

Woeful figures on women's representation in public life show that gender equality is far from complete

By Democratic Audit

*Women continued to be under-represented in public life, across many different types of organisation. In the first post in Democratic Audit's new [Gender and Democracy](#) series, **Adele Baumgardt** believes this under-representation undermines the idea that women's equality has already been achieved. With a specific focus on Wales, which led the world in its achievement of a gender-balanced legislature, she argues that new positive action measures are needed to ensure progress in women's representation continues.*

It is common now to encounter the argument that women's equality has been 'done'; that women are



Women continue to be under-represented in public life. Credit: DFID (CC BY 2.0)

represented at the highest levels of decision making; are working; outperforming boys at school and at all levels of academic achievement and generally 'have it all'. And it is true that women's equality and their economic independence have advanced hugely in the last thirty years. But there are entrenched bastions of inequality that remain. Everywhere we see the evidence of negative entrenched social attitudes towards women and girls which lead to sex stereotyping, the early sexualisation of girls, domestic violence and the persistent gender pay gap to name but a few. But if we look at women and girls' achievements we might expect to see them differently and more equally represented across society.

Women are, in fact, under-represented at the highest levels, in both the public and private sectors, even in those organisations where women are represented in large numbers overall. There are endless sources of data which demonstrate women's underrepresentation in all aspects of decision making despite their success academically. There are of course, always the brilliant exceptions, but in general you can see that women's academic success does not translate into equal representation. At a UK level [22% of MPs are female, as are 22% of peers](#) and just [16% of the Cabinet](#) (including ministers attending Cabinet). But progress has been different in the devolved nations where in 2003 the [National Assembly for Wales](#) achieved the first gender-balanced elected representation in the world.

Much progress was achieved in Wales when positive action measures were introduced by political parties. This type of positive action is available to all political parties but it is voluntary and take-up is patchy – not least because it means shifting the balance of power away from the status quo. The introduction of women-only shortlists and other forms of positive action were clearly the reasons for Wales' early success in women's representation. However, as with most radical shifts in power, it has resulted in a backlash, although not one as severe as some political commentators feared. Positive action measures have been dropped or reduced in many cases – chiming with that familiar argument that women's equality has been achieved, but also driven by the fear of disenfranchising the white, middle class heterosexual male powerbase. Wales' female representation still remains higher than average, although it has fallen from that early high – it has been overtaken by countries such as Rwanda, where positive action is in place.

Staying with Wales, if we look beyond national political representation into local government, to our hospitals, schools, police and criminal justice systems, women's representation is woeful. In 2011 the [Equalities and Human Rights Commission found](#):

- A survey of 50 top Welsh companies found only two women chief executives
- Only one of Welsh 22 council leaders is a woman
- Only 26% of secondary school headteachers are women, despite 75% of all teachers being women
- Only 23% of local government chief executives are women, despite 68% of local authority workers being women

In the meantime and over the last 30 years I have seen various types of positive action implemented aimed largely at 'fixing' women. From the 1980s springboard training focused on teaching women how to behave more like men in order to succeed – from wearing power suits with shoulder pads to 'getting your voice heard in the Board room without being too unfeminine' – and more recently programmes supporting women in completing applications for public life. Common to these programmes is that they seem to see women as the problem. A more enlightened approach is followed by the [Women Making a Difference](#) project operating in Cardiff, supporting women in a variety of ways to increase their confidence and to apply for any positions in public life. They have a constant list of well qualified, competent and confident women applying for roles – but success remains hard to come by.

There is a plethora of research on the causes of women's under-representation. In my experience the barriers faced by women fall into five categories:

- **Practical.** Women are traditionally time poor compared to men, are more likely to have caring and domestic roles; they are more likely to need childcare in order to participate; facilities and premises often create barriers and problems for women including where they are and whether public transport is available to get to them.
- **Personal.** Women drop out of activity in huge numbers at certain stages in life. In particular when women become mothers they face a whole new load of barriers including those above.
- **Habit.** All of the evidence suggested that once you stop participating in public life you are less likely to return to it. In particular women returners post-motherhood to both the labour market and public life, lack confidence and are likely to undersell themselves, whereas men entering fatherhood are more confident and will apply for jobs and roles for which they are not qualified.
- **Financial.** Women have different budget constraints to men and less often prioritise their spending on their own development or activities than men do.
- **Institutional.** Our infrastructure lacks mentors for women, lacks women role models, and most of all lacks women in leadership roles. This means that women are less likely to be around the table when opportunities are designed and delivered.

So why does this matter? Because all our decisions are made by and for, largely one sector of the population – white, over-55 years old men. Where our schools are built, how and where we deliver sport and leisure, where our hospitals are built and what public transport runs to it, how we are going to create jobs what they will be and where, how and where our resources are allocated are all made by a sector of society largely with one life experience. This doesn't make our decision makers bad people, or all of the decisions bad, but if in general board, political and policy decision makers have always had a 'home maker' providing back up for children and home, they are unlikely to think about the day to day barriers that create inequalities in women's lives.

So what should or could we do about it? Positive action remains vital. While we wait for the mandatory setting of quotas for women – set to be introduced in the [Irish parliament](#) – positive action in terms of selection and process are critical. It is not women who need fixing but the systems and process that underpin and recreate the status quo. We are all guilty of being more likely to appoint people to positions who are like us.

[Sport Wales](#) recently undertook some positive action in recruiting women on to its board. This did not involve setting quotas but was principally led by determined leadership and commitment. We actively reached out to women and made the case to them regarding what they could bring to sport in Wales and why it was important that their voices were heard. We changed the wording in the job specification and person specification to reflect better what was really needed from the role rather than the prescriptive mantra that recreates the status quo based on mandatory previous experience.

Increasing women's representation is difficult but it is not rocket science; it is more an attitude of mind and culture. If we do not do this, and continue to rely on a meritocracy that does not exist, how and where our services are designed and delivered, how our resources are allocated and what society and decision making looks like will continue to be based on the outdated, outmoded male-dominated model. If we are not careful it will be much quicker to roll back women's equality which has taken decades to build and we risk returning to a 'breadwinner/homemaker' model underpinned by gender inequality.

Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics.

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This post is part of Democratic Audit's **Gender and Democracy** series, which examines the different ways in which men and women experience democracy in the UK and explores how to achieve greater equality. To read more posts in this series [click here](#).

