

Confronting Gender Inequality: how far have we come in the UK?



Suffragettes Mrs Flora Drummond and Miss Annie Kenney after attempting to force their way into 10 Downing Street, 1906. PhotoCredit: [Leonard Bentley](#).

On Tuesday 13 October the [LSE Commission on Gender, Inequality and Power](#) will present their Final Report at a [public debate](#). Professor Anne Phillips, a contributor to the Commission, reflects on the group's findings below and considers how far the UK has come in confronting gender inequality since the early twentieth century.

In the week when *Suffragette* is released in UK cinemas, we get the chance to assess just how far gender equality has come in the hundred years since the militant struggles for the right to vote. [Confronting Gender Inequality: Findings from the LSE Commission on Gender, Inequality and Power](#) is launched on October 13, with a public debate involving Shami Chakrabarti, [Rebecca Omonira-Oyekanmi](#), and Anne Perkins. It reports on the state of play in four major arenas – the economy, politics, law, media and culture –and interweaves its analysis of these with four crosscutting themes of power, rights, work-life balance, and gender-based violence.

No- one could deny the advances made since the days of the suffrage campaigns. These include major changes in relation to education (a hundred years ago, university education was almost entirely the preserve of men, but women now make up the majority of new graduates); in professional employment (a hundred years ago, women were still excluded from professions, but now make up a majority of new solicitors and nearly half of new barristers); and in political representation (women were denied even the right to vote in 1915, but make up nearly 30% of MPs in 2015). Yet advances have been patchy, and the impetus has been hard to sustain. The report tells a potentially depressing story of enduring inequalities. Key institutions remain profoundly gendered, operating through often unspoken rules and practices that maintain an older order even when the numbers and faces change. In the main centres of power, there isn't even that much change in the numbers and faces.

One issue that comes out from the report is the way austerity measures have reinforced patterns of gender inequality and power. Research by the House of Commons Library and UK Women's Budget Group shows that close to 80% of cuts in the welfare budget have fallen on women, with particularly devastating effects for lone parents. Women make up nearly two thirds of public sector

workers, so are additionally disadvantaged by wage freezes in the public sector. Austerity policies have reduced funds for refuges for domestic violence survivors, while equal access to justice is becoming increasingly illusory with reductions in legal aid, hefty increases in court fees, and declining access to law centres and citizen's advice bureaux. A number of those giving evidence to the Commission emphasised the particularly stark impact of these changes on women whose immigration status is unclear, who are victims of domestic abuse, victims of trafficking, or are without high levels of confidence in English.

Even in areas of progress, like the increased proportion of women elected as political representatives, the pace of change is slow and uncertain. Devolution, combined with quota measures, provided one major moment of transformation. In the first election to the Welsh Assembly, women took 40% of the seats. This rose later to 50%, and after a by-election in 2006, there was a brief period in which women out-numbered men in the Welsh Assembly. But while the representation of women in Wales remains impressive – it is the highest among the UK's elected bodies – the figure has since slipped back to 41.6%. In the Scottish Parliament, there has been a similar pattern: an impressive 37% of MSPs were women in the first election, rising to 39.5% in the second, but since dropping back to one third. Numbers in the House of Commons rose to their historic high in the 2015 election – mainly because the Labour Party and SNP had selected higher numbers of women to run as candidates – but men are still over-represented to the tune of more than two to one. It remains much easier for a man to become a politician than a woman. It is much easier for him to be selected, but also, given that women continue to assume the primary responsibility for care work, much easier for him to envisage the demands of a political career. One striking bit of evidence from the previous intake of MPs is that 45 per cent of the women in the House of Commons have no children, but only 28 per cent of the men.

The Commission makes a number of recommendations for action. These include gender quotas for senior positions across all organisations in the public and private sector; serious (not just box-ticking) gender audits for new policy proposals; a national care service to tackle what is now a major caring deficit; a media watchdog to monitor sexism in the media; and a review of the cuts to legal aid/ increased fees for tribunal and judicial reviews that are undermining women's access to rights. It also recommends legislation establishing a ceiling gender quota for the MPs for each political party: a maximum 70% of either sex at the first general election following the legislation, rising to a maximum 60% at the following one, along the lines of recent legislation in Ireland. The framing of this recommendation as a ceiling rather than floor reflects the Commission's view that the burden of the argument should now shift from the *under*-representation of women to the unjustifiable *over*-representation of men. Making recommendations to government is, of course, a tamer kind of action than blowing up castles or going on hunger strike, but the report reflects some of the same frustration with the slow pace of change that drove the suffragettes to their militant tactics.



Professor Anne Phillips is Graham Wallas Professor of Political Science in the Department of Government at the LSE. Further details of the public debate on Confronting Gender Inequality: findings from the LSE Commission on Gender, Inequality and Power can be found on the [LSE website](#).

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