). Similarly, Chappell (2002) quotes an insight from Graham White that "the most marginalised will be as marginal in a federal system as they are anywhere else" (168). This does not mean that MLG is irrelevant, but that it should be placed in the larger social, political, and economic context.

The pessimists also seem to portray MLG in rather static terms. Chappell cautions that "similar political architecture in different countries does not necessarily produce the same opportunity structures" (Gray 2010 27). For example, a centralization of power can happen in both federal and unitary systems, and federalism can allow for both progressive and regressive policy innovation (Gray 2010 23). One of the key contributions of MLG research has been to show the wide diversity and flexibility of governance arrangements and participating actors.[4] However, so far, the gender analysis of MLG has only begun to scratch the surface of this *governance* piece – how the changing policy roles of not only state actors, but also the voluntary sector, or civil society, are affecting women.

In order to develop a thorough feminist understanding of MLG, the analysis must reach beyond neo-institutionalism. The strong neo-institutionalist orientation in the feminist MLG literature[5] leads to a fixation on institutions over the systems of power relations in which they are embedded. Contrary to those who emphasize institutional factors, and the political opportunity structure, political economists see MLG as a reflection of social forces.[6] In this way, MLG on its own is neither an opportunity, nor an obstacle, it is a reflection of social and political power at any given time and place, and it is a tool, with which to understand these relations. Approaching MLG from this angle opens up space for interrogating 'new' governance structures and their gender impact in different ways. This can be seen in the field of gendered multilevel governance in ECD policy in BC.

Feminism, Multilevel Governance and the ECD Community

MLG is central to a field like ECD, which encompasses the responsibilities of all three levels of government in Canada, numerous NGOs, and spans multiple policy areas (i.e. health, education, labour, social welfare, family policy). In order to provide better coordination across these partners in British Columbia, in the early 2000s, two community-capacity building projects emerged. Starting in 2000, the Make Children First Initiative in the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) began providing funding and other resources to develop intersectoral coalitions around the province (Schroeder 2005). In 2003, a partnership between the United Way, the Credit Unions of BC, and MCFD was created called Success by 6 (Success by 6 "Partners"). As part of its mandate of improving ECD services and community engagement, Success by 6 also supports local ECD tables.

As a result, most communities in BC now have intersectoral roundtables governing ECD. There are wide variations across the tables, but most of these roundtables include public (municipal governments, local health authorities, school boards, MCFD, libraries) and community (such as voluntary sector service providers, United Way, multicultural and immigrant organizations, and Aboriginal organizations) partners. In the first phase, I studied these tables in six communities in BC – Central Okanagan, Greater Victoria, South Peace, Surrey/White Rock, Revelstoke, and Vancouver. [7] The partnerships range in complexity: from a very small, isolated community in one municipality of Revelstoke;

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[4] Brennan (2010) shows that in Australia, "[w]omen have contested the division of responsibilities between the federal and State governments in a number of policy areas and actively attempted to reshape the contours of policy responsibility" (37).

[5] Despite different conclusions among the optimists and pessimists, neo-institutionalism appears to be the common framework in both.

[6] For example, see Simeon and Robinson 1990; Cameron 2006; Graefe 2006.

[7] The study uses a qualitative method, based on key informant interviews, participant observation of community meetings and policy document scan. For a more detailed description of the methodology, see, Tammy Findlay, "Social Capital and Local Governance Regimes: Early Childhood Development Roundtables in British Columbia," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Carleton University, May 28, 2009. Interviews from South Peace, Surrey/White Rock, Revelstoke and Vancouver are used in this paper.

to a large, culturally diverse urban centre in Surrey/White Rock; to a network covering Greater Victoria, with 13 municipalities and four school districts.[8]

All of these roundtables are archetypical of MLG, acting as bridging institutions between governments and community. In addition, the participants are primarily women, working in a policy area commonly seen as 'women's policy,' providing an interesting entry point for gendering MLG. MLG helps to elucidate the contradictory nature of this community-based governance for women.

As seen earlier, much of the feminist literature attempts to identify the opportunities and constraints associated with MLG. Building on that research,[9] I am interesting in asking the question: From a feminist perspective, how well are these structures of MLG working in ECD? Phillips (2003) lays out some vital criteria with which to answer this question:

> [t]he role of the state is not merely to regulate the voluntary sector in order to keep it trustworthy, nor simply to provide financial support. It is to create spaces for deliberative democracy, encourage participation and active citizenship, promote good self-governance, and give voluntary organizations the policy tools they need to build communities of support to help their communities help themselves (58).

To what extent are ECD roundtables meeting these goals?

Political Opportunities: Coordination, Participation and Representation

MLG offers some opportunities for innovative organizational forms to develop and to create new spaces for women's activism.[10] Brock (2003) identifies "coordination across subsectors" as essential to effective governance (13), and this does appear to be one of the key benefits of the ECD tables. This was a recurring theme in interviews. For some, this coordination was especially important for the once very disjointed and siloed ECD policy community. As one participant from Surrey/White Rock explained, the table made it possible

> for people to be together and to work together and so often in the past … agency was pitted against agency, was pitted against government and it was a bit of a turf war. And I think it's lovely to see everybody working together we all have the same common goal so it just makes total sense for everybody to be on the same page and for the government and the agencies and school board and everybody to be working collaboratively … It allows people to see things globally as opposed to seeing things from simply their own perspective (Interview # 6).

This new collaboration was highlighted in another interview in Surrey/White Rock, where it was suggested that in a huge community, the table "gives me the opportunity to link up with people that I wouldn't otherwise be able to … and "the opportunity to come together with some common focus, and some common purpose" (Interview # 14).

In Vancouver, a very similar observation was made, that in a large city, their Windows of Opportunity table fostered "the ability of variety of sectors to come for a common cause" and to lessen the competition between them (Interview # 16). Another member of that table noted that "what I see as the biggest strength is people from all different areas sitting at the same table and working towards, if not having, a single focus" (Interview # 15). For one participant, given the ways in which the ECD community in Vancouver is divided into geographic networks, the table

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[8]The municipalities are Central Saanich, Colwood, Esquimalt, Highlands, Langford, Metchosin, North Saanich, Oak Bay, Saanich, Sidney, Sooke, Victoria, and View Royal.
[9] Although I am less inclined to some of the literature that views MLG as the causal factor.
[10] But it is debatable, that this is 'feminist' activism, as will be discussed below.

provides a forum, a vehicle for the various community partners and the different networks to share information and learn about what is going on in each of the different networks. To look at where there are opportunities to collaborate … commonalities among the networks were identified and each network provided what their action plan was. I think that one of the other strengths was that it is a formal mechanism for the public partners to have access to and for the community partners to the public partners on issues that are relevant or on the early childhood agenda (Interview # 5).

Even in a small community, like Revelstoke, where the majority of ECD Committee members know each other, the ability to share resources and to work collaboratively with other agencies was seen as one of the major advantages of the roundtable (Interview # 7, 10, 11, 17). Membership on multiple committees (in particular the municipal government's social development committee) in the city has also aided in continuity and the transfer of ECD information and knowledge (Interview # 7, 10). In South Peace, in northern BC, the table also improved integration and coordination of partners and programs (Interview # 9).

These tables give the primarily female members of the ECD voluntary sector regular access to public officials, and work to unite, rather than divide, those who have historically been marginalized in the policy process. In the examples above, the structure encourages the formation of political alliances within the sector, and for new voices to be at the table. This is, of course, one of the other potential contributions of these tables – to increase the participation and representation of women in public policy. Phillips (2003) argues that the voluntary sector

is rapidly evolving from a model based on charity to one based on civil society – that is, from an approach premised on helping those less fortunate to one in which communities have the resources and are empowered to represent and help themselves and in which citizens actively participate (18).

Such was the stated motivation for establishing these ECD networks, to build community capacity, and this distinction does distinguish some tables from others.[11]

For some ECD roundtables, participation and representation are central. Real effort is made to move beyond the "usual suspects" and to reflect the social relations in the community. Warner highlights the importance of such horizontal linkages across community, as well as vertical linkages between community and the state (1999). This can be seen in Surrey/White Rock, where a diverse range of public and community partners are involved (provincial MCFD, the City of Surrey,[12] United Way, school district, public health, literacy, child care, women's equality, ethno-cultural and immigrant and refugee groups). In addition to the 'standards,' Revelstoke's ECD committee integrates local business and parents. This sectoral and demographic representation seems to incorporate feminist principles of both procedural (or numeric) and substantive representation. This is crucial in ECD, where women (though not necessarily feminist perspectives) predominate, so procedural, or numerical representation is simply not enough. Surrey in particular exhibits identity and interest-based representation to bring a women's equality and diversity lens to the table.

Representation and participation are vital accountability mechanisms for community organizations (Evans, Richmond and Shields 2005).[13] Surrey/White Rock and Revelstoke stand out in their public engagement and capacity building efforts. Surrey/White Rock has improved its public communication strategy through community radio; engaging with kindergarten teachers, child care centres and family doctors; organizing social events; and parent consultations and interviews, and they have a wide-ranging engagement strategy with the South Asian community. In response to needs identified in a parent survey, Revelstoke has developed an impressive array of public ECD information in print (pamphlets, a community calendar) that are widely available around the city, and prominently displayed on the

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[11] In other tables, this shift is less evident, and a charitable orientation remains. For instance, in South Peace, much emphasis is placed on helping 'vulnerable' or 'needy' families, and the recent addition of the Salvation Army was celebrated in this regard (Interview # 9).

[12] So far, the City of White Rock has not been actively engaged (Interview #1).

[13] Evans, Richmond and Shields (2005) argue that these accountability mechanisms are often overlooked in the NPM preference for performance measures.

community centre bulletin board. They also hold an annual '3-Year Old Fair' for children and parents, and a weekly 'Family Night Out.' A combination of academic research and community input through surveys and focus groups form the basis for their work, including their strategic plan.

These tables also have strong individuals or groups who take on the role of "local champions" or convenor (Bradford 2003), and well-developed structures and processes. Revelstoke has two levels of membership (active and associate) to facilitate participation by respecting different community time constraints. For the same reason, some partners use rotating reps to attend meetings. Precedence is given to consensus decision-making. The capacity of Surrey/White Rock's Make Children First Coalition is supported by a jointly funded[14] Office of Early Childhood Development, Learning and Care established in 2006.

In substantive policy terms, in Surrey/White Rock and Revelstoke, roundtables consider ECD to be a universal right, requiring access for all, children as the subjects of public policy are viewed within the proper family and community context,[15] and ECD is viewed as a collective responsibility that requires an integrated approach and work/life balance.   This orientation is consistent with research that shows the importance of universal programs to the building and maintenance of social capital (Kumlin and Rothstein 2005) and to good public policy.

Returning for a moment to the conditions for good governance established by Phillips, these ECD tables do provide some policy tools to build community connections and help to cultivate deliberative democracy, participation, active citizenship and self-government. In other words, from this perspective, the structures of MLG are working fairly well for the women involved in them. But there are also some real limitations that require examination.

The Limits of Community-Based Governance: Offloading, Regulation and Social Hierarchy

Notwithstanding the opportunities, community-based governance does pose some challenges for women. A feminist analysis of MLG must also consider the offloading of government responsibility onto women in the 'community,' the regulation and control of the voluntary sector, and the social hierarchies that are reinforced in ECD roundtables.

One of the central contradictions of this community-based form of governance is that it simultaneously includes women in the policy process, AND places new responsibilities on already overburdened individuals and organizations.[16] The shopping mall approach to MLG discussed earlier, which prioritizes the quantity over the quality of political openings, fails to account for this tension. These tables have definitely provided some new "institutional choices" (Sawer and Vickers 2010) for engagement, but how much choice is really involved? Are there better options available? How can 'jumping scale' (Brennan 2010 36) work when MLG is intended to bridge these scales? At this point, in ECD policy in BC, these tables are basically the only game in town. And the playing field is uneven.

Research has definitively shown that downloading, or offloading, has increased the pressure on the social service sector (Brock 2003; Jenson & Phillips 1996). These tables add another responsibility for service providers – governance. In many ways, this is a positive advancement, devolving some decision-making power to the voluntary sector. But the extent of this power should be kept in perspective, as decision-making is often not their primary activity.

Mahon and Jenson's study "shows that there is an increasing understanding that collaboration among all governments and community organizations is essential if children's programs are to expand and move towards greater coherence in ways that will help both children and parents" (Mahon and Jenson 2006 4). Cooperation and coordination do not happen automatically through MLG. It requires a lot of effort. So for many tables, considerable time and energy is devoted to the coordination function. One of the most successful methods of coordination in Revelstoke is for the members of the ECD Committee to be everywhere, to wear multiple 'hats' (Interview # 8, 13), since, as one participant put it,

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[14] By Fraser Health, MCFD, School District 36 (Surrey), the City of Surrey and the United Way of the Lower Mainland.

[15] As opposed to the dominant SIS approach outlined below.

[16] Several of the tables have some (albeit insufficient) male participation. Given the dangers of ghettoization and offloading for women, the presence of men in ECD governance can be an important indicator of the social value of ECD and the reality is, it is likely to bring needed resources to the table.

"there are only so many people to fill all of these roles" (Interview # 17).[17] Community overload is a looming prospect.

In most cases, responsibility for coordination has fallen to the community (with the least resources), rather than to the public partners on the roundtables. The situation in Surrey/White Rock is quite telling, where the table Coordinator described her effort at bringing the public partners together by saying, "it's herding cats!" (Interview #1). One of the main tasks of the table was to create a summary document that mapped out what each level and department of government was doing on ECD (Surrey/White Rock MCF) because, according to the Coordinator, the public partners -- "They have no clue. They have no clue (Interview # 1). This puts the voluntary sector in the position of having to use its scant resources to 'educate' governments (Brock 2003 7). For Brown and Troutt (2003), this is backward because "[t]he government's role must be viewed as that of system manager for the sector. More fundamentally, government is responsible for managing and coordinating all systems for meeting a societal need" (214).

In many of the interviews, roundtable members expressed frustration that those with the most capacity, the government partners, were not doing their share. In Vancouver, one member said that she "would like to see the public partners [the City, Health Authority, School District, MCFD] more active. I think the community folks are trying very hard at committing to it. I don't feel the same from the public partners" (Interview # 16). Another commented that

> there really haven't been any constructive and thoughtful processes or policy framework put in place to help enable and support that collaboration. And it's almost like … we [public partners] think it should happen and therefore you should do it … if there was the framework that really set out … the responsibilities and opportunities as provincial government to work with local government and community partners (Interview # 5).

She went on to say that the lack of coordination and integration across the different ministries and governments has resulted in continued policy 'siloing,' dividing early learning from child care (Interview # 5). Apparently, the public partners were more active and supportive in Vancouver in the past,[18] when the City had a dedicated social planner at the table, and the Library had a larger presence, but cuts have weakened these links (Interview # 16).

Those in Surrey/White Rock also wanted more leadership from the public partners:

> [t]he main challenges right now, are the lack of strategic leadership from the City and the School District to advance ECD in a coordinated, strategic way … you don't have the other authoritative structures - the policy frameworks and/or bureaucratic structures to deal with these things … The lack of vision and leadership at a provincial level, I would say, is the absolute number one barrier to all of this (Interview # 1).

Another table member believed they needed more involvement from "somebody a little higher up that has some power … somebody that can really see what's going on (Interview # 6). This aspect of the ECD tables brings to mind what Peters and Pierre (1998) have called "governance without government" (223).

The ECD roundtables show that cooperation and coordination between partners cannot be assumed in MLG, it must be actively sought. In these 'partnerships', voluntary sector organizations are not only parties to MLG, they are the chief facilitators of it. In this way, the women at the table act less as 'decision-makers,' and more like organizers of 'human resources', taking on traditionally gendered roles. For stretched communities, it is questionable whether this role is the best use of their knowledge, precious time, resources, and limited social capital. As a case in point, in a place like South Peace, a struggling community on many levels, I have to wonder if it is realistic to expect a table with a Coordinator who is paid for only ten hours per week, to be responsible for the coordination of three Ministries, five

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[17] An added piece in Revelstoke is that because it has a reputation as a very successful table, increasingly, they are sought out for support and advice from other regions in Canada (Interview # 11). They are advancing mutual learning, but also facing these new external pressures.

[18] This is partly reflected in that Vancouver is the only table with Co-Chairs, one from the public and one from the community sector.

Aboriginal agencies and a medley of ECD programs and service providers in three municipalities[19] (Interview # 7, 9).

Having said this, calling on public partners to do more also must acknowledge the limited capacity of many governmental actors. It was seen above that cuts to the public sector in Vancouver have negatively affected their ability to participate in ECD governance (Interview # 16). One interview participant explained that in Vancouver "time is the other challenge both for … the folks who are around the Windows of Opportunity table and for the public partners. And I don't think that the public partners more recently have been able to dedicate the time to actually attending the Windows meetings" (Interview # 5). Likewise, in South Peace, "Northern Health, have always been at the meetings just until about a year ago when they said look, we love what you're doing, we totally agree with it, but we just can't spare the time to come to the meetings" (Interview # 9). The community's only speech therapist quit due to over-work, and they now rely on someone who flies in from Saskatchewan once a month (Interview # 9). Not all government partners are equal, and under the current neoliberal provincial government, gendered social service Ministries, such as MCFD, Education, and Health, are marginalized.

This current political context is further embedded within thirty years of neoliberal devolution and offloading, and is a lot for local community governance alone to overcome (Bezanson 2006 433). ECD governance exists within a neoliberal gender order and an overarching political economy of residualism, where family policy continues to be treated largely as a market and family responsibility. The greatest challenge for ECD roundtables, according to one participant is that "we don't have key universal services to support families and children" (Interview # 5). Hence, community partners are occupied trying to figure out how to "get the greater lion's share of the smaller pieces of the pie" (Interview # 5). Here, she is referring to a common situation faced by all of the tables, in which they are 'governing' a patchwork of small, local, boutique programmes, with a lack of "understanding where they sit and link with policy and the bigger strategic picture" (Interview # 5).

There is a risk that with the "local turn" in governance and public policy (Bradford 2003 3), community governance can be viewed in abstraction, outside of the power relations in which it is situated. As the ECD Coordinator in Surrey/White Rock astutely concluded, local governance can only go so far without broader political, economic and social change for families with children in Canada (Interview # 1). A striking reality with all of these tables is the complete absence of representation from the federal government (Interview # 1, 12, 13, 14, 16), the level with the greatest fiscal power (Mahon and Jenson 2006). Comprehensive MLG must include the federal government. This point is made strongly in work by Bradford (2003, 2007) and in specific reference to ECD by Mahon and Jenson (Jenson and Mahon 2002; Mahon and Jenson 2006; Mahon 2007). Warner has also pointed out that

> the mismatch between the current enthusiasm for social capital and the scale and depth of community development problems is a reflection of the general retreat of the state under globalization. Thus a focus on community social capital building must be complemented by programs that address transformation in governmental institutions and markets at the local, state and national levels (1999 389).

Instead, MLG systems operate largely based on neoliberal principles (Gray 2010).

These neoliberal principles have meant that communities must grapple with a range of mechanisms of regulation and control around funding and policy framing. Recall that for Phillips (2003), adequate financial support for the voluntary sector is a basic democratic requirement. However, ECD roundtables and services are terribly under-resourced (Interview # 1, 5, 6, 7, 9). These women are expected to 'make do.' In one interview, it was stated that there is "very little money for the entire South Peace, which is made up of 3 communities and 5 aboriginal agencies, you know dividing those funds became very challenging and there was not much left once it was all divided up" (Interview # 9). And even though in some ways, the tables have served to undercut competition for funds within the sector, it continues to be an issue. In Vancouver, "the fact that there is under funding … for most services in most networks … there is an underlying I don't know if I'd call it tension, but just an awareness that … there's limited dollars and everybody has a challenge trying to get by" (Interview # 5).

Brock (2010) provides that "too often organizations with limited resources must themselves navigate through the bewildering array of government departments and services to locate relevant

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[19] The table represents the cities of Dawson Creek, Chetwynd, and Tumbler Ridge.

funding sources, programs, and information" (142). This is definitely the case in ECD, and was raised in most of the research interviews. In Revelstoke, one participant, describing the work of the table Coordinator, noted that "a lot of her time is looking for different funding. Finding creative ways to do it, through the use of relationship but also through the use of just knowing what different kinds of grants are available" (Interview # 7). Another said "it's a constant ongoing concern, is there always going to be money? (Interview # 8).

Funding, and the accountability mechanisms that follow it, entail a coercive or controlling element (Brock 2003, 2010; Jenson and Phillips 1996).[20] The thrust of governments has been to use funding mechanisms to discourage, or even prevent advocacy in the voluntary sector (Phillips 2003 36). In this environment, there is confusion among the tables about whether they are to act primarily as a distributor of funds, or as a coherent advocacy voice in ECD policy. Several tables had debates about whether they should devote the bulk of their limited funding to programs and services or to salaries (for instance for a paid Coordinator position). This is an important decision, because if the priority is the former, communities are being steered toward individualized, neoliberal approaches. If it is the latter, it signals an interest in strengthening the advocacy and mobilization capacity of the table.

In South Peace, when a small pot of money became available, the table considered simply dividing up the money and distributing cheques directly to families with children (Participant Observation). In Vancouver, the table made a conscious decision not to spend money on a Coordinator, but on services instead (Interview # 16). This table member thought this was a mistake for a large geographic area in need of coordination. She added that other tables in Richmond and Burnaby have made different decisions. She clearly believed strongly in an advocacy role and did feel they were making an effort to resist the push away from advocacy: "I think the group really tries to stay true to their role of networking and advocacy and not that will take money and give it to people … For this table to be functional, it has to be recognized. It has to be given that advocacy power" (Interview # 16). From the same table, it was suggested that

> I would like to see more mobilization activities … I think that they do have the potential to harness a lot of energy from families in the community … I think there's a bit of a disconnect of understanding that to influence change … there is resistance at that table because most of the public partners don't want to rock the boat with … their corporate masters (Interview # 5).

In the face of these financial constraints, tables are struggling between individual and collective responses.

For some tables, the wider atmosphere of austerity is seeping into their own policy orientation, where communities are accepting the politics of scarcity unquestioningly. In one interview, the participant seemed aware that funding is about priorities, mentioning that in South Peace, the oil and gas hub of the province, "there's lots of money for young men" (Interview # 12). But the conversation quickly turned inward to the ECD sector and to making difficult decisions about "where do we rob Peter to pay Paul?" (Interview # 12). This is consistent with other research that is concerned with the ways in which voluntary sector organizations become de-radicalized in partnerships with government (Jenson and Phillips 1996; Warner 1999).

Evidence of this can be seen in the erasure of gender as a policy lens and of feminist definitions of policy problems in favour of a Social Investment State (SIS)-inspired focus on children as the targets of public policy (Saint Martin 2007; Jenson 2008; Gray 2010). The voluntary sector grapples with the strategic framing of policy issues (Brock 2003), and these ECD tables are no exception. Most seem to have taken a rather narrow, child-centric view of ECD. Despite being overwhelmingly made up of women, the tables focus very little on women's equality as a pivotal goal of ECD policy.[21] In addition, few of the tables include feminist organizations.

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[20] Not all state funding is necessarily coercive. Brock (2010) contrasts coercive with enabling relations between government and the voluntary sector.

[21] Which reinforces the distinction made by some feminist political scientists about the difference between numerical and substantive representation.

The inclusiveness and representativeness of the tables was a key interest in my research. All have some representative gaps (Interview #1, 5, 9, 13, 14 17).[22] Only Surrey/White Rock includes a women's equality group.[23] Few have any Aboriginal participation, and all are struggling to improve their relationship with Aboriginal communities (Interview # 1, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17).[24] None of the tables have any labour representation. Interestingly, the shift toward direct citizen involvement over groups, traced by Laforest and Phillips (2007), does not appear to have filtered into these tables. In several places, table members shared their desire to have more direct participation from parents. In Revelstoke, three respondents wondered if this might help to address the needs of "fringe families" there (Interview # 11, 13, 17).

The notion of hierarchical social capital (Arneil 2006) can be useful here in elucidating how inequalities among women, particularly through more informal networks, can get reinforced and reproduced through these MLG arrangements. How well do these ECD roundtables work for marginalized women?

Revelstoke is a fascinating example because it is held up as the beacon for ECD in the province,[25] and at the same time reveals the darker side of social capital. The Revelstoke ECD committee typifies the personal relationships of trust that are associated with social capital. Its members know each other well. They are friends, neighbours, and family who share personal, professional, and political alliances (Interview # 11, 13, 17). Then again, for those who find themselves on the outskirts of this close knit community, their experiences are markedly different from those in the 'mainstream'. As one participant illustrates:

> it's a community where lots of people know one another, it's really easy to sort of make social connections and there is a really big sort of population of young families like higher functioning families. And so socially it's really exciting if you're part of the group and you have kids because then you know you do sort of congregate at Strong Start and play in the park and go to Mother Goose and kind of hang out and participate in all the community events that go on here … But … I work with a different population and that's the population that I feel is most vulnerable and that we're not necessarily addressing those people in our community (Interview # 13).

Her table colleague added that,

> [i]f you're a young mom who grew up here and you always felt ostracized as a child here for whatever reason, you're not inclined to put your children in that same group. And some of them … it attracts bright, high functioning people, or at least on the surface they appear high functioning and so, if you don't identify yourself in that group, for whatever reason, you don't go. And there are some activities that are quite cliquey (Interview #17).

These hierarchies can be seen between the table and some outside in the community, as well as inside the ECD Committee itself. In this setting, for those with contrary views,

> it's very difficult to put those notions forward … it's a committee on paper, but there are some very big personalities at the table and some very strong opinions at the table. And so if you don't happen to share the flavour of the day belief, or whatever, that's a challenge to stand up to that. It's a challenge to be heard. It's a challenge to present the different perspective. I think it's a challenge to put forward notions and beliefs and ideas that are not congruent with their view of how the world works or how Revelstoke works (Interview #17).

In the same way:

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[22] In part, the homogeneity of the table can be a reflection of the community itself. In an interview in Revelstoke, a remark was made that "it's funny when I first moved here … I was just struck by -- this is the whitest community I've ever been in" (Interview # 7).

[23] And the women's shelter is involved indirectly in Revelstoke as an associate member.

[24] In South Peace, the challenge was said to be between Aboriginal organizations (Interview # 9, 12).

[25] Based on its results on the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a population-level measure of children's vulnerability as they enter kindergarten.

sometimes it's difficult for new people that join the table to feel sort of included and if you don't really know what's going on they you don't feel confident to put forth your opinions, so I think it's a very strong group for some key players but I don't know if that everybody feels confident to add their opinion to the table … it's really difficult … to go against a group opinion with a group of women who have been in this community doing what they're doing for between 10-15-20 years (Interview # 13).[26]

Not all voluntary sector organizations are equal, and some partners can exhibit "a reluctance to yield or share authority" (Brock 2003, 2010 148). In all of the tables, participants were able to identify a hierarchy between partners and an unequal division of power. In Surrey/White Rock, it was expressed that

it's not necessarily a level playing field … I think some people see some agencies as have-nots and some governments as having too much control and you know those sorts of things … I think the government wields an influence just because they're the ones that signed the contract … they have the upper hand, and I don't think that they've ever made a secret of that … the agencies are probably all pretty, pretty equal but I think the school board and the [provincial] government certainly have some power. It's their facilities, it's their contracts … they don't walk around with a big stick but certainly they have the authority and the ability to say 'No it's not happening' or 'Yes it will' … I think it's just a culture, you know once you've worked at an agency as long as I have you just know what the hierarchy is and you just better respect it or somebody will remind you (Interview # 6).

The City of Surrey and the School District were thought to be quite influential (Interview # 14).[27]
A participant from Revelstoke was particularly outspoken, insisting that on the ECD Committee "there's the illusion of input … the illusion of inclusiveness. And God help you if you have a dissenting opinion … [the School District] very generously contributes their early learning dollars and then … there's the illusion of input into how the funds are all dispersed" (Interview #17). When asked how power is distributed on the table, her response was, "not widely" (Interview # 17).[28] This was echoed in another interview where the school district was depicted as a "very big voice at the table" (Interview # 13). She concluded that "I definitely feel like it is dominated by a couple of key people … there's just a handful of the same people that … participate and really … drive the decisions" (Interview #13).
Hierarchical relationships are also visible between levels of governments. In both Surrey/White Rock and Vancouver, the status of the municipal government vis-à-vis the provincial government was raised:

I think one of the biggest gaps … that we have from a policy perspective, is that provincial policy totally ignores the role of municipalities. Totally ignores it. You can have Health, and you can have School Districts, Health is miniscule in all of this, really. But if you don't have the municipality as part of this, they are the biggest providers in Surrey. Now that may not be everywhere else, but in Surrey they are the biggest providers of ECD … And yet they are a non-entity when it comes to provincial policy. They're not even acknowledged (Interview # 1).

[In Vancouver] it's just very disconnected the type of connection between local and provincial government. There's a real hierarchy and despite the fact that you know local government is much closer to what's happening on the ground, can influence planning, can shape communities,

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[26] Others on the table were not unaware of "the challenge of having a longstanding group of people who have worked together for 5 or 6 or 7 years it's very easy for us to relate to each other and to fit in so we're always conscious of how new people might be feeling" (Interview # 10).
[27] However, another participant felt that the School District has been marginalized in Surrey/White Rock (Interview # 14).
[28] It is also noteworthy that even though she is a member of the ECD Committee, she used third person, referring to the Committee as 'they' (Interview #17).

through its bylaws and so on, provincial government doesn't seem to have a connection to local government. I mean there is somebody from MCFD who sits at the ECD MOU table but that's a regional person and you know even the regional representative, representatives of provincial government are disconnected from corporate levels of government. And the corporate levels of government is where the policy gets made (interview # 5).

This disjuncture in MLG for child care policy has been explored by Jenson and Mahon (2002) and prevents the development of comprehensive, feminist family policy.

A final cautionary note about hierarchical partnerships relates to the prospect of adding business to the mix. So far, there is very little business involvement in ECD partnerships,[29] but several interview participants expressed interest in getting business on board in some way (Interview # 1, 8, 10, 11, 13, 17). MLG can empower communities whilst increasing openings for private, market, commercial influence (Sawer and Vickers 2010; Brennan 2010). Brennan (2010) shows the disastrous consequences of "new forms of governance (especially the significance of stock-market listed Corporations in the planning and delivery of services)" for child care advocacy and policy outcomes in Australia (49-50). For this reason, tables should be wary of the type of role that business might play in ECD.

Overall, in its current form, this community-based governance poses a number of serious challenges for women that should inform feminist analysis of MLG.

Conclusion

This paper sought to make a contribution to the developing feminist literature on MLG by considering women's engagement in the ECD policy community in British Columbia. MLG allows for such an analysis because it directs attention to the gendered relations inside states and communities, as well as the contradictory nature of their interactions with each other.

Public and community partnerships, or ECD tables, do meet some of Phillips' objectives of facilitating deliberative democracy, participation, active citizenship and self-government, by bringing more actors into the process, forging new relationships, and generally opening up space for policy discussion. But the women involved in the governance of ECD have also experienced an offloading of responsibility without much real authority, which is exacerbated by insufficient financial support. They have encountered forms of regulation that control more than enable. They are both subjects and participants in the social hierarchies that mark these tables. And they are operating within a field, ECD, which lacks a coherent policy framework, and genuine political commitment from governments.

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[29] A possible exception is a troubling case in Dawson Creek, where public concern about the social and environmental impact of the oil and gas industry is growing. As a public relations strategy, the company Encana is funding community initiatives which include those related to ECD. The table was discussing possible projects in order to access these funds (Participant Observation).

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