

ARTICLE

Descriptive Representation from the Perspective of Mothers Facing Socio-economic Precarity in Brussels

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Abstract

Descriptive representation is often assumed to enhance democratic legitimacy by increasing the presence of historically underrepresented groups in political institutions. Yet empirical research shows that greater presence does not consistently produce substantive responsiveness. Drawing on participatory research with women facing socio-economic precarity and migration backgrounds in Brussels, this article centres participant-led perspectives to examine how these women understand and evaluate representation. Adopting an intersectional lens, the analysis demonstrates how participants repeatedly articulate political concerns and expectations of representation through motherhood, which infuses and shapes their experiences of precarity, migration background, and discrimination. The findings reveal a critical and conditional understanding of descriptive representation: while lived experience remained politically meaningful, descriptiveness mattered primarily insofar as it served to actively respond to and engage with ongoing experienced political problems. Ultimately, this study reframes descriptive representation and its link to substantive responsiveness by highlighting the central roles of power, political memory, and lived experience as a dynamic source of political knowledge.

Keywords: Descriptive representation, substantive representation, political inclusion, intersectionality, lived experience

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Introduction

Descriptive representation occupies a central place in democratic theory because scholars commonly assume it enhances legitimacy, trust, and responsiveness through the inclusion of historically underrepresented members of society (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999; Williams, 2000). Yet empirical findings increasingly suggest that greater descriptive presence does not consistently translate into substantive responsiveness, policy change, or meaningful political inclusion (Celis & Childs, 2018; Meier & Severs, 2018; Phillips, 2019; Goyal & Sells, 2024). Existing scholarship has therefore moved beyond questions of presence alone towards the conditions under which descriptive representation becomes politically meaningful (Celis & Childs, 2020; de Jong & Mügge, 2023; Harder, 2025).

While this literature has primarily focused on representatives, institutions, and normative justifications, it devotes less attention to how representation is interpreted and evaluated from the perspective of those positioned as represented. This omission matters because it risks reproducing normative assumptions insufficiently grounded in everyday lived experiences (de Jong & Mügge, 2023; Vermeulen et al., 2025). Moreover, existing research suggests that people in precarious situations, who remain severely underrepresented in political institutions, frequently express greater dissatisfaction with representative politics (Ceka & Magalhães, 2016; Talukder & Pilet, 2021; Does et al., 2024). This underscores the relevance of examining whether descriptive representatives are appraised differently and perceived as altering representative relationships by them.

Against this backdrop, I adopt an intersectional perspective to expand and refocus this field of inquiry. I zoom in on conversations on political representation with women facing socio-economic precarity in Brussels, many of whom have migration backgrounds and are raising children in single-parent households. Analysing their sense-making processes allows me to explore how those positioned as the represented construct and attribute representational meaning.

To this end, the article asks three questions: (a) How do mothers facing precarity in Brussels perceive, evaluate, and formulate expectations of descriptive political representatives? (b) What do these evaluations imply for existing theories of descriptive representation? (c) How do they reshape the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation?

The article makes three contributions to the literature. First, it leverages a participatory research design to offer a novel, bottom-up account of descriptive representation. Second, it shows how representational expectations emerge through intersecting experiences articulated through motherhood and related problem configurations. Third, it demonstrates that participants evaluated descriptiveness as a contingent and relational resource rather than as a representational

good in itself, foregrounding the importance of sustaining ongoing engagement with lived experience.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it outlines the analytical framework, situating the study within debates on descriptive representation. Next, it discusses the research design and methods before presenting empirical findings on how participants understand and evaluate descriptive representation. Finally, it considers the theoretical implications for descriptive and substantive representation.

Theoretical Framework

Debates on descriptive representation have long centred on whether descriptive similarity carries independent political significance. Early scepticism questioned its democratic and empirical necessity, emphasising mechanisms of authorisation and accountability instead (Manin, 1997; Pitkin, 1967; Przeworski et al., 1999).

Pitkin (1967, p. 11) was foundational to debates on representation, conceptualising it as comprising formalistic, symbolic, descriptive, and substantive forms. Treating descriptive representation as analytically distinct, she defined it as representation by resemblance, with representatives “standing for” others by mirroring particular characteristics (Pitkin 1967, p. 12). The substantive variant, by contrast, concerns acting in the represented’ s interests through responsive judgement and action. Although Pitkin recognised resemblance’s political significance, she ultimately privileged policy action, arguing that the central democratic question concerns whether representatives “act for” the represented (Pitkin 1967, pp. 43–157).

Feminist political theorists challenged this subordinate status and expanded both the democratic significance and meaning of descriptive representation, arguing that ostensibly neutral mechanisms presuppose relatively equal access to political debate and influence (Phillips, 1995; Williams, 2000; Young, 2002; Mansbridge, 1999, 2011). Phillips (1995; 2021) argued that this condition is unlikely to exist in practice, reframing descriptive representation as democratically necessary under conditions of systematic exclusion and linking presence to more equitable agenda-setting (1995, pp. 25–57). Mansbridge (1999; 2003) similarly argued that descriptive representation becomes particularly important in contexts marked by historical exclusion, mistrust, or uncrystallised interests (pp. 628–631). At the same time, revisiting trait-based understandings of descriptiveness, Williams (2000) emphasised shared social experiences as a basis for descriptive representation, while Young (2002) highlighted social perspectives emerging from structural positioning as sources of situated political interpretations and understandings (pp. 136–137).

Meanwhile, mixed empirical findings raised questions about whether descriptive similarity translates into substantive representation in practice (Childs & Krook, 2009; Reingold, 2000; Wängnerud, 2009). Concerns also emerged regarding risks of

essentialism, exclusion, and the assumption that descriptive similarity necessarily produces shared or common interests or political behaviour (Dovi, 2009; Meier & Severs, 2018; Funk & Hinojosa, 2023; Harder, 2025). Indeed, several studies demonstrate that shared characteristics alone do not generate political alignment (Dawson, 1994; Cassese, 2015; Saini et al., 2023).

Critical scholarship additionally shows that political environments themselves may reproduce exclusionary dynamics for descriptively similar representatives (Durose et al., 2013; Hussain, 2021; Saini et al., 2023; Christoffersen & Siow, 2025). Attention has therefore shifted toward the contexts under which descriptive representation becomes politically meaningful, including the roles of power asymmetries, credibility demands, and institutional settings (Mansbridge, 2017; Celis & Childs, 2020; de Jong & Mügge, 2023; Harder, 2025). I align with this latter shift by adopting the perspective of those positioned as represented.

I approach descriptive representation as a relational process that acquires meaning in practice. This invites engagement with scholarship conceptualising representation as an evolving and relational process, particularly constructivist approaches.

Saward (2006; 2010), for example, conceptualises representation as claims-making, in which contingent representative claims articulated by claim-makers must be recognised and accepted by relevant audiences (pp. 297–302). From this perspective, descriptive similarity acquires political significance only when communicatively mobilised, interpreted, and contested by relevant audiences, rather than operating as an automatic basis for representation (see also Disch, 2015; Urbinati, 2011). By foregrounding the performative dimensions of representation and processes of interpretation and judgement, constructivist approaches create space to consider how people positioned as represented understand representation itself. They also account for scepticism or refusal toward descriptive representatives despite categorical similarity. Nevertheless, constructivist scholarship has focused primarily on claim-makers.

To foreground the perspectives of those positioned as represented, I draw on feminist standpoint theories, which argue that experiences shaped by structural inequalities can generate distinctive insights into social realities and institutional arrangements (Harding, 1992, 1995; Collins, 2022; Smith, 2005). Because such experiences are produced through intersecting relations of power, the analysis adopts an intersectional lens. Intersectionality highlights how race, gender, sexuality, class, and colonial legacies jointly shape lived experiences and political positioning, challenging single-axis approaches that obscure intra-group differences and the interlocking nature of multiple inequalities (Atrey, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991; Hussain, 2021; Janssen, 2022; Taylor, 2017; Weldon, 2008). Together, they provide the analytical foundation

for centring the experiences and interpretations of those who remain structurally underrepresented.

Methodology: The Participatory Agency Research Design

Participatory Research Approach

To operationalise the theoretical commitments outlined above, I adopted a participatory research design rooted in the Latin American action research tradition (Bradbury-Huang & Reason, 2007; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; McTaggart, 1997). By centring the epistemic agency of those most affected by structural inequalities (Hammou, 2025), the project's direction, vocabulary, analytical emphasis, data collection, interpretive, and ethics frameworks were co-developed with participants from the outset.

Still, early encounters were marked by distrust. Participants questioned the purpose of academic research, expressed concerns regarding extractive dynamics, and demanded greater influence over research decisions and outputs before agreeing to formal conversations. Several framed these concerns in ways resonating with discussions of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2017; Byskov, 2021), which prompted deeper forms of collaboration.

This aligns with Asenbaum's (2022) critique of formalistic agency and its reduction of participation to pre-given institutional frameworks. Rather than treating participants as informants to a fixed research agenda, the project evolved responsively, allowing participants to shape how representation was introduced and understood. Analytical categories were co-developed; for example, participants rejected terms such as "poor" or "marginalised" in favour of "people in socio-economically difficult situations" and preferred "people" over "citizens", reflecting concerns regarding unequal treatment by political institutions.

Data Collection

I collected the empirical material analysed in this article between September 2018 and November 2022.² The analysis focuses specifically on a total of 35 participants engaged through three women-only group discussions across collaborating

2 Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Commission in Human Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The study forms part of a broader PhD project on political representation among people experiencing severe socio-economic precarity, particularly housing insecurity and homelessness. The wider project involved 126 participants and around 30 non-profit organisations and action groups, with engagement ranging from single encounters to long-term collaboration.

organisations (FMV Empact, Sunchild, and Foyer/Dar al Amal), alongside six instances of participatory observation, ten individual conversations, and twelve telephone conversations.³ These interactions took place before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Telephone conversations were used where restrictions, privacy considerations, or participant availability limited in-person engagement (see Appendix). Thirteen participants are cited directly in this article. They participated in one or multiple forms of data collection, which are specified alongside quotations.

Conversations were open-ended and guided by issues participants considered important, including contemporary political developments. An initial questionnaire served purely as a flexible guide (see Appendix). Research relationships developed through neighbourhood meetings, workshops, public activities, and informal gatherings prior to formal conversations. Access to participants was facilitated through collaborating organisations and activities organised according to their existing organisational set-up and the groups they served. Activities therefore varied in their intended audiences and could be organised for women, men, young people, older people, or mixed groups, depending on the organisation and activity.

Rather than being conventionally recruited, participants frequently assessed the researcher's⁵ commitment before agreeing to participate, partially reversing conventional researcher-participant dynamics. Social workers occasionally joined activities at partner organisations' request, while political actors participated in selected events at participants' request to facilitate direct exchanges with decision-makers.

All participants lived in precarious conditions. Whilst migration background and religious identification emerged organically during conversations, they were not used as predefined sampling criteria, in line with participants' explicit resistance to imposed categorisation. Basic socio-demographic information was collected, including age range, housing status, and family situation. The women included were mostly in their mid-twenties to mid-sixties and lived in social and legally or materially insecure housing. Most had North African migration backgrounds, primarily Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian, with smaller numbers of Turkish, Syrian, and Italian origin.

3 Telephone interviews are counted separately from in-person interviews within the dataset.

4 The COVID-19 pandemic began spreading globally in March 2020 (WHO, 2023). Belgian lockdown measures to curb infections worsened conditions for people in socio-economic hardship, particularly those without legal documentation or housing (LDH, 2020, pp. 15–25; Lucera & Tosi, 2021, pp. 103–107).

5 The researcher is a Flemish-speaking political scientist of Moroccan migration background at a Flemish university. Shared language and background aided rapport, while academic affiliation raised suspicion.

Research Context: Brussels

Fieldwork⁶ focused on Brussels' municipalities marked by housing precarity. A neighbourhood-based approach (Mercenier, 2019, pp. 64–66; Silverman & Patterson, 2014, pp. 5-17; Warner & Settersten Jr., 2017, pp. 122–124) enabled analysis of local dynamics of gentrification, sanitation, and housing access. Key sites were Anneesens (Bruxelles-Ville), Quartier Nord (Schaerbeek), Cureghem (Anderlecht), and Rixensart and Yser (Molenbeek).

Collaboration took place with local non-profit social organisations (ASBLs), FMV Empact, Sunchild, and Foyer (Dar al Amal) (introduced above), action groups, and semi-public welfare actors. In the Belgian context, such organisations provide housing support, legal assistance, welfare mediation, language courses, community activities, advocacy, and childcare services, while often acting as intermediaries between residents and public authorities.

As participant access emerged through sustained engagement within community settings, the compiled material reflects relationships developed over time and captures the perspectives of individuals willing to engage in collective activities despite initial reservations about research participation. The findings should consequently not be understood as statistically representative but as analytically informative of broader dynamics that may extend beyond the specific settings examined here.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022; Edwards et al., 2021; Vila-Henninger et al., 2024), combining thematic coding with idiographic attention to individual narratives (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Abduction was especially useful where observations diverged from theory, particularly participants' limited emphasis on descriptive representation despite its prominence in the scholarly literature. Themes emerged through empirical coding that connected lived experiences to debates in representation theory.

Interpretations were discussed openly: approximately half of the participants took part in feedback sessions, while some were regularly involved in deeper reflection on the findings, interpretations, ethics, and follow-up activities. These exchanges, including debates on language, framing, and emphasis, supported bottom-up theory-building while maintaining analytical rigour.

6 "Fieldwork" was initially avoided due to its connotations of exotification and objectification but retained as participants saw it as signalling commitment and credibility. Here, the field refers to Brussels neighbourhoods and social organisations where interactions took place.

Anonymisation and Presentation of Empirical Material

All participant names are pseudonyms. Some participants preferred individual conversations over group participation or requested not to be quoted on the basis of earlier group contributions; these preferences were respected. The empirical section presents extracts from both individual conversations and group interactions. Quotations were selected to reflect broader patterns identified through iterative coding, while observations that were less widely shared are explicitly identified as such. Each quotation includes bracketed information indicating pseudonym, method of interaction, organisational setting, date, and the corresponding page reference in fieldnotes or transcripts.

Empirical Findings

Participants rarely raised descriptive representation spontaneously. When they did, such as referencing representatives who grew up in poverty, came from the same neighbourhood, or shared a minority background, it was generally not treated as sufficient for meaningful representation. Instead, evaluations of representation were grounded in everyday experiences of pressing problems. In particular, issues regarding material and neighbourhood contexts, alongside racism and discrimination, profoundly informed how participants made sense of and evaluated representative efforts. Their evaluations rested on three interrelated considerations: (1) representation as problem-solving; (2) perceptions of institutional power and authority; and (3) the importance of sustained engagement with those currently living these realities. Representation was therefore evaluated less through descriptive similarity itself than through its perceived capacity to address concrete problems and mobilise practical knowledge into meaningful political action.

The empirical findings are structured around four recurring themes: where representational expectations and political subjectivities originate; who is considered a meaningful representative and on what basis; how political scepticism emerges; and when or under which contextual circumstances descriptive representation acquires political significance.

Problem Configurations and Political Subjectivity

Motherhood emerged as a key frame through which participants articulated political urgency, shaping how problems were named, ordered, and assessed, and how they positioned themselves as “the represented”. While participants were engaged through a broader context of socio-economic precarity, concerns surrounding children, care responsibilities, and future generations repeatedly structured the political significance attributed to everyday experiences.

Rather than functioning simply as an expressive claim or isolated identity category, participants positioned themselves as “the represented” through responsibilities toward children and future generations. This positioning was intertwined with experiences of raising children, often alone and with limited support, under conditions of socio-economic precarity, racialisation, and territorial stigma. Participants, for instance, discussed problems through everyday responsibilities of care: ensuring children’s safety, managing family life and limited resources, arranging childcare, navigating welfare and educational institutions, mediating relations and conflicts with public authorities, and anticipating future opportunities and risks for their children.

It also operated as a collective and mobilising language through which individual concerns acquired broader political significance. Participants often described themselves as “mothers” and “concerned mothers”, feeling obligated to speak up not only for their own families but also for other mothers, neighbourhood residents, religious communities, and younger generations. In this way, personal burdens became collective claims, turning representation into a situated political demand around persistent and insufficiently addressed concerns that participants labelled urgent and beyond personal resolve.

Deteriorating neighbourhood conditions and services were commonly linked to a larger political omission and limited responsiveness, visible markers of whose needs were not prioritised. Local parks, playgrounds, and shared public spaces were repeatedly described as unsafe, neglected, or increasingly unusable, connecting these conditions directly to children’s safety and opportunities for social participation. Participants emphasised that they could not themselves, individually, ensure sanitation, improve infrastructure, or provide security and maintenance; these were viewed as matters requiring structural change, public action and political commitment. Amira and Fatima’s comments illustrate how these conditions became interpreted as reflecting persistent political neglect.

The park in our neighbourhood is not safe. There are no playground equipment, no slides, swings, or toys. The park is filled with drugs and syringes. It’s not safe for our children. There are no toilets, and the garbage bins are insufficient. We deserve a nice park, just like other municipalities in Brussels (Amira, Group discussion at Dar al Amal Foyer in Ribeaucourt, March 2019, pp. 5–6).

I never let my children play outside in the park. If it were a nice, green, and safe park, I would let them. But here, it’s just not possible. (Sighs). If you ever get the chance to speak to the Mayor or someone from the municipal council, pass on our recommendations (Fatima, Group discussion at Dar al Amal Foyer in Ribeaucourt, March 2019, pp. 5–6).

Fatima's account on housing insecurity similarly illustrates how participants connected their own experiences to broader questions of political responsibility and prolonged institutional inaction with consequences extending across everyday family and community life:

The walls in our building are paper-thin. You can hear everything the neighbours are doing. My children can't study or sleep. It feels like the walls are made of cardboard. My eldest is a teenager and often gets frustrated because he wants more space and privacy. We're on a waiting list for a better apartment, but it could take up to ten years. And when you have a child with special needs who uses a wheelchair, living on the seventh floor of a building with a broken elevator, it's heartbreaking...I know for a fact that not all citizens have to wait ten years. But when it comes to us, they [politicians] tolerate far too much. They're taking the wrong approach. As a mother, it's overwhelming (Fatima, at Dar al Amal Foyer in Ribeaucourt, March 2019, pp. 6–7).

Beyond material difficulties, Islamophobia and religious difference emerged as recurring urgent problems. Participants living in neighbourhoods with large Muslim populations frequently expressed frustration with how their communities and their children were represented by media narratives and political actors. Complex social realities were reduced to negative associations between Islam and socio-economic disadvantage, with severe consequences for how communities were treated by public institutions. According to participants, these portrayals continue to reinforce stereotypes about Muslims across generations, making the need for representative intervention even more pressing.

Children's educational opportunities and daily experiences of unfair treatment were similarly foregrounded. Educational institutions were frequently singled out as environments where children encountered discouragement, surveillance, and exclusion. Several participants also referred to police harassment and discriminatory treatment by authorities as shaping young people's daily activities and trajectories, particularly for adolescent boys and young men. Having a Muslim identity intensified these experiences and heightened concerns regarding belonging and future opportunities. Nabila's reflections illustrate these concerns.

I see my sons becoming more discouraged. I'm worried they might drop out of school, but I know they're too smart to waste their potential. The reality is, if you don't have the 'right name', if you're not well connected, it's harder to find a job. It's tough, especially for young people. When your name is Mohamed, people judge you differently. What's truly sad is that the young people who will succeed are the ones who were already in a position of privilege, who have a strong support system at home. The others are neglected. (...) Many people just don't know much about Islam and get the wrong idea. Politicians should do something

about this, inform people to stop it [discrimination] but I don't think they want to (Nabila, telephone conversation, December 2020, p. 2).

She later added:

When I speak of 'youngsters', I mean all youngsters, regardless of their background, Christian youngsters, Muslim youngsters, Jewish youngsters, all youngsters. But right now, Muslim young people are facing the most problems. It wasn't always like this, but now, in municipalities like Molenbeek or Schaerbeek, local residents aren't left alone. They are targeted. Especially the adolescents. (...) We [mothers of Muslim children] worry for our children, our sons (Nabila, telephone conversation, November 2020, p. 8).

Problem-Solving and Political Authority

Most participants nevertheless continued to recognise politicians and local officials, typically "the elected", as possessing formal authority over the issues they considered most important and held them accountable for failing to respond. Despite widespread dissatisfaction and distrust, these actors remained for many the only truly viable avenue for representation because they were associated with decision-making authority, resource allocation, and the ability to influence conditions participants themselves could not alter.

This reflects a pragmatic understanding of representation as problem-solving, in which perceived pathways toward resolution and a forward-looking political orientation operated as primary evaluative standards, while descriptive similarity was not initially prioritised (Dewey, 1998 [1882–1953]; James, 1975 [1909]; Ormerod, 2006). Participants continuously emphasised the need for local action, calling for a direct line of communication with elected representatives to determine the issues affecting the community. Public officials were singled out based on their systemic leverage and formal authority, as illustrated by the reflections of Nadia, Soumia, and Zara:

Nadia: The solutions have to come from above, from politicians.

Soumia: They earn 10,000 a month; it's their job to find solutions. People are struggling.

Zara: We have questions, and we often know how they could be addressed. We can inform politicians and have a dialogue with them, but they're the ones who have to come up with solutions and implement them (Sunchild group discussion in Anneessens, July 2020, p. 11).

Participants simultaneously distinguished elected from non-elected actors such as social organisations, social workers, neighbourhood organisers, and community actors, who were described as more accessible and knowledgeable because of their direct interactions with affected communities. Yet participants also recognised their limited decision-making authority and dependence on state funding, frequently

excluding non-elected actors who claimed to speak on their behalf. The following exchange further demonstrates this distinction, leading to a comparison between practical proximity and formal authority:

Nadia: Here (at Sunchild), people actually listen to us.

Nesrine: What the state doesn't give us, we find at Sunchild.

Soumia: The dignity the state won't give us, or doesn't want us to have.

Zara: But unfortunately, social organisations have to struggle too, and they don't have any power either.

Nesrine: And they don't get enough funding.

Soumia: Worse than that, they depend on the state for money (Sunchild group discussion in Anneessens, July 2020, pp. 9–10).

Participants also expressed reservations toward actors they referred to as “experts”, including policy advisers, commentators, and others involved in public debates, who were often perceived as detached and as reproducing dominant political narratives. Criticism was directed less toward expertise itself than toward forms of knowledge lacking practical understanding of everyday realities.

Sometimes I wonder where these experts even come from.... Do they really have the freedom to say what they want? I don't think so. They have to follow the politicians, the politicians lead the discourse. (...) In the end, the people we see on television aren't people from my neighbourhood (Nabila, telephone conversation, November 2020, pp. 9, 11).

Scepticism and Negative Political Memory

Descriptive representatives were not exempt from the broader scepticism participants expressed toward political actors and, at times, elicited even greater suspicion and dissatisfaction. Although shared backgrounds and experiences occasionally surfaced, these references were regularly accompanied by cynicism and doubts regarding whether descriptive similarity would alter political priorities or representative relationships.

Public institutions, particularly welfare services, were frequently depicted as reproducing unequal relations and operating within environments shaped by racialised, gendered, religious, and socio-economic prejudice. Several participants recalled being questioned regarding religious practices, parenting decisions, family structures, and socio-economic backgrounds, describing these interactions as characterised by judgement and dismissal.

Participants who were women, mothers, Muslim, or wore headscarves repeatedly spoke about “dehumanising” and “traumatic” interactions with welfare institutions, recalling comments such as: *“Is keeping your headscarf on really necessary?”*, *“So*

your husband won't be joining us?", or *"Are you sure you can make a decision about this on your own?"* Pre-existing feelings of self-blame were further reinforced through questions regarding whether it was "wise" to have children "in their condition", alongside what participants described as generally "infantilising" treatment implying deficiencies associated with their socio-economic circumstances and family situations. Despite these encounters being highly stressful, participants explained that they avoided displaying emotion out of fear of being labelled "hysterical". Some participants raising children with disabilities further described feeling treated as burdens or cost factors by service providers and, by extension, by the government. Participants also recalled condemnatory discussions in which they felt absurdly accused of intentionally having children with disabilities to access welfare benefits. In some cases, the persistent undermining of dignity and capability resulted in withdrawal from welfare support altogether.

These accumulated experiences, or "memories" (Williams, 2000, p. 97), of earlier dismissive institutional encounters reinforced representative scepticism. They informed not only retrospective interpretations of institutions but also anticipations regarding future representative relationships and descriptive representatives' perceived capacity to bring about change. The following exchange between Nadia, Nesrine, and Zara illustrates how repeated experiences informed participants' evaluations:

Nadia: You can't rely on politicians.

Nesrine: Anyway, we don't even have a spokesperson at that level. And even if we did, they probably wouldn't listen to them.

Zara: Or they wouldn't take them seriously, I've seen that happen already (Sunchild group discussion in Anneessens, July 2020, p. 9).

Representatives sharing similar lived trajectories and experiences were frequently perceived as initially carrying forms of knowledge and lived experience that made them politically relevant to affected communities. However, participants considered political institutions systematically devalued and sidelined these figures precisely because of their backgrounds, exposing them to what participants described as a form of "descriptive stigma". Tokenism was regularly assumed, whereby such representatives were perceived as included for merely symbolic or electoral purposes. Nabila expressed a similar concern during one of our telephone conversations:

I don't like it when political parties play the 'immigrant' or 'Muslim' card. It makes me wonder what they're going to vote for next to make life harder for us (Nabila, telephone conversation, November 2020, p. 10).

Many participants also perceived descriptive representation itself as functioning primarily as a restorative gesture toward historical inequalities and, at times, as an attempt to symbolically compensate for or “whitewash” past injustices. As Nadia, a mother of five, articulated:

Nothing can undo the injustices our community has endured. Attempts to diversify political representation, by adding a few faces that resemble ours, fall short if they don’t address the systemic issues at their root. You know, we are not blind to these tactics. We are acutely aware of our history, a history that was stolen from us, and we know the ongoing struggles we face. They are just creating new problems. We don’t need inclusion; we need transformation and new ways of doing things. Only then will it truly be about us, about our experiences and not about their redemption (Nadia, Sunchild group discussion in Anneessens, July 2020, p. 12).

A major reason descriptive representatives were not evaluated more positively or differently from their non-descriptive counterparts was the perception that, once elected, they became increasingly compliant, distant, and unaware of community needs, rendering them equally incapable of addressing urgent problems. As Samia put it:

You know, they don’t treat us any differently. Once they’ve made it, we only see them during election time—or maybe at the occasional neighbourhood event. And even that’s a lot to expect (Samia, interview at FMV Empact in Yser, December 2020, p. 3).

Importantly, this perceived knowledge deficit was not framed as an individual moral failing but as a structural consequence of political integration.

Lived Experience and the Conditional Relevance of Descriptive Representation

Interestingly, participants’ critiques of descriptive representatives simultaneously revealed an implicit appreciation of shared experience and its political relevance. Descriptive representatives in office were frequently described as not truly “descriptive” and political institutions as not meaningfully more diverse.

Do you know any manual worker in politics? Anyone? And especially one who’s also a Muslim woman? Sure, now there are people with glasses, maybe vegetarians too (laughs). But let’s be honest. Is there anyone who really represents the community? I don’t think so (Hayat, telephone conversation, December 2022, p. 2).

Hayat's comments could wrongly lead to the impression that participants associated descriptiveness primarily with demographic similarity. Experiential knowledge was not treated as a fixed resource acquired through past experience alone. Participants emphasised that changing circumstances and evolving struggles produced shifting needs and interests, complicating representatives' ability to fully grasp and respond to present realities.

Consequently, continuous immersion in the community was seen as a prerequisite for keeping the experiential knowledge pool updated and 'alive'. Without this continuous epistemic anchoring, participants feared a 'proxy effect', whereby descriptive representatives might inadvertently freeze or eclipse real-time insights from local residents, or generate the false impression that their political presence is sufficient, thereby replacing rather than facilitating direct engagement with local residents. Accordingly, truly genuine descriptive representatives were expected to recognise that what participants ultimately sought was active inclusion as knowledgeable partners in decision-making and that those currently living these realities must have a seat at the decision-making table to enable effective problem-solving. Soumia and Samia expressed this expectation as follows:

As a mother who's living through it, she would understand.... There wouldn't be any need to explain why I should be listened to or invited to the table. You know? Like right now, while I'm talking to you, my youngest is crying in the background, my son in high school needs help with his homework, and I've been walking around with a potato peeler in my hand for the past forty minutes. A mother would know that we should have a say (Samia, telephone conversation, interview at FMV Impact in Yser, December 2020, p. 6).

We [other participants] know what courses of action should be followed. We know what our children struggle with. We should be regarded as partners in conversation, but instead we are pitied and judged. (...) Basically, we don't think politicians want to acknowledge us or our needs, want to actively listen to us and respond to our questions and needs. At least not in an appropriate manner, a manner that acknowledges us as actors and not victims (Soumia, Sunchild group discussion in Anneessens, July 2020, pp. 6, 9).

This illustrates how descriptive representation acquires significance under specific conditions. First, when sustained engagement with those currently living the problems at stake is recognised. Second, when descriptive similarity becomes particularly relevant in relation to intersecting problem configurations perceived as politically neglected, insufficiently recognised, or politically uncomfortable for established elites. Under such circumstances, shared experience is expected to increase the visibility and underscore the urgency of these concerns. Zara's comments reinforce this understanding:

The best spokesperson is lived experience. Engagement with affected communities is therefore essential, as those at the political level lack direct experience of the issues at stake (Zara, Sunchild group discussion in Neighbourhood Anneessens, July 2020, pp. 9–10).

Participants' "ideal" descriptive representatives would thus be grounded in the concrete lived trials they navigated; not only as mothers, but mothers raising children from Muslim and often North African backgrounds. These are mothers whose children are disproportionately exposed to discrimination in schools, public institutions, and everyday encounters, with citizenship experienced as conditional and Islamophobia as persistent. Shared experience was expected to facilitate the immediate recognition of concerns affecting their children, ultimately contributing to more responsive political action and improved future prospects. Zara's comments further illustrate this expectation:

Politicians are disconnected because they cannot imagine the concerns we raise or why we ask the questions we ask. There are no representatives in parliament who share our experiences, understand the reality our children are living, and could help us. Personally, I would trust a Muslim mother who truly understands these issues. (...) Although I am well aware of the growing hostility toward Islam, I've often wondered why this problem is ignored by politicians, especially here in Brussels, where the Muslim community is so present. The only explanation I can come to is that they must resent us.... My son, who holds Belgian citizenship, frequently talks about feeling like he's being pushed to move back to Morocco, believing that he won't find a job or a future in Belgium and fearing that forced return policies will eventually be enforced against him (Zara, Sunchild group discussion in Anneessens, July 2020, pp. 12–13).

Discussion

From Shared Experience to the Maintenance of Experiential Knowledge

The findings presented above advance a stronger epistemic and democratic argument than is common in debates on descriptive representation. Participants understood their lived experiences as constantly evolving alongside changing political and social conditions. Experiential knowledge was therefore viewed as dynamic rather than fixed. They were sceptical of claims that lived experience could be permanently embodied or possessed, suggesting that descriptive presence becomes problematic when it substitutes for the inclusion of affected communities, helping to explain their critical evaluations of descriptive representatives.

This distinction reframes descriptive representation by shifting from shared experience towards the active political maintenance of experiential knowledge: the sustained effort to create and preserve channels through which experiential knowledge can inform political judgement, agenda-setting, decision-making, and public debate. Descriptiveness must therefore be continually reproduced through meaningful engagement with those currently living the realities under discussion. It becomes a relational accomplishment rather than a representative attribute.

Political Memory and Power Constellations

Political memory negatively shaped political evaluations and expectations, inviting a reconsideration of Williams' (2000) concept of political memory. Contrary to the expectation that shared disadvantaged experiences and histories of exclusion and unequal treatment can strengthen trust in descriptively similar representatives, these experiences were repeatedly mobilised to scrutinise current representatives and anticipate future political interactions. Descriptive representatives were not presumed to understand or prioritise communities' concerns more effectively; participants often anticipated that they would become assimilated into the political system and feared that they would ultimately be reduced to symbolic roles, much like the affected communities themselves.

These negative expectations were often shaped by encounters with street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky, 2010), such as welfare institutions and public service providers. They reinforced the conviction that people living in precarity are not regarded as credible interlocutors, listened to, or taken seriously, and shaped the anticipation of being treated similarly by politicians. For many, this anticipation was further inflected by processes of racialisation and religious visibility, resonating with scholarship showing how Muslim women in Europe are governed through secular-national norms shaped by Christian legacies and racialised forms of belonging (El-Tayeb, 2011; Jouili, 2015; Murray, 2016).

However, when it came to the overall assessment of elected representatives, they continued to be recognised as most capable of producing meaningful change within the political system, notwithstanding profound dissatisfaction. Their continued orientation towards dominant representative institutions reflected acknowledgment rather than endorsement. This revealed a persistent tension between aspirations for change and the felt pressure to comply with existing representative arrangements.

So while community organisations, social workers, neighbourhood initiatives, and participants dismissed themselves as potential representatives because they lacked formal authority, the practices of proximity associated with these actors were not. In fact, their incorporation into representative relationships with elected officials was sought out. Representative demands centred on more interaction and

mutuality (Dovi, 2012; Mansbridge, 2017; Neblo et al., 2018), expanding agency within political spaces recognised as unequal and limiting. Calls for engagement were thus both transformative and power-compliant.

Representative Ambivalence

Evaluations of non- and lacking representation shed a different light on how ambivalence is understood in the literature. In de Jong and Mügge's (2024, pp. 160–164) account, it captures the simultaneous and conflicting orientations citizens hold toward representation, reflecting the difficulty of fully aligning with any single political actor or representative offer. In connection with the democratic dilemma (Celis et al., 2021), these tensions appear not as episodic moments of evaluation, but as part of a more continuous orientation shaped through accumulated encounters with representation in practice. Competing judgements are carried forward and reactivated over time as recurring gaps between expectations and outcomes are confronted, making ambivalence a continuous rather than fluctuating orientation.

Similarly, recent work on expressive epistemic injustice suggests that exclusion persists not only through the discounting of testimony but also through failures of political institutions to adequately register, interpret, and incorporate the understandings, priorities, and concerns articulated by affected groups (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2025). The issue is not merely whether opportunities to speak exist, but whether experiential knowledge can be politically influential.

Ambivalence is thus neither simply the coexistence of contradictory evaluations nor an exceptional response, but a structurally produced condition in which dissatisfaction and reliance are co-constitutive; participants do not move in and out of ambivalence; they remain positioned within it. It becomes a default orientation through which political experiences are interpreted and communicated. This resonates with Sobande and Emejulu's (2022) account of ambivalence as a mode of political feeling that registers disjunctures between lived experience and dominant political narratives. Participants' accounts reflect such disjunctures. Their sense of uneasy belonging, conflicting attachments, and critical distance suggests that representative arrangements fail to adequately capture broader political realities, and that these tensions became incorporated rather than resolved in everyday relationships with politics.

Preferable Representational Arrangements

The contingent role of descriptiveness points towards a shift in the primary unit of analysis, from individual representatives to the representational arrangements through which representative relationships are organised and sustained. Participants' assertion of epistemic authority also laid bare a broader point: because they lived these realities, they considered themselves uniquely positioned to help resolve

them. This resonates with Allen's (2022) argument that lived experience constitutes political knowledge relevant to representation because it provides access to dimensions of social and political reality that may otherwise remain obscured from institutional actors. However, this assertion of epistemic authority did not translate into demands for direct political representation, distinguishing between the authority to know and the authority to act. Yet, while representatives' authority to act was accepted, the idea that this automatically conferred the right to define, interpret, or speak over experiences they did not or no longer lived directly was not.

Political legitimacy was located in pathways combining experiential knowledge with institutional decision-making capacity. In line with findings from other empirical studies (Cramer & Toff, 2017; Knops, 2021; Miscoiu & Gherghina, 2021), participants affirmed their own experiential authority while questioning representatives' epistemic competence and local understanding. Resistance to substituting or supplementing elected officials with alternative representative roles (Childs & Celis, 2020) reflected the value placed on proximity to lived experience alongside concerns that delegating experiential knowledge away from affected communities would reduce opportunities for direct engagement. Representation required a division of labour; affected communities diagnose problems and elected officials respond (Severs, 2012; Christiano, 2012; Manin, 1997), consistent with epistemic accounts of socially dispersed political knowledge (Landemore, 2020).

The central democratic imperative, then, becomes preserving the epistemic authority of affected groups within representative arrangements without requiring them to assume representative roles, extending Dovi's (2012) argument regarding preferable descriptive representatives. While Dovi emphasises mutual relationships between representatives and disadvantaged groups as a criterion for evaluating representatives, the concern here lies less with evaluating representatives themselves than with the conditions under which affected communities preserve authority over the definition and interpretation of their own experiences. The question, then, is not simply which representatives should be preferred, but how representative relationships can be organised around the continued epistemic authority of affected communities.

The findings point towards an understanding of descriptiveness grounded in sustained engagement with what participants understood as animate lived experience: experiential knowledge generated through realities that are being actively lived in the present rather than merely remembered from the past. Its animate character is not acquired through its existence alone, but through ongoing interaction, dialogue, and engagement with those currently living and producing that knowledge. It is continuously articulated, updated, and interpreted through these exchanges.

Conclusion

This article examined how mothers facing precarity in Brussels perceive, evaluate, and formulate expectations of descriptive political representatives, and what these evaluations reveal about descriptive representation and its relationship to substantive representation. In doing so, it recentres descriptive representation from the perspective of the represented. Representation was approached pragmatically, evaluated not only through tangible outcomes, but also through the processes by which resolution could be most efficiently secured. Institutional authority was closely associated with responsiveness, and elected office with decision-making capacity as well as with obligations toward those represented, including acting in their interests (Pitkin, 1967). Needs for representation were articulated from the standpoint of motherhood.

These insights shed new light on ongoing debates regarding the democratic and intrinsic significance of descriptive representation (Celis & Childs, 2018, 2020; de Jong & Mügge, 2023; Harder, 2025). Descriptiveness acquires political significance not as an independent political good, but insofar as it contributes to addressing problems and maintaining the political inclusion of affected communities and their knowledge. This in turn supports intersectional critiques of single-axis representation by highlighting how representational expectations and conditions emerge through interconnected experiences of socio-economic precarity, migration, neighbourhood neglect, religious positioning, and family life (Celis & Childs, 2020; Hussain, 2021; Phillips, 2020).

Although this case is situated in a specific urban context, the dynamics identified may extend beyond it, offering analytical insights into how descriptiveness is evaluated in contexts characterised by persistent exclusion, institutional distrust, and weak representative relationships. Future research could examine *how* representative arrangements can be developed to maintain connections with animate lived experience. Alternatively, focusing on *who* occupies descriptive representative roles presents its own empirical challenge, as the profiles participants foregrounded, combining precarity, familiarity with stigmatised neighbourhoods, minority and religious positioning, and active motherhood, remain highly underrepresented within Belgian political institutions, reflecting the socio-economic stratification of political elites (Pilet & Cross, 2014; Sevenans et al., 2025), which arguably lends credence to participants' scepticism.

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