

Sexism in local government is putting women off politics – it is time to do something about it

By Democratic Audit UK

*Sexism continues to be a problem for women in local government, with damage done to individuals and their careers. These problems have a long history, but current government policy – such as the abolition of the Local Government Standards Board – has made the problem worse, and not better, according to **Polly Trenow**.*

There has been much furore about sexism in Westminster over the past year. From the Rennard scandal to David Cameron telling a female Shadow Minister to “calm down dear” during PMQs, the media has increasingly been shining a light on the treatment of women in parliament. Recent research by the Fawcett Society suggests, however, that sexism in local politics is just as prevalent as it is in national government even if these stories rarely make it into the media.

Women standing for local election face numerous barriers. From the lack of flexible working and awkward meeting times to selection procedures that favour men (whether by design or unconscious bias), it is enough to deter many women from running.

Those that do get elected find that life is no easier on the inside. This year has seen at least three reports of women councillors resigning because of sexist behaviour in their councils – a figure which, because of the difficulties in ousting and being ostracised from one’s own party, we can only assume is the tip of the iceberg.

Deal Town Clerk Lin Dykes [quit, accusing](#) her colleagues of sexism. She reported that she was told that male councillors would be “more comfortable” if she were man and accused other colleagues of bullying. The same is true for [Basingstoke Councillor](#) Laura James who also reported bullying and said her fellow councillors had “a problem with women”.

Like MPs, female councillors are targeted for their looks. Either too ‘sexy’ – as with the case of Brentwood Councillor John Kerslake who was called out for referring to his colleague’s (the Director of Corporate Strategy, Jo-Ann Ireland) “[elegantly formed posterior](#)” during a public meeting. Or too ‘ugly’ – as with Councillor Keith Parker who referred to his colleague Karen Chivers an “ugly sister” [during a public meeting](#).

When councils are dominated by one type of person (white, male and middle-aged), sexism can become institutionalized as in the case of Llanelli council which had a male-only dinner. [Women were excluded](#) for fears that they would be offended by the “blue humour”.

Sexism and harassment at a council level is not only directed at female colleagues, but also at the public. [Conservative Councillor Pete Chapman](#) called staff at his local Costa coffee shop “bone idle bitches...[who] need a good beating” on Facebook and, this year a [Conservative councillor was lambasted](#) by the press for tweeting a photo of women in their underwear referring to All Women Shortlists in the text. While this story hit the national



(Credit, PJ Rey, CC BY 2.0)

press, few of these incidents do likewise.

It is inevitable that sexist views held by councillors will impact on the policies they advocate. For example, Brentwood Councillor [Chris Hossack](#) who declared that women in the town centre have “too much on show” and that this was a “risk”. He went on to say that he wouldn’t be surprised if there were attacks on women because of this.

These incidents should be considered in light of the male dominance of local government. Just 32 per cent of councillors in England are women, a figure that has remained stagnant for many years. As for council leaders, the figure has actually decreased from 16.6 per cent in 2004 to 12.3 per cent now. The situation is even worse in Wales where councillors are only 27 per cent women and 24 per cent in Scotland.

Many parties complain that too few women put themselves forward as council candidates but the responsibility for this lies with political parties and councils themselves. Mentoring schemes can help new candidates navigate the complex selection-committee procedures. Much of the responsibility for increasing the number of women lies with the parties themselves. Training selection committees – who are typically white, male and middle-aged, on equality and diversity will help them to look beyond an unconscious bias that can typically see them ‘recruit in their own image’. Finally positive action measures such as All-Women Shortlists should be seriously considered by parties who fail to substantially improve the representation of women at this, or their next, election.

Once elected women face other institutional barriers. Councillors are rarely paid enough to live on, so those who are not retired or independently wealthy must also have a job. Yet council meetings usually take place at awkward times making it difficult for those with a job and/or caring responsibilities to attend. This was the case for Councillor Michelle Sheratt who said she was deselected after failing to find childcare so she could attend some council meetings.

Councillors are also self-employed and therefore lack access to flexible working, job sharing, maternity or paternity leave. Councillor expenses rarely cover childcare costs and few councils have crèches, so women with children face huge barriers in these roles.

How councils can deal with sexism has also changed recently making it more difficult to hold individuals to account. Since the abolition of the Standards Board, an independent body which investigated claims of misconduct in councils, councillors must investigate themselves. Councils also no longer have to abide by a national code of conduct and instead, can write their own. Sadly many codes of conducts do not even contain rules against sexism and harassment which means councillors will not be found to be in breach of the code. Even if they did, councils have had the power to suspend councillors removed, so they can now only censure councillors which is barely a slap on the wrist.

While local government may suffer from an unglamorous reputation of bin collections and pot-holes, local government spending actually accounts for almost a quarter of the UK’s total – but how and where much of this money is spent is being decided in town halls where an average 7 in 10 councillors are male.

Spending cuts at this level are having a skewed impact on services women rely on – research has shown that local authorities have in recent years cut funding for services offering support to victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse by almost a third.

Action must be taken immediately to improve the number of female councillors in all councils. To do this we must not only make it easier for women to become councillors but also create a culture where they wish to stay. Codes of conduct, sanctions and independent investigation are not “red tape” which prevent councils from doing their job, they are vital instruments to ensure our political representatives are treated with the respect they would receive in any other workplace.

Sexism is putting women off politics, [it’s time to do something about it](#).

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