

Female Representation Beyond Westminster:

Lessons from Scotland and Wales

Why is female representation in Parliament so low? How can the number of female MPs be increased? Looking at the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales, **Diana Silvia Stirbu** argues that ending gender inequality in UK politics requires serious structural and cultural changes.

Society might look very different from more than a century ago, when the suffragettes were tying themselves to the railings of Buckingham Palace demanding women's right to vote, but gender inequality in the UK is not a thing of the past. Women in full-time employment earn, on average, 15.5 per cent less per hour than their male counterparts. The disparity is wider in some professions than others: according to a recent report from the Chartered Management Institute, the gap between how much male and female managers earn widened to £10,546 in 2010.

In politics, the gender gap is as overt and visible as ever. Women make up just 22 per cent of the current House of Commons. Roughly one in four local councillors are female. Sexism is alive and well in UK politics too: during a recent Prime Minister's Questions, shadow chief secretary Angela Eagle was put in her place by none other than the UK prime minister with his 'humorous remark', 'Calm down dear, calm down'!

What message does this kind of behaviour transmit to electors and young women with an aspiration to pursue a career in politics? Is this what politics in the UK is all about, or is there more to it than what we see every Wednesday at Prime Minister's Questions? This piece looks beyond Westminster politics to investigate advancements on the gender agenda on the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, where a 'new kind' of female politics seems to be emerging since devolution was launched in 1997.

Devolution was infused with expectations that the new institutions in Scotland and Wales would be more open, more inclusive and more accountable than Westminster. At the heart of the new polity in the devolved nations was equality of opportunity for all, allowing citizens greater participation in the political process and promoting a more consensual type of politics. The parliamentary committees in both Scotland and Wales became important venues for public engagement and consultation with civic society. The Additional Member System used in the 1999 elections produced impressively gender-balanced results: a healthy 37.2 per cent female representation in Scotland and 40 per cent in Wales.

In 2003 we saw an increase to 39.5 per cent in Scotland, and 50 per cent in Wales (although 2007 brought the first minor decline in female members of the devolved assemblies). Wales was in fact the first country to break through the 50 per cent barrier in 2006, when, following the by-election in Blaenau Gwent, the National Assembly's gender composition was 31 women to 29 men. Astonishingly, the representation of women has never fallen below 40 per cent in the Welsh National Assembly or below 30 per cent in the Scottish Parliament. These figures mean that Scotland and Wales may be likened to the Nordic countries, which have a strong tradition of gender-balanced political representation, and newly established democracies that endorsed quotas in their constitutions (Rwanda, South Africa).

So, do devolved institutions hold the key for balanced gender representation? And how sustainable are these advancements? The electoral 'triumph' of women both in Westminster post-1997 and even more so in Scotland and Wales was not down to chance, but a combination of political will, structural factors and strong activism from 'strategic women' within political parties. The Labour Party reaped the rewards of 'all-women shortlists' in the 1997 UK General Elections. In Wales, Labour and Plaid Cymru used twinning (pairing up constituencies – one man, one woman candidate) and zipping of candidates (women on the first and third place on regional lists). 'Strategic' women within political parties (especially Plaid and Labour in Wales), such as Val Feld, Christine Chapman, Helen Mary Jones and Jane Hutt, who had a wealth of experience as social activists either in trade unions or women's organisations, were instrumental in pushing the gender agenda within their respective parties. In Scotland, women had an important platform in the Scottish Constitutional Convention to argue for 50:50 representation in the Scottish Parliament.

The element of proportionality in the electoral system in Scotland and Wales arguably increased women's chances of being elected, although numerous counter-arguments can be made based on empirical evidence from countries using PR or mixed systems that have appalling records of gender representation in their



Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is one of 19 female Scottish National Party MSPs at Holyrood. Press Association

national parliaments (less than 15 per cent in Ireland, Romania, Brazil or Hungary).

The question of sustainability goes beyond the numbers game; evidence from the 2011 elections shows a mixed picture. On the one hand, Labour and Plaid gradually stepped back from affirmative action, raising fears of a dramatic fall-back in the number of women elected. However, results were not as bad as predicted: the gender composition is now 43.3 per cent women in the National Assembly (down 4 per cent from 2007) and 36.5 per cent women in the Scottish Parliament (a slight increase from 2007). On the 'positive side', parties traditionally reluctant to employ affirmative action performed better. In Wales, the Conservative group now has four women (an increase of three since 2007), and in Scotland, the Scottish Nationalist Party's gender intake significantly improved (from 12 to 19).

However, evidence from Scotland and Wales suggests that, despite a decade of progressive approach to gender equality, success and best practice did not permeate the other aspects of public life. In Wales, for instance, the Equality and Human Rights Commission report *Who Runs Wales? 2011* draws a gloomy picture, counting only two female chief executives in the top 50 firms in Wales, just two female editors at

the newspapers surveyed and only one in ten Assembly Government sponsored bodies run by female chief executives. Only the National Assembly stands out – not just for its record in the number of women elected and their high profile within the institutions (female presiding officer, women chairing important committees), but also for its gender balance at administrative and managerial level.

The message from the devolved legislatures is mixed. First, progress on the gender equality agenda doesn't come easily, but it is possible. A combination of structural, political and cultural factors is required to achieve substantial progress. Female activism, political will, affirmative action measures and the electoral system are all crucial aspects, but not sole ingredients for success. Constitutional frameworks alone cannot guarantee progress, unless we are prepared to talk about enshrining gender quotas in our constitution. However, a more pluralist electoral system – together with structural change in the candidate selection process within political parties and a more fruitful partnership between men and women politicians in promoting the goals of gender equality – might make a significant difference.

Second, we have to accept that the nature of the 'job' in the Welsh and

Scottish assemblies is more attractive for women than life at Westminster. This is down to institutional features: less of a macho environment, a consideration to balancing family and working life (the National Assembly has operated family-friendly working hours since its inception), no tolerance for sexist language and behaviour, and, more importantly, a significant presence of other women. This doesn't mean that tribal politics doesn't happen in Wales and Scotland, but there certainly haven't been any 'Calm down dear, calm down' comments on the floors of Holyrood or the Senedd. Westminster would benefit from not letting the 2010 Speaker's Conference Report, which made a raft of recommendations on improving female representation in Parliament, gather dust on the shelves.

There is no room for complacency, nor for the assumption that once a 'critical mass' in Parliament is achieved, the gender battle will have been won. Rather than couching the gender equality debate in the language of a war of the sexes, both men and women need to be engaged in helping to promote greater female representation in UK politics.

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