

GENDER AND POLITICAL PROCESSES IN THE CONTEXT OF DEVOLUTION

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The devolution of government to Scotland and Wales was accompanied by the election of women political representatives in unprecedented numbers. This research investigates whether and how a gender balance in political representatives within the National Assembly for Wales has influenced political culture and policy development, and the relationships between local government, the National Assembly and third sector organisations.

The political culture of the National Assembly

A major feature of the National Assembly as a representative political institution is its *gender parity*. During the first Assembly, elected in 1999, 40% of the seats were held by women; in 2003, this rose to 50% and, since May 2007, 47% of AMs have been women. The Assembly is a *new political institution* associated with a consensual political style, an inclusive politics, and working arrangements which recognise the caring responsibilities of those working within it. Its legal framework obliges it to consider *equality of opportunity* in all its business.

There was a widely held perception amongst AMs that gender parity and the fact that the National Assembly is a new institution have an effect on its *culture*. In the words of a male Labour AM:

It makes a difference to the culture in which group meetings are conducted, as I've said we have fierce disagreement in group meetings but it is conducted with the complete absence of chest thumping and table thumping.

The Welsh Assembly has a distinctive *political style* which is defined in opposition to the adversarial political style of Westminster. In its early days the Assembly was characterised by a consensual political style but many AMs regard a less consensual style as necessary for the development of an effective opposition to the Welsh

Assembly Government. This does not necessarily imply a more confrontational politics as most AMs distance themselves from the aggressive, macho posturing which is often associated with adversarial politics.

Gender balance is seen as having an effect on the style of interactions between politicians, both cross-party and within-party. According to many AMs, women tend to do politics differently from men and this is often described as being more consensual than adversarial. It would, however, be unwise to attribute the style of the National Assembly for Wales solely to gender parity. Some younger men do politics in a more feminised way than older men just as some women adopt a masculinised political style. And there are party differences in style with the Conservatives tending to be the most adversarial.

AMs agreed that women had an impact on the type of *policy issues* that were debated. More emphasis was given to what one AM referred to as 'non-traditional areas'.

Domestic violence is on the agenda, equal pay is on the agenda and all those kinds of really important issues that probably wouldn't be there if there wasn't such a high number of women.

The *working environment* and working hours are explicitly family friendly. This was widely seen as being of symbolic importance. However, in most AMs' views, family-friendly hours were not of great practical importance. In fact, the notion that the Assembly is family friendly was dismissed by some AMs, particularly those who did not live in and around Cardiff where the Assembly is situated. However, when (male) party leaders and business managers threatened to undermine the commitment to family-friendly working, a

rebellion by women AMs ensured that the policy remained intact. Family-friendly working represents a recognition that political representatives may have family and childcare responsibilities and indicates a distancing from more masculinist political cultures.

There is quite a high level of gender awareness amongst AMs, although this varies with party. They talk about the way issues are gendered and see equality as being an important principle governing the work of the Assembly. Many of the women and some of the men define themselves as feminist and are in favour of positive action to improve the levels of women's representation.

The culture, the way debates are conducted, the language used and the policies that are prioritised are linked, by almost all AMs, both to the gender balance of the Assembly and to the fact that it is a new institution.

Local government and gender

The gender composition of local government contrasts with that of the National Assembly. After the 2004 local elections the proportion of women councillors in Wales was 22%. Since the 2008 elections it has increased to 25%. At local level there is a lower percentage of women councillors overall but this hides considerable variation. At the time of our research, Cardiff had 37% women councillors, Swansea 31% and Vale of Glamorgan 30% compared with Blaenau Gwent 9.5%, Anglesey 5% and Merthyr Tydfil 3%. The representation of women in local government is lower than in the Assembly and, in many cases, women are in a small minority. There is also an age difference with 42.4% of councillors being retired. There are very few councillors from ethnic minorities.

According to AMs, the *culture* of local government contrasts with that of the National Assembly. As one of the women AMs said:

Well you have to remember that I was a member of a Valleys council and it had been controlled by the Labour Party since 1925, it was largely made up of older men who felt that the place for a woman was in the home, and also that they had a right to run everything locally.

There was a view among councillors that the culture of local government was male

dominated and that that in order to fit into it women had to behave like men. In the words of a woman councillor:

Women in politics have to be very, very tough and very resilient and very pushy so maybe we have certain features to our personality that you would associate with, with a male ... in politics, you can't be a retiring reclining sort of accepting type of person, you have to have that tough streak and be determined and, you know, sometimes I

think 'Am I really this kind of person?'

There was a perception that there was little difference in *political style* between women and men but that women bring different qualities to politics because of their gender-specific experiences. Political style was seen as varying individually or relating to the different cultures of the political parties rather than being linked to gender although some thought that political style was gendered.

The *working environment* in councils was not perceived as family-friendly or indeed friendly for anyone who had paid employment, particularly if it was full time. This was seen as difficult for both men and women but particularly for women. There was a lack of awareness, particularly amongst male councillors, that women often faced extra barriers because of their domestic and childcare responsibilities.

There was support for the idea of increasing women's representation, either in the interests of equality or because

women brought different qualities to local politics, but there was widespread opposition to any positive measures being taken to achieve this. Measures such as twinning and all-women shortlists were understood as 'positive discrimination'. The view that women who were 'not up to the job' were being s/elected as a result of positive measures was widespread. Most councillors assumed that the current selection of men was based on merit. Some women were aware that the principle of selection on merit was undermined by men informally selecting other men to replace them when they decided to retire.

There was a lack of gender awareness amongst councillors and very little understanding of how policy issues may be gendered; hardly any of the councillors identified themselves as feminist. In contrast to politics at the all-Wales level, local politics is embedded in gendered networks that normalise a masculinist political culture that tends to discourage women's participation and is often insensitive to women's political concerns.

The third sector and the National Assembly – a process of inclusion?

They (AMs) need to understand the issues...and we need to be telling them, so we need to have that way of working together really.
(Woman representative of national third sector organisation)

The National Assembly for Wales was designed to be an inclusive institution which encourages participation and cooperation. Third sector involvement helps ensure that policy development is based on real life experiences. Such engagement can be encouraged by open and transparent consultation and by the funding of voluntary and community organisations to assist them in promoting their views. The research focuses on three policy areas related to gender: domestic violence; child poverty; and equalities, especially equal pay. It draws on the perspectives of representatives from local and national third sector organisations working in these areas, as well as those of Assembly Members and civil servants.

Devolution has increased engagement of third sector organisations in policy development.

- This happens via formal mechanisms such as the Third Sector Partnership,

ministerial meetings, consultations, working parties.

- It is also facilitated by informal mechanisms, including: AM visits to local third sector projects and

maintenance of AMs' prior personal links with particular organisations.

Access to ministers and AMs is facilitated by the relatively small size of Wales and its national political institution, and engagement is a two-way process that can be initiated by third sector organisations or AMs.

However, not all third sector organisations are effectively engaged in policy development.

There are several barriers to engagement, particularly for grassroots and local organisations:

- Many are funded only to provide services. Consequently they have no time to respond to consultations nor are there resources to facilitate their engagement.
- Some AMs expressed concern that third sector organisations may fear withdrawal of funding if they criticise Welsh Assembly Government policy.
- The dual role of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, which both represents the third sector in Wales and administers and gate-keeps funding grants, was identified as a possible barrier to full engagement.

Gender parity of elected representatives at the National Assembly for Wales has had an effect on third sector engagement, particularly for those types of organisations included in this project.

More women AMs has meant that more AMs have links with voluntary organisations acting for women's interests.

Increased diversity amongst elected representatives would encourage engagement with a greater diversity of third sector organisations.

National third sector organisations are actively engaged with policy makers. The Third sector Partnership Council is chaired by the Minister responsible for Social

Justice, and meets three times a year. Third sector organisations are also able to meet the minister whose portfolio is relevant to their concerns at twice-yearly meetings, and influence policy through working groups and expert panels to which they are seconded. They are also able to meet Ministers and AMs on request. A senior Welsh Assembly Government civil servant with experience of advising ministers in the pre-devolution era, commenting on formal mechanisms of engagement, told us:

...I feel there is more diversity of advice going now. And ministers are considering, you know, they've got their special advisers, they've got their civil servants, they also have all the groups that access them, and are very open. So I don't think that would have happened without devolution, the sort of openness to different perspectives...

A woman minister described also the effectiveness of informal types of engagement:

... I think I use my contacts with women's groups particularly just in order to listen and learn and update myself on what's going on, evidence, and also a reference group...it's their experiences and knowledge which actually keeps me informed as a minister, as much as getting formal briefings from civil servants...

However, the situation in grassroots and local organisations is very different due primarily to the lack of resources for engagement. A representative from a local women's community-based organisation said:

... really we haven't got the capacity to be engaging really fully with the Welsh Assembly [Interviewer: Have you been asked to participate as a

voluntary organisation in the development of any policies?] No, no we haven't...This is the kind of stuff we would really like to do more of, but, and it is what my job is supposed to be, but we don't have the capacity for it at the moment...

The disparity in levels of engagement in policy development between national and local third sector organisations has recently been acknowledged by the WCVA which is initiating its 'Voices for Change Cymru' project to encourage more engagement with small and grassroots organisations.

The development of policies on domestic violence

But for instance domestic abuse, the previous minister took a particular interest in that, really because although sentencing and the law is non-devolved, how you actually treat, you know, deal with the victims of domestic abuse is very much devolved. So it comes down to things like housing, support services, and lawyer services and all the rest of it. I suppose on that one there was, you know, the minister herself was very committed.

(Senior civil servant)

Domestic violence is defined as a criminal justice issue by the UK government and criminal justice is an area of policy which is not devolved. Some initiatives have, however, been taken in this policy area. The Welsh Assembly Government's domestic violence strategy, launched in 2005, was the culmination of several years of work which began with the establishment in 2002 of the Working Group on Domestic Violence and Violence against Women in Wales (now the Working Group on Domestic Abuse) by Jane Hutt, then Minister of Health and Social Services. The research looked at the development of domestic violence policies in Wales and whether they are making a difference to women's lives.

Services have improved in recent years through policy developments initiated by the UK Government and the Welsh Assembly Government.

- The Home Office has introduced specialist domestic violence courts which have made visits to court less intimidating for female survivors of domestic violence.
- Another Home Office initiative, multi-agency risk-assessment conferences (MARACS), has increased protection for women most at risk from domestic violence.
- Multi-agency working and the appointment of domestic abuse coordinators in each local authority in Wales and England has led to cooperation between public and third sector agencies and more integrated services for victims of domestic violence.

- A 24-hour helpline for those experiencing domestic violence, run by Welsh Women's Aid, has been established by the Welsh Assembly Government.

The All-Wales Strategy on Domestic Abuse has led to increased funding for domestic abuse services, rising from £1.17 M to £3.7M.

Despite some improvements arising from these policy developments, there are some key problem areas.

- Some local authorities have interpreted the equality duties to mean that local women's refuges also have to provide services to men; this is despite the Equality and Human Rights Commission's recognition that domestic violence is 'one of the most serious forms of gender inequality'.

- Local refuge groups funded by the Supporting People Revenue Grant are more secure financially, but the types of services that they are able to supply are more restricted and they have less autonomy in responding to their service-users' needs.
- Misrecognition of the gendered nature of domestic violence, with women making up the vast majority of victims, and misleading statistics which have influenced policy development have serious implications for resource distribution and social justice.

The UK government's National Delivery Plan for Domestic Abuse covers both Wales and England. It has seven crime reduction objectives and its definition of domestic violence is gender neutral. The All-Wales Strategy focuses on devolved policy areas such as housing, health and education, but has the same objectives as the Home Office's plan.

Community Safety Partnerships have been identified as crucial for delivering the All-Wales Strategy. Domestic violence agencies such as local Women's Aid groups have been invited to participate in these and are also represented on the Working Group on Domestic Abuse.

The existence of the All Wales Strategy at all, in view of the lack of devolved authority in this area, attests to the effects of gender balance in the National Assembly for Wales and the commitment of key women AMs to the issue of domestic violence.

There are some worrying developments concerning the use of misleading statistics and gender-neutral definitions of domestic violence, both of which give the impression that domestic violence is not related to gender. Both the Welsh Assembly Government website and the website of the Dyn Project, a service established to support male victims of domestic violence, cite figures from a 1999 Home Office report of one in four women and one in six men experiencing domestic violence. These figures include one-off incidents and have been shown to be seriously flawed by follow-up research. Their widespread use, however, together with gender neutral language, has the effect of reducing the visibility of gendered power relations as a crucial dimension of domestic violence and has serious implications for the distribution of resources.

Obviously we acknowledge that there is domestic abuse towards men, and everybody acknowledges that. It has been very difficult because some of us, especially people with a sort of Women's Aid background or specifically women focussed services, have always said 'well, it's not gender neutral is it?' and obviously it is not gender neutral in severity and percentage
(Local Domestic Abuse Forum member)

Policy implications

- Our findings support the claim that a gender balance among political representatives has an effect both on the way politics is done and on the policy issues that are prioritised.
- We also have evidence that a diversity of political representatives facilitates engagement with a greater range of civil society organisations.
- However, we found resistance at local level to positive measures to increase women's representation. This suggests that further consideration needs to be given to ways in which diversity amongst political representatives can be increased.
- Our evidence shows effective engagement, both formal and informal, of the National Assembly with voluntary sector organisations at the all-Wales level. However, at local level there are serious barriers to such engagement, primarily due to a lack of resources and constraints as to how resources are used. In order to facilitate greater local engagement, the nature of funding regimes needs to be re-assessed.
- There is some evidence from this research that there are unintended consequences associated with the equalities agenda and, particularly, with the Gender Equality Duty, that could have a detrimental impact on the stability and sustainability of voluntary sector provision to women and children threatened with domestic violence. This should be investigated as a matter of urgency.
- We have also found an inappropriate use of official statistics and gender-neutral language in relation to domestic violence. It is important that statutory and voluntary agencies, Community Safety Partnerships and the Welsh Assembly Government base their policies and resource allocation on evidence which reflects accurately the gendered nature of domestic violence

The study aimed to

- explore the contribution made by women members of the National Assembly for Wales to policy development and to the responsiveness of the Assembly to gender-based welfare initiatives;
- identify the ways in which political issues are defined and understood and the effect of this on gender politics;
- investigate the political and organisational culture of the National Assembly, and its relation to the political and organisational culture of local government in Wales;
- explore how third sector organisations are affected by the different gender balance of the National Assembly and local government, and the importance of gender in their work.

Methods

The research was carried out between 2004 and 2008. The main methods were extensive qualitative interviewing at national level and in three case study local authority areas, documentary analysis and observational research. The findings reported here draw on:

- interviews with 31 of the 60 sitting Assembly Members during the second term of the National Assembly (2003-07);
- four interviews with Welsh Assembly Government civil servants;
- interviews with 27 councillors and senior officials from three local authority areas. Two were urban/rural socially mixed authorities and one was a deprived post-industrial valleys authority;
- interviews with 24 representatives from local third sector organisations and with 6 officials from national third sector organisations and trade unions;
- twenty observational sessions at party political conferences, local council meetings and National Assembly for Wales plenary and committee meetings;
- analysis of gender-related policy areas through Welsh Assembly Government publications, Records of Proceedings and Minutes from meetings of committees and working groups.

January 2009

This research was funded by the ESRC (RES-000-23-1185). The research team consisted of Nickie Charles (Principal Investigator), University of Warwick, Charlotte Aull Davies and Stephanie Jones (Co-investigators), Swansea University.

Printed on paper from registered sustainable forests by Glamorgan Press, Unit 27, Neath Abbey Business Park, Neath, SA10 7DR