

# How women work together in masculinised parliaments to represent the interests of women



*How do representatives act for those they represent? [Peter Allen](#) and [Sarah Childs](#) use the case of the Labour Party's Women's Committee to illustrate how it advances women's interests in a feminist direction by sustaining its focus on a small number of issues and interacting with party leadership.*

Over three days in London in September 2018, British women politicians and academics reflected on the [centenary of the passage of the Parliament \(Qualification of Women\) Act](#), the 1918 legislation that allowed women to first sit in the House of Commons. As sitting and former MPs spoke of their experiences in the House, and historians and political scientists recounted the personal and parliamentary lives of the first women MPs, as well as their contemporaries' behaviour, the thorny question of whether these acts changed the substance and style of politics was ever-present.

That seemingly simplest of questions, 'do women in politics make a difference?', cannot easily be answered. Of course, there is a very defensible 'yes'. As [Joni Lovenduski presciently put it](#): there is a 'substantial amount of circumstantial evidence' connecting 'women's presence to policies that address women's concerns', that holds for the UK and globally. When women are present in legislatures the nature of the issues discussed is more likely to include the concerns and perspectives of women. In the present-day UK Parliament, we might point to the Labour MP Jess Philips's International Women's Day Debate where she [named all of the women killed by men in the previous year](#); her colleague, Stella Creasy's [successful campaigning](#) on access to abortion on the mainland for Northern Irish women; or the [Chairing of the Women and Equalities Committee](#) by the Conservative former cabinet minister, Maria Miller.

But there is a more complicated academic answer: one that rejects essentialist claims about women and men, that render only the former as capable of acting for women; that refutes claims that there is anything automatic about numbers in politics, criticising the idea that change only arrives at the point of a critical mass of women; and that [queries assumptions](#) that substantive representation is always and only ever about acting in a feminist fashion, when not all women in politics are feminist, and some are explicitly anti-feminist (Childs and Krook 2006). By complicating the picture in these ways, activists and women MPs have often looked aghast at the academic: appearing to (but we would argue not actually) undermining the claim for women's right to equal descriptive representation in politics. For we too hold that [who are politicians are](#), matters ([Phillips 1995](#)).

Our [recent paper](#), '*The Grit in The Oyster? Women's Parliamentary Organisations and the Substantive Representation of Women*', returns to the foundational question of if and how women 'make a difference', but it does so by shifting focus from individual representatives' behaviour to instead examine the role of women's parliamentary organizations (WPOs). We consider WPOs to be 'a regularized but not necessarily formal association of legislators formed to sustain women's presence in the political institution, and/or to engender women's representation, descriptive, substantive, and symbolic'.

In our paper, we look specifically at the Parliamentary Labour Party Women's Committee (WPLP), considering the extent to which we can view the WPLP as both a critical site of, and critical actor in, women's substantive representation. In doing so, we undertook both quantitative and qualitative research: (i) interviews with more than 40 members of the WPLP and of the then Labour government; (ii) created an individual-level dataset registering members' attendance patterns between 2001 and 2015; and (iii) a text corpus generated from the minutes of WPLP meetings, 2002-14. Together these data permitted us to systematically examine the WPLP's efforts to substantively represent women over more than a decade.

So what evidence do we now have of the ‘direct, irrefutable, causal relationship’ that Lovenduski earlier had spoken of. One core aspect of our study was designed to identify what women’s issues the WPLP had focused upon during the New Labour years. The interview data suggested childcare, violence, pensions, the institution of Parliament itself, and caring. To these findings, we added our text data, and analysed the text of meeting minutes to computationally estimate the topics discussed by the WPLP, giving us a more objective purchase on the ‘content’ of the WPLP’s discussions over the years. Three of the four topics related to women’s substantive representation. They neatly matched those identified in the interviews. Specifically, we found that the WPLP focused on issues of violence against women and women’s bodily integrity; care and caring; and pensions along with the broader gendered nature of the economy. Here, then, was the WPLP’s feminist agenda.

Our wider empirical observations enabled us then to develop an explanatory account of the acts and processes that engender substantive representation by the WPLP. Crucially, in the face of gender inequality, WPLP members wanted to act ‘for women’ by influencing the party and the government, and they did so because they identified as feminists. In terms of the content of women’s substantive representation – ‘what is in the interests of women’ – the qualitative and quantitative data reinforce one other. Importantly, we note that there was a broad and consistent set of women’s issues over time that constituted the group’s main agenda for change. This was defined in an unapologetic feminist direction by Labour’s women. In addition to offering resistance to, and the means by which to, better negotiate and challenge masculinised practices and culture, we found the WPLP acclaimed as an important site for instigating processes of substantive representation: it is where women’s issues are discussed and what is in the interests of women constituted. Finally, we found evidence in our interviews that the WPLP’s reputation as the legitimate ‘voice’ of women in the party was supported and, therefore, justified.

Women’s caucuses and women’s committees – the main two types of WPOs – are central to the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s ‘Gender Sensitive Parliament’ Framework. They are part of a set of cross-national norms and practices aimed at making parliaments better for women. Whilst the WPLP does not fit precisely under the [IPU definitions](#), it is nonetheless a parliamentary organization that is ‘for women’ MPs, and which seeks to ‘act for women’. Accordingly, we see it as an actor and site for women’s substantive representation. ‘A Grit in the Oyster’ shows that the difference that New Labour’s women MPs made had a great deal to do with the actions of that collective grouping of its women. Working inside a masculinised House of Commons and PLP, the WPLP disturbed politics as usual, giving rise to feminist representational outputs – the pearls of the article’s title as described to us by one of the women who, as part of the WPLP, worked to bring them into existence.

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Note: the above draws on the authors’ [published work](#) in *Political Studies*.

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