

How does the nature of democracy
impact upon the representation of women
in government?

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY

Given that women make up just over 50% of the world's population, examining their presence both in local and national governments and analysing why this presence might be so slight is very important to a comprehensive understanding of global politics. In 2010, 31% of councillors in England were women, a figure which falls far short of parity but appears favourable in comparison to the fact that in 2013, only 23% of MPs in the House of Commons were female. Although neither local nor national government has succeeded in achieving equal representation, local government would appear to be a better environment for women¹. Women's underrepresentation in governments is a global problem, as the vast majority of countries have fewer than 29% female representatives in their parliament². However, for the purposes of comparison and because my engagement activities took place in the United Kingdom, I will narrow the focus of my analysis to democratic states with representatives elected by voters of all genders. It is crucial to understand why there are so few elected women in democracies, and to appreciate how the structure and culture of such a political system might hinder women's participation. Feminist theorists argue that these structures are inherently designed to promote men over women, and so it is important to analyse to what extent this might be true and if this can be rectified. In a form of governance in which power is given from the people of a state to their representatives through elections, it is indicative that there are other factors involved when a body of elected representatives does not reflect the demographic of the population who elected it. In order to examine this, I took part in several engagement activities.

In order to explore the way in which gender and democratic governance intersect, I decided to interview female councillors in Oxford City Council, a local authority with responsibilities

¹ Taken from: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN01250/women-in-parliament-and-government> (accessed 06/01/2014)

² Taken from: http://womanstats.org/substatics/Governmental%20Participation%20by%20Women_2010.tif_wmlogo3.png (accessed 05/01/2014)

including planning control and land use, leisure and waste collection, and which contains democratically elected councillors. I attended a meeting of Full Council, during which issues surrounding both local governance and the wider governance of the United Kingdom were discussed. I then interviewed Councillor Anne-Marie Canning³ and Councillor Beverley Clack⁴ about their roles as councillors and the way that they felt that gender had impacted upon their political careers in local government. I went campaigning with Anne-Marie, supporting Victoria Groulef, the Labour parliamentary candidate for Reading West, and was able to speak with Victoria about her experiences. Attending a politics conference for sixth form students allowed me to hear Nadine Dorries MP speak, which was certainly

interesting, as she has firmly opposed measures designed to increase the numbers of female representatives in the UK, and it gave me an insight into national government. Finally, I attended a group discussion with Theresa May MP, the Home Secretary, who is currently the only woman in the cabinet, the executive decision-making body of the United Kingdom containing the most senior ministers in the government⁵. She spoke with us about the impact of the media on her as a female politician and the culture of high powered politics.

Possibly the greatest barrier to women's participation in elected politics is a lack of encouragement to stand for election. During my interview with Anne-Marie and Bev, both admitted that they probably would not have stood until someone suggested it to them. The reality of women simply not considering politics is not only an issue in local government in the UK, but seen across the world in both regional and national governments. Indeed, the School of Public Affairs at the American University in Washington published a report which showed that, of those who received no encouragement to stand for election, 21% of

³ <http://mycouncil.oxford.gov.uk/mgUserInfo.aspx?UID=498> (accessed 17/01/2014)

⁴ <http://mycouncil.oxford.gov.uk/mgUserInfo.aspx?UID=552> (accessed 17/01/2014)

⁵ Taken from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/how-government-works> (accessed 17/01/2014)

women would consider a career in politics compared to 32% of men⁶, indicating that men have been socialised to believe more in their ability and suitability for political office. In order to counter this, there have been attempts to offer support to female candidates, such as the 'Women for Election' NGO in Ireland⁷, which offers financial support and advice to women seeking election. There have also been attempts by political parties to redress the balance, such as the Labour Party's all-women shortlists in some constituencies, which resulted in the percentage of female MPs increasing from fewer than 10% to over 20%. It is important to recognise that this was a controversial move, altering the democratic process of elections in the UK, and raising the crucial question of how to gauge a candidate's suitability for office. Theresa May pointed out in our discussion that she would rather see 'the best person for the job' in office, despite the fact that a huge part of an MP's job is to represent and reflect the population. The policy was also subject to criticisms that it was undemocratic, and infringed upon the electorate's right to choose their representative fairly. During my session campaigning with Victoria Groulef, I discovered that she was selected from an all-female shortlist and believes they have been a hugely positive change which took advantage of the UK's system of allowing political parties to select their candidates in closed primaries and encouraged women to stand for office in all constituencies.

Another difficulty for women is the conflict between work and home. A feature of national government in democracies is the tendency for power to concentrate itself in one place, usually the capital city of the state, where the legislature sits and the government is based. This means that elected representatives often have to commute to this place from their constituencies in order to fulfil the demands of their role. In larger countries such as the United States, travelling between Washington DC, where Congress is based, and Florida

⁶ Taken from: http://www.american.edu/spa/wpi/upload/Girls-Just-Wanna-Not-Run_Policy-Report.pdf (accessed 05/01/2014)

⁷ Taken from: <http://www.womenforelection.ie/about-us/> (accessed 06/01/2014)

means a five hour flight. When listening to Nadine Dorries MP, it became clear that she saw this requirement to be away from home so often as one of the greatest challenges to her, as a female MP. Unlike many female politicians, she rejects the notion that she does not have to be the primary homemaker, believing that women do have greater domestic responsibilities than men. This is a problem around the world for female politicians who feel that they cannot lessen their duty to their families. The figures show that for those aged between 24 and 34, women are twenty four times as likely to be classed as 'economically inactive due to family responsibilities' than men⁸. In terms of local government, both Anne-Marie and Bev agreed that many women felt themselves to be too busy with the combination of career and home life to stand, although the issue of commuting was negated. It is clear that for this to improve, and for women to be able to embrace political careers, perceptions about both men and women's domestic responsibilities need to change and there needs to be an improvement to the quality of childcare provided to all.

Another aspect of democratic politics which I noted during my engagement activity and subsequent research was its often combative nature. Unlike in a state under the governance of one party, such as in the People's Republic of China, a key part of democracy is encouraging debate between opposing points of view. However, this could be said to have resulted in a political culture which is overly concerned with point scoring, and indeed, tuning into Prime Minister's Questions in the UK would reveal an ugly side to democratic politics. The leaders of both the government and the opposition are often barely able to hear themselves speaking over the hectoring of the benches, and it cannot be denied that this style of debate is infinitely more suited to a louder and deeper voice. The former Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, encountered this problem in 2012, as even after making a

⁸ Taken from: <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/media-centre/blogs/category/item/childcare-isn-t-just-a-women-s-issue> (accessed 06/01/2014)

fierce denunciation of sexism in Australian politics, she faced criticism for 'screeching', and indeed, if you search 'Julia Gillard' on Google, one of the first suggestions is 'annoying voice'⁹. During my engagement activity, I attended Full Council, where motions proposed by councillors are considered, public addresses and public questions are heard and petitions raised in the area are debated. It was clear that although the democratic hallmarks of lively debate and discussion were still present, with attendant sniping, the dominance of male voices was not as clear. This could be another reason why local government does have a higher percentage of female representatives than national government, because the culture is less overwhelmingly about literally shouting down the opposition. There is also evidence that most women place more emphasis on cooperation than men when in positions of political power¹⁰, indicating that female representatives could be important in transforming the political culture to be less inhospitable to future female voices.

The prevalence of sexist comments and assumptions about female politicians in the media and in wider society is a huge issue. During my interview with Anne-Marie, she mentioned that on her way to Full Council she had been stopped and asked by staff if she had made an appointment: despite the fact that she had been elected for months, the assumption was made that she was not a councillor. Lindiwe Mazibuko, Parliamentary Leader of the opposition in South Africa, faced a similar lack of recognition in 2011 when she was dismissed by the leader of the ANC's youth wing as "a tea girl", and he refused to debate with her on the basis that she was no one of importance, despite the fact that he himself was not even an elected representative¹¹. This is compounded by a tendency to focus on female politicians' appearances: Rosy Senanayake, a member of Sri Lanka's United National

⁹ Taken from: <http://theconversation.com/when-julia-talks-does-her-gender-speak-louder-1342> (accessed 03/01/2014)

¹⁰ Kathlene, Lyn. "Power and Influence in State Legislative Policy-Making: The Interaction of Gender and Position in Committee Hearing Debates." *American Political Science Review* 88(3):560–76, 1994.

¹¹ Taken from: <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-20-terrified-juju-bails-on-debate-with-zilles-tea-girl> (accessed 04/01/2014)

party, was referred to by a minister as "a beauty queen" during a debate in 2012, and told that his thoughts were "running riot"¹². She was unimpressed and expressed a desire to be recognised for her achievements in politics. However, Theresa May made it clear during our group discussion that she was not bothered by the media's obsession with her clothes and shoes, and in fact knew of another female MP who revealed that it was May's shoes which sparked her interest in politics. It would be fair to say that, although there are occasionally positive outcomes, the increased pressure on female politicians and the fact that often less respect is accorded to them does play a part in making both local and national democratic politics harder for women.

It is clear that there are many complex and deep-rooted barriers to women's participation in democratic politics, some of which spring from the nature of democracy itself and others which can be more simply attributed to misogyny. Listening to Nadine Dorries MP and speaking with Theresa May MP provided an insight into aspects of democracy which apply pressure to female representatives, and it is arguable that the confrontational nature of democratic politics is inherently more suited to male voices. However, although Anne-Marie and Bev admitted that they would not otherwise have seriously considered entering politics, both spoke positively about the encouragement they received. Moreover, I discovered from attending Full Council that an increased percentage of female representatives coincided with a more positive atmosphere for women, and this indicates that a way in which obstacles to female participation in democratic politics could be overcome is through increasing the number of female representatives. Indeed, Victoria Groulef was very supportive of measures such as all-women shortlists, and there is an argument to be made that if there were more women in governments, behaviour that can often be discouraging to women would be

¹² Taken from: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jun/14/top-10-sexist-moments-politics> (accessed 6/1/14)

reduced. Thus, even aspects of democratic politics which could be deemed to be structural could be overcome: prevailing attitudes towards the domestic responsibilities of women could be changed, and the combative point scoring and hectoring of many democratic legislatures could be transformed into a more positive political environment for representatives of all genders.

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