

# Working in local and devolved government: doing gender and practising politics

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This paper explores the experiences of working as a political representative in local and devolved government in Wales, drawing on research undertaken as part of an ESRC-funded project into gender and political processes in the context of devolution<sup>1</sup>. The gender composition of local government and the National Assembly for Wales are very different with women constituting, on average, 22% of councillors across Wales and 47% of Assembly Members (AMs). In this paper we draw on interviews with women and men AMs and councillors to investigate the extent to which the different institutional organisation and gendering of local and devolved government affect the working environment and organisational culture of these two political arenas. Several of the AMs we interviewed had experiences of both local and devolved government and this enables us to compare the organisational cultures of local government and the National Assembly and the differently gendered ways of doing politics that characterises them. We show that, while the National Assembly can be said to have a feminised political and organisational culture, at local level politics is masculinised. This has implications both for the ways in which women and men learn to do politics and for how they learn to do gender in these different political domains. Indeed women and men often come to politics through different routes and this also has implications for their understanding of politics and the ways in which they engage with it. This notwithstanding, our findings show that in a masculinised political space women, as well as men, adopt 'masculine' styles of working while, in a more feminised political space, there is less pressure on both women and men to practise politics in what is often referred to as a 'macho' style. Our evidence shows that there is a widespread perception that having a gender balance in the National Assembly means that both politics and gender are done 'differently' and that 'women's issues' and equalities issues more generally are given greater priority. This contrasts with local government where women representatives are in a minority, the working environment takes little account of caring and domestic

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<sup>1</sup> E.S.R.C. grant number RES-000-23-1185 awarded to Nickie Charles (Principal Investigator University of Warwick), Charlotte Davies & Stephanie Jones (Swansea University).

responsibilities, and women as well as men learn to 'do' gender in a masculinised arena where both women and femininity are seen as out of place.

## **Working in local and devolved government: doing gender and practising politics**

It is now ten years since the first elections to the devolved legislatures in Scotland and Wales which resulted in the election of an unprecedented number of women representatives. In both the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales women constituted over 40% of elected representatives and, in the second Assembly elections, women constituted 50% of Assembly Members; in other words gender parity was achieved. This contrasted significantly with the proportion of women in both the Westminster government and in Welsh local government where the figures were 19.5% and 21.8% respectively. Politics, like other areas of public life, has long been dominated by men and is culturally masculine; indeed the way politics is done at Westminster is, in many ways, overtly hostile to women (Sones et al, 2005). In this paper I want to explore how politics is done in local and devolved government in Wales and the relationship between the doing of politics and the doing of gender. I first locate the research in the wider literature relating to gender, politics and the culture of organisations before going on to explore the findings of a recently completed research project investigating political processes at different levels of the polity. My focus is on the cultural practices characterising these two levels of government and the pressures that are felt by politicians to adapt their behaviour to the dominant norms and expectations surrounding political life.

### **Political institutions as places of work**

Feminists have long argued that the structure and culture of bureaucratic organisations are gendered, with men predominating in positions of power and authority at the top of organisational hierarchies and masculine modes of behaviour and sociability being taken as the norm (Acker, 1990; Witz and Savage, 1992; Halford and Leonard, 2001). Such a model has only recently been applied to political organisations, where it has been argued that not only is power associated with men and masculinity but that it is white men who embody power in Western culture (Puwar, 2004; Lovenduski, 2005). This implies that if women aspire to positions of power they are subject to questions about not only their femininity but also their sexuality (Cockburn, 1991). This gendering of power and the cultural association of politics with particular forms of masculinity has implications for how politics is done. In the UK, for instance, research shows that the new intake of Labour women in 1997 experienced the House of Commons as

not being 'conducive to women acting in a feminised way' and that in order to be able to 'do' politics effectively women felt that they had to adopt a masculine style of behaviour (Childs, 2004: 8). Conversely, where women have entered the political field in significant numbers, there is some evidence of less pressure on both women and men to behave in an aggressively 'macho' way (Bochel and Briggs, 2000; Childs, 2004; Grey, 2002; Ross, 2002; Freedman, 2002; Mackay et al, 2003). There are relatively few sociologists, however, who have analysed political institutions as places of work although it has been suggested that, in order to understand the impact of increasing numbers of women representatives, we have to consider not only the ways in which they influence policy development, but also the changes that might be brought about in the working environment as a result of their presence. This has been termed taking a 'workplace perspective' and it is this perspective that informs what follows (Dahlerup, 2006:513).

## **The study**

The research on which this paper is based explored the effect on political processes and participation of gender parity amongst political representatives in devolved government. Wales was particularly interesting in this regard because, after the second Assembly elections in 2003, women constituted 50% of AMs; this rose to 52% during the course of the second Assembly due to a by-election in Blaenau Gwent. We were interested in investigating whether this gender balance at the level of the National Assembly was associated with a differently gendered organisational and political culture, and in the relationship between the organisational and political culture of the Assembly and the organisational and political culture of local government where women's representation is much lower. In order to explore these questions we looked at three levels of the polity: the National Assembly for Wales, local government, and civil society organisations.

The National Assembly has 60 AMs and, between 2005 and 2007 (during the second term of the Welsh Assembly Government) we carried out 31 interviews with AMs, 15 women and 16 men. Our interviewees were drawn from the four main political parties in Wales – the Labour Party, Plaid Cymru/the Party of Wales, the Liberal Democrat Party and the Conservative Party. We also interviewed two Independents. Between 2005 and 2008 we carried out 21 interviews with councillors (9 women and 12 men) in three, contrasting local

authority areas, and a further 6 with council officials (3 men and 3 women). Our three case-study areas differed both in terms of the political composition of local government and in the proportion of women councillors. One was an urban local authority with a Liberal Democrat-led coalition in control of the council with women comprising 29.2% of councillors. One was a primarily rural local authority where the council was controlled by an Independent-led coalition with Labour; here women comprised 16.2% of councillors and the council leader was a woman. The third was a post-industrial local authority, which had for decades been controlled by Labour but at the time of our study was run by an all-party coalition; here only 3% of councillors were women. We also interviewed 24 representatives of local civil society organisations and 6 from all-Wales voluntary organisations and trade unions as well as one director of a public body (3 of these interviewees were men). In addition we undertook policy analysis and observations at party conferences, the National Assembly and local government. In this paper I am drawing on our interviews with AMs and councillors.

## **Context**

The gender balance in the National Assembly is very different from both local and national government. This was achieved by the adoption of positive measures by the two main political parties in Wales. The Labour Party adopted a policy of twinning whereby constituencies were paired, with a man being selected in one constituency and a woman in the other. Plaid Cymru put women at the top of the 5 regional lists; 20 seats in the National Assembly being filled in this way. The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives took no special measures to ensure an adequate representation of women. The adoption of twinning was possible because the National Assembly was a new political institution and there were no incumbents; it was therefore a one-off measure that could not be repeated and it was mainly this tactic that resulted in gender parity amongst AMs. This can be seen in Table 1 which shows that, of the 29 Labour AMs, 19 were women.

**Table 1: Gender and party composition of National Assembly at time of interviewing (2006-7)**

	Women	Men	Total
Conservative	2	9	11
Labour	19	10	29
Liberal Democrat	3	3	6
Plaid Cymru	6	6	12
Independent	1	1	2
Total	31	29	60

The policy of twinning was very divisive within the Labour Party in Wales and was adopted by the narrowest of margins. Prior to its adoption, Labour candidates for local and UK government had been overwhelmingly male (Mackay et al, 2007: 75). Some of the Labour women AMs we interviewed reported considerable hostility to their selection from within the party and all-women shortlists have been particularly controversial in south Wales.

No such measures have been taken in relation to selection of candidates for council elections and some of the councillors we interviewed see the whole idea as a luxury, given the difficulties in finding people who are willing to stand and who have the necessary skills. This means that at local level there is a lower percentage of women councillors overall but considerable variation between councils. At the time of our research, prior to the 2008 local elections, 37% of councillors in Cardiff were women, 31% in Swansea and 30% in the Vale of Glamorgan. This compared with Blaenau Gwent where the figure was 9.5%, Anglesey where it was 5% and Merthyr Tydfil where it was 3%. There is, therefore, considerable variation within local government but generally women's representation is much lower than their representation in the National Assembly and, in many cases, women are in a very small minority. This means that there is no critical mass of women in many councils.

The differences in the proportion of women representatives at the levels of the National Assembly and local government in Wales are associated with different ways of doing politics. Here I focus on the experiences of local and devolved government and the light they shed on the practice of politics and the doing of gender. In particular I explore whether there are there new ways of practising

politics in the National Assembly and investigate whether this is related to doing gender. I look first at the National Assembly then at local government.

## **Findings**

### *National Assembly*

From our interviews with AMs it became clear that they perceive the gender balance within the National Assembly as having an effect on both the culture of the institution and on policy development. Four of the male AMs we interviewed had been MPs and 16 AMs had been local councillors; they were therefore able to draw on their experiences of other levels of government to discuss the effect of gender parity within the National Assembly.

Most AMs linked the culture of the National Assembly to the fact that there was a gender balance of AMs and to the fact that it had been set up expressly to embody a political style that differed from the aggressive and confrontational culture characterising Westminster. These two issues were intertwined in their accounts.

Certainly compared with the House of Commons, that is very different, very different. The House of Commons is incredibly male dominated, ... but to what extent it's down to the greater gender balance or ... just because the way the Assembly works, it is a new institution, very explicitly being designed to be inclusive, it is very difficult to decide... (Male Labour)

AMs expressed the view that having gender parity made a difference to the culture and to the way in which politics was done.

Oh I think ... it makes a difference to the culture in which group meetings are conducted as, 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. (Male Labour)

This difference was often understood in terms of gender, although there was also an awareness that individual women and men did not necessarily behave in stereotypically gendered ways.

I don't like making generalisations because I know women who are just as aggressive as men, and I know men who can be as calm and sensible as many women I know, but I think on the whole the women that I know have got a different way of working and think things through, and aren't sort of overly aggressive. (Female Labour)

These comments alert us to the difference between a general understanding of differences in behaviour between women and men, which is often based on cultural stereotypes, and a more nuanced appreciation that the behaviour of individuals varies and may not conform to cultural expectations. While being aware of this distinction, it was also clear that AMs perceived a difference between the ways in which women and men worked.

Oh it's made a tremendous difference yes, because women do things in a different way, do debate in a more consensual style not, I mean many of us have learnt to be less consensual, for publicity reasons, 'cause the media aren't interested in consensus, but I mean our natural way of working is, probably more practical and more low key. (Female Liberal Democrat)

This comment is interesting because, while recognising gender-based differences in behaviour, there is also an awareness that women may have to learn to behave in different, possibly more 'masculine' ways, because this is expected by the media and is what is necessary in order to be seen to be doing 'real' politics and to make politics newsworthy.

So women and men are perceived as having a different political styles which are linked to gender, but women are also seen as capable of behaving in a more 'masculine' style. By the same token, the presence of women was seen as having an effect on men's behaviour.

I wonder whether, it is slightly more difficult sometimes here, at least I find it so, there are very few male members here who would actually shout down a lady member in full flight. (Male Conservative)

Despite the view that politics was being done differently in the National Assembly from both Westminster and local government, there was still evidence of 'macho' behaviour, particularly in the run up to elections. And we found that some men, particularly those from the Conservative party, preferred to engage in more



robust debate and adopted a more 'Westminster style' than other AMs (see also Chaney et al, 2007). Amongst some AMs, there was a view that in order for politics to be seen to be interesting and for government to work properly there had to be healthy disagreement. Consensus, one AM told us, which was associated with a more feminine political style, was boring.

Working hours in political legislatures, as in other organisations, are often premised on the assumption that political representatives do not have any domestic or caring responsibilities. The National Assembly, in contrast, has tried to develop a family-friendly working environment which is seen by women AMs as having both practical and symbolic importance. Its symbolic importance relates to the fact that it embodies a recognition that political representatives, and those who work for the National Assembly, have domestic and caring responsibilities. Male AMs (and some women), however, were not so convinced and argued, in purely practical terms, that the working hours were only family friendly for those who lived in Cardiff, where the Assembly is based. For those living further afield, longer hours on fewer days in the week would be more family friendly. There is considerable pressure to bring the Assembly's working hours more in line with those of Westminster and the arguments advanced in support of this are couched in terms of the amount of work that needs to be done. It is women from across the different parties who have resisted such pressure.

Amongst AMs there was a high awareness of gender and equality issues and widespread support for positive measures to increase women's political representation; indeed 16 (10 women and 6 men) identified themselves as feminist. There was also evidence that women prioritised different policy issues from men. This related both to their routes into politics (several of the women had been involved in the women's movement) and to their different life experiences. Thus AMs told us that 'non-traditional' issues were on the political agenda.

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. (Female, Plaid)

This was seen as being due both to gender parity amongst AMs and also to the fact that key strategic women had positional power and were able to ensure that so-called women's issues were prioritised.

## *Local government*

The contrast between the National Assembly and local government, in terms of political style and working environment, was very marked, with the culture of local government being far more masculinised than that of the National Assembly. This comparison was made by AMs who had been councillors before standing for election to the National Assembly.

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. (Female, Plaid)

Given that local government is a male-dominated political environment and the culture is masculinised, in order for women to be accepted and taken seriously by male councillors they have to behave like men. Doing masculinity is part of practising politics.

Women in politics have to be very, very tough and very resilient and very pushy so maybe we have certain features that (laugh) to our personality that, that maybe 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, and be determined and, you know, sometimes I think 'Am I really this kind of person?' (Female Liberal Democrat councillor)

Furthermore, it is difficult to behave in any other way while women are in such a small minority.

I have come to the conclusion that unless you have a critical mass of female councillors – approaching 50% - then the culture of the council will be male and any minority female members can only hope to fit into that culture by acting in a similar way to the male councillors..... (Female Labour councillor)

There was a view amongst councillors, especially the men, that there was no gender difference in political style, which is perhaps not surprising if women are in a minority and feel that they have to adopt masculine modes of behaviour in order to survive. This view, that there was no gender patterning to political style

and that any variation was due to individual personality, legitimated the argument that there was no need to take any special measures to ensure an increase in women's representation because a councillor's gender did not make a difference to the way they operated.

Despite the view that gender did not affect political style, women were seen as less aggressive than men and as bringing different qualities to politics: they are not so inclined to indulge in political posturing, they are more empathetic and approachable, and they have different life experiences. So despite the fact that women feel they have to behave 'like men', there are differences between women's and men's political style which councillors understand in terms of gender. One of the male councillors thought that women and men behave differently in debates, with women being less confrontational, something which also emerged from our AM interviews:

I think if anything I think perhaps men hold back from criticising women more so than they would; I think the male-male political arguments tend to be more heated than the...The male-male confrontations tend to be more no holds barred, whereas there is more 'gentleman-ness' in the male-female sort of confrontation....(Male, Independent councillor)

Women were also seen as more skilled at calming down a situation that might be getting out of control.

I think that certainly in the council chamber when things are getting heated, when things are getting very politically turbulent, I think the female councillors can, how can I say, calm the mood a lot easier than the male councillors. If a male councillor stands up and says 'let's calm this down chaps' whereas female councillors tend to have a more calming effect, but subtly not overtly. (Male, Independent councillor)

Women were also more prepared to listen and consider other points of view in contrast with men who tended 'to want always to be right and see backing down or considering alternate arguments as a sign of weakness'. She continued:

I think you probably get more debate and discussion and people considering, you know, more of a range of points of view. (*Int: You think that happens at the moment with more men?*) No, no it doesn't happen (laughter). It would

happen if there were more women...But you know the basic thrust of that because what you find with men is that they are afraid to look at another point of view because it makes them look weak as if they are sort of backing down from what they have said. (Female, Labour councillor)

There is also some evidence that women are more likely to engage in debate when 'women's' issues are under discussion. In one of the councils, when the local domestic abuse strategy was being debated, women's participation increased.

I was very supportive of the domestic abuse strategy, I supported that and I found it very exciting that when that came to Council that women who didn't normally speak very fluently actually spoke quite fluently, you know, about it and it was clear that there was a feeling across the Chamber that all women who perhaps wouldn't have, because they were in different political parties, did actually feel that they were supporting something together. (Female, Plaid councillor)

These comments point not only to women's ability to work together across parties on particular issues, something that was never spoken about in relation to men and which we also found occurring in the National Assembly, but also to the fact that when political debate is seen as relevant to women, women councillors are more likely to become involved.

The working environment in councils, unlike that of the National Assembly, was not perceived as family-friendly or indeed friendly for anyone with paid employment, particularly if it was full time. As one of the women councillors put it:

I read and understand that councils, for example, want to have more women and young people as councillors, professional people, and they say this but they don't, it's as if they do nothing to ensure that this happens ... For example now, every meeting starts at 10 in the morning or at 2 in the afternoon, so for someone who works full time it's impossible for them to be a councillor. ... nor do I see a crèche or anything being offered ... I'm afraid that they talk about changes but they aren't ready to change. [*Int: Yes, so you don't see that it is significant?*] It's grey men in grey suits at present, and like that I can see the future. (Female, Plaid councillor)

This was seen as difficult for both men and women but particularly for women. And the extra barriers faced by women because of their domestic and childcare responsibilities, frequently in addition to paid work, were often not appreciated. One of the woman councillors told us that there was:

A lack really of thinking the whole thing through, because one of the councillors that was on the last authority she had two young children and a job which she tried to do in the evenings and there was a lot of criticism, well she never turned up for this meeting and that meeting and the other meeting, and ... there was no sympathy at all for the fact of all the other things she was doing, ... And you know there is very little done to accommodate that or even recognise well why aren't we getting these women candidates, well because they are home cooking their husband's tea. What's *your* wife doing now? You know, unless they just don't see it. (Female Labour councillor)

These comments underline the absence of any attempt to create a family-friendly working environment at local level.

This evidence suggests that the political style and organisational culture in local government is both male-dominated and masculinised, even in the council where there was a 'critical mass' of women. Politics is gendered masculine and in order to be taken seriously women felt that they had to behave like men. There are no concessions made to the fact that councillors might have domestic and care responsibilities to attend to and, in contrast with the National Assembly, there is little awareness of gender or equality issues amongst councillors. Furthermore, there is considerable opposition to the idea of positive measures, on the part of women and men, which are seen as unfair and resulting in the s/election of candidates who are not 'up to the job'.

## **Conclusions**

The different cultures of these two levels of government have implications for the ways in which women and men learn to do politics and for how they learn to do gender in the different political domains. Our findings suggest that in a masculinised political space women, as well as men, adopt 'masculine' styles of working while, in a more feminised political space, there is less pressure on both women and men to practise politics in what is often referred to as a 'macho' style.

Our evidence shows that there is a widespread perception that having a gender balance in the National Assembly means that both politics and gender are done 'differently' and that 'women's issues' and equalities issues more generally are given greater priority. This contrasts with local government where women representatives are in a minority, the working environment takes little account of caring and domestic responsibilities, and women as well as men learn to 'do' gender in a masculinised arena where both women and femininity are seen as out of place. Moreover there is evidence that doing politics in a consensual way is seen as doing femininity and doing politics in an aggressive way is understood as doing masculinity. This means that men are unlikely to engage in consensual politics although, as we have seen, many women feel that they have to perform masculinity in order to be taken seriously. Thus in order to 'do' politics in local government, councillors have to do gender in a masculine way, while doing politics in the National Assembly is far less closely tied to performances of masculinity and the links between practising politics and doing gender are, almost imperceptibly, loosening.

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