

Women in the Chamber

Barriers to female representation in local politics

**Benjamin Linsley, Andrea Marie,
Rose Martin and Laura Stacey**

Edited by

Emily Robinson

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Women in The Chamber

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The New Politics Network is politically independent and campaigns for democratic renewal and popular participation in politics. We work with most political parties, as well as a wide range of groups and individuals, to develop ideas and action to improve politics.

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The opinions in this paper reflect those of the individual authors only

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Introduction

The stark fact that fewer than 20% of MPs are women is a testament to the barriers which women still face in entering national politics. Even if all the major parties nominated women in 50% of their vacant and winnable seats until parity was reached, the rate of change would be slow. The year would be 2037 before equality of men and women was reached in the Parliamentary Labour Party; 2046 in the Liberal Democrats and 2278 in the Conservative Party.¹

This is not to deny the progress of recent years. In 1945, there were just twenty-four female MPs; we now have a total of 126 out of 646. The major leap in this period took place in 1997, when Labour instituted its radical affirmative action initiative. The doubling in the number of female MPs from 60 in 1992 to 120 in 1997 was almost entirely due to the increase in female MPs in the Labour Party. Ninety-seven of the Labour Party's 355 MPs are women. In the Liberal Democrat Party this figure is ten out of sixty-three, and in the Conservative Party it is seventeen out of 196.²

Upon being elected leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron said: "We will change the way we look. Nine out of ten Conservative MPs are white men. We need to change the scandalous under-representation of women in the Conservative Party and we will do that."³

The other parties share his concern. Labour already practices affirmative

¹ J. Lovenduski, and L. Shepherd Robinson, *Women and Candidate Selection in British Political Parties*, (London: 2002).

² Fawcett Society Press Release, 'Record Number of Women MPs', May 2005. http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Women_MPs_May05.pdf

³ BBC News, 'In Full: Cameron Victory Speech', 6 December 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4504722.stm

action and Menzies Campbell used his first speech as Liberal Democrat Leader to pledge to bring in more female candidates.⁴

Any attempt to increase the representation of women in Parliament is laudable. However, national equality measures and targets do not always recognise the interrelation between the different tiers of government.⁵ Local politics is an important pathway to involvement in national and devolved government, and this is particularly true for women.⁶ It is therefore crucial that any steps to improve the representation of women in politics do not ignore the local level. According to research from the Equal Opportunities Commission, 68% of both male and female parliamentary candidates said that previous experience in local politics was important in encouraging them to stand.⁷ Of all elected MPs in 2001, 55.7% had local government experience.⁸

In general, women are better represented at local council level than they are in Parliament, but the figures are still woefully low. Following the 2006 local elections, 28% of councillors in the UK are female.⁹ Party breakdowns for the 2006 elections are not yet available but previously, women accounted for 35% of Liberal Democrat councillors; 29% of Labour councillors and 27% of Conservative councillors.¹⁰ Women were also proportionately less likely than men to achieve the position of Leader

4 BBC News, 'Campbell Wants a Fairer Britain', 5 March 2006, http://212.58.226.40/1/low/uk_politics/4774680.stm

5 For instance, the Liberal Democrat's 'Reflecting Britain' Campaign statement for the Leadership Challenge asks the new leader to "personally support initiatives to ensure that the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Parties are more reflective of British society," with the specific goals of "at least 40% of new MPs and 25% of the Parliamentary Parties overall being female after the next election." It also mentions the need to increase the representativeness of MEPs but there is no mention of councillors. The Conservative Women's Organisation website also has much more information for potential parliamentary candidates than for council candidates.

6 More female than male parliamentary candidates had been local councillors (60% compared to 54%). In this survey, three target audiences were interviewed; those who were not selected for a constituency in either 1997 or 2001 (both those who were and those who were not shortlisted); those who have stood for election but were unsuccessful; and those who were elected as MPs for the first time in either 1997 or 2001. Throughout these three groups are referred to as 'parliamentary candidates'. Jessica Elgood, Louise Vinter and Rachel Williams, *Man Enough for the Job? A Study of Parliamentary Candidates*, (London, 2002).

7 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p.24.

8 There is a significant party element to this: 65.4% of Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 2001 had a local government background, compared with 66.3% of Labour MPs; 30.7% of Conservative MPs; and 31% of MPs from other parties. *Dod's Parliamentary Companion*, (London, 2005).

9 Figure kindly supplied by Christine McCartney, Electoral Reform Society.

10 Employers' Organisation for Local Government and the Improvement and Development Agency (2005), *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales* (London, 2005)

or Deputy Leader.¹¹ In the devolved administrations, the picture is more balanced. 36% of Members of the Scottish Parliament, 50% of Welsh Assembly members and 38% of London Assembly members are women.¹² The Welsh Assembly has a higher proportion of female members than any national parliament in the world.¹³

It seems self-evident that if attempts could be made to increase representation at local level, this would widen the pool of female candidates wishing to progress to political office on the national stage. But the relationship is not one-way. Just as local politics affects the composition of national and devolved government, the culture and practice of national politics also impacts upon local government. Not only are the procedures of national government emulated in the localities, especially in the wake of local government modernisation, which was based on the cabinet model, but also the image of national politics affects women's perceptions of politics in general and often impacts upon their decision of whether or not to stand for local office. Having said this, steps taken to improve women's representation in local councils need to be tailored to the specific problems at this level, and not simply emulate initiatives aimed at improving the number of women in parliamentary politics.

¹¹ *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales.*

¹² Correct at time of going to print.

¹³ Information supplied by the Fawcett Society

Executive Summary

We conducted interviews with seventeen female councillors in order to discover the specific barriers that women face at local council level.¹ In addition to these seventeen councillors, we also spoke to two Members of Parliament and four members of devolved chambers. In order to preserve anonymity, these four interviewees will be referred to as MDC (Member of a Devolved Chamber). Interviewees were chosen so as to provide a broad a range as possible in terms of party affiliation, geography and type of local authority. In total, twenty-three women were interviewed. Of these, eight were Labour, eight Conservative, five Liberal Democrat and two from smaller parties, which will not be identified for the sake of anonymity. They will therefore be referred to as 'Small Party' throughout this publication.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone, and interviewees assured of their anonymity. All names have been changed, using a list of popular names supplied by the Office of National Statistics. Any resemblance to the names of real-life councillors is entirely coincidental. The interviews were structured around a series of twenty-eight questions, with the interviewers asking additional questions at their discretion.

Some of our interviewees from local government had experienced barriers at almost every stage of their political lives, both in becoming councillors and once in office. Many of these barriers were common to

¹ Women as a group are far from homogenous: ethnicity, income, educational background and disability are all factors which have an enormous impact on women's lives. Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues. To give an example of the effect of one of these factors, women are particularly under represented in certain racial groups. They make up only 13% of Asian, compared with 35% of Black Caribbean, councillors. Equal Opportunities Commission, 'Women and Men in Britain: Public and Political Life', (London: 2002), p.5.

female politicians at national and devolved level as well.

None of our interviewees thought politics appealed to young women and most either had a negative image of female politicians, or had not been influenced by the presence of female politicians at all when considering a political career.

The lack of women already in politics is often the first barrier that women face as it discourages them from seeing themselves as potential politicians. Training was also conspicuously absent as a means to recruit women and to encourage them to enter politics. Most of the women thought that support from their respective parties could be improved. It is worth noting that all of the women we interviewed thought that the experience of local politics was a good “apprenticeship” or “training ground” for national politics.

Party procedures governing initial selection were often seen by the women to be lacking formality and therefore open to discrimination. What is more, most of the women thought that there was not enough political will from their parties to address these issues and to turn promises of more female candidates into policy commitments aimed at increasing women’s participation in government. On this issue we found a division along party lines. In general, the Labour interviewees were in favour of using equality guarantees; the Liberal Democrats preferred training and support; and the Conservatives opted to let things improve over time with the help of better education to increase general interest in politics.

Typically, the women’s experience in office was characterised by a culture of direct and indirect discrimination. In particular, outdated attitudes about the role of women meant that some felt that their expertise had been overlooked when they were assigned roles within the council.

Despite women statistically being less likely than men to achieve the very top positions in local councils, in general the women we spoke to were satisfied with the encouragement they received from their parties when considering running for positions of authority or leadership. However, some interviewees did identify room for improvement when it came to formalising support networks and finding endorsement for such systems within their local parties.

Probably the most significant barrier the women faced was the difficulty of balancing council duties with home life and a career. The timings and locations of meetings were brought up by some women as a problem, but the financial strain of taking on a role in local government and possibly missing out on other paid employment was the greatest barrier of all. Some of the women also suggested that the loss of earnings involved in choosing a career in local government was the biggest disincentive to

Executive Summary

women considering becoming a councillor. The pay-gap between men and women in the workplace means that this is more of a problem for women than it is for men.

Our interviewees' experiences tended to be relatively similar, but they varied in what they termed as discrimination. These variations were related to party affiliation: Conservative women, in particular, were significantly less likely to describe the culture and practices of local government as discriminatory. For this reason, they were far less likely to support measures aimed specifically at improving the representation of women in politics.

However, by looking at the interviewees' responses as a whole, it is evident that there are a number of ways in which women are prevented from participating equally in local government. Some of the women reported intentional discrimination, sexual harassment or taunting. These are attitudes and behaviours which are perpetuated by party structures and councils' institutional frameworks and working practices. The women also cited problems such as council decisions being taken 'at the pub' and the times of council or party meetings not taking account of family commitments. This may not be through any particular malice or intention to marginalise women, but it is something to which local authorities and political parties need to be sensitive.

Section I
Women's Experiences of
Becoming Councillors

Women's Experiences of Becoming Councillors

Recruitment

Image

None of the women we interviewed thought that politics appealed to young women. The image of national politics is usually the first contact that women have with politics but less than half of the women in our survey said that the image of female politicians had a positive effect on their attitude towards politics.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke¹: “I didn't know many women in politics, very few women, and certainly at the national level, I didn't really have any contact with any of the women who were in national politics at the time, and there were very few.”

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: “I certainly don't think that Parliament is an attractive place for women at all. I think it is very much still an old boys' club, and the fact that it hasn't been modernised and the behaviour is so old fashioned.”

Small Party Cllr Joan Robinson: “There are aspects of [politics] which reflect the fact that it's dominated by men...It's difficult to know whether the women who get to the top are women who've survived in the men's world, and actually the women who would do things differently have been sorted out near the bottom and don't get the chance to transform the way politics is done. So I think maybe a bigger barrier [is] the sense that it isn't a field that's particularly attractive to women.”

¹ All names have been changed, using a list of popular names supplied by the Office of National Statistics. Any resemblance to the names of real-life councillors is entirely coincidental.

The lack of women in politics undermines the legitimacy of the political process. It also perpetuates the image that politics is an exclusive realm for men and discourages women from seeing themselves as potential politicians.

Labour Cllr Helen Thompson: “You’ve got to have a party which is actually promoting policies women can relate to, so they actually think to themselves, ‘yes, this is something I want to be involved in,’ and it also has to project an image that, ‘yes, women are welcome in this party,’ and they are given good roles to play within the party.”

Labour MP Julie Walker: “Women parliamentarians can be really good role models and give really good encouragement.”

Labour Cllr Rebecca Green: “Seeing women...in the media; you see MPs etc that have been successful, or your names of local councillors (although not as much), that’s at the back of your mind and you realise that other people can do it and they’re an example to other women if they want to follow that route.”

We need more female politicians not just to act as role models but also in order to normalise the presence of women in politics.²

It is also important that local government is seen to be inclusive of women. In their decisions to enter politics, many of the women we interviewed were particularly influenced by the presence of women in their local authorities:

Conservative Cllr Susan Jones: “There have been two women representing this ward for many years and doing a jolly good job, so I’d say I had positive images of women working in this field.”

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: “I knew that women had been very effective in [my district] and had in fact held some of the top jobs.”

Conservative MDC Christine Wilson: “In [my district] there have always been women in politics in the council who have always got on and have been respected, but that is the situation in [my district], which is much to be appreciated by the other authorities.”

In addition to showing that politics is accessible to women, a greater proportion of women in politics would also change the political culture and make a difference to the way in which political institutions function. Professor Joni Lovenduski’s research has found that the greater intake of

² Sarah Childs interviewed female Labour MPs first elected in 1997, of whom she found that more than 80% thought that the presence of women in Parliament affected future numbers of women in Parliament. See Sarah Childs, *New Labour’s Women MPs: Women Representing Women*, (London: 2004), p. 58.

female MPs following Labour's use of quotas in 1997 made a difference to women's experience of Parliament. They reported a reduction in sexist behaviour and a decline in the 'boys' club' culture.³ Parliamentary hours were also changed to be more family friendly, although they have since been changed back somewhat.⁴ Lovenduski has also warned: "I am not convinced that if the number of women changed back to what it was before 1997 that things would not change back."⁵ To avoid this occurrence, reforms need to become more institutionalised and it seems that this is most likely to happen through increasing female representation.⁶ Without sustained changes to the culture and practices of politics, elected office will remain an unattractive option for most women.

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: "I have an older daughter who...was interested in politics and she was put off by the men...The men who are in local politics tend to be older at the moment, and they have retired, coming out of their various professions, and they are still very chauvinistic. I think any woman going in is going to have the same problem."

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: "I think we have to deal with [the lack of appeal of politics to women] in terms of culture and how we are supposed to behave. [For example,] all the nonsense that goes on in council meetings: name calling, this 'yah-boo' stuff – [it's] disgusting [for it] to be regarded as a game and it's very male dominated and not very attractive to women."

Political parties need high profile campaigns to show to the public that they want women candidates for all levels of government, including local government. Party leaders must show that they are prepared to reform the culture and practices of the parties themselves in order to attract more women.

Outreach

Most of the women we interviewed had entered politics through local activism or because of their interest in their communities.

³ BBC News, 'Women MPs 'Endure Sexist Taunts'', 7 December 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4074877.stm

⁴ Since May 2005 the sitting hours in the House of Commons have changed back from 11:30am to 7:00pm on Tuesdays to 2.30pm to 10.30pm.

⁵ Professor Joni Lovenduski quoted in BBC News, 'Women MPs 'Endure Sexist Taunts'', 7 December 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4074877.stm

⁶ Despite the inability to prove a direct causal relation between women's descriptive representation and substantive representation, there is much evidence to suggest that women do make a difference to the way political institutions function and they do effect change that benefits women. See Sarah Childs, Joni Lovenduski and Rosie Campbell, *Women at the Top 2005: Changing Numbers, Changing Politics?*, (London: 2005), pp. 48-73.

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: “I was involved in various residents’ groups and things and it just seemed to be that the next step really was to become a local councillor so that I could be part of making the decisions that actually affect the people who live in [my city].”

Liberal Democrat Cllr Dorothy Turner: “I joined my local community group on my estate that was campaigning to get a community building as part of a new school build, and it all started from there really.”

Small Party Cllr Joan Robinson: “I was involved as a student in single-issue campaigns: [the] women’s movement and [the] anti-nuclear movement... I got into the anti-war movement in [my city] and reconnected with [my] party.”

Women are more active in community associations than men, and it is often through such grassroots activism that women come into contact with their local councils.⁷ Lovenduski argues that a strong NGO culture can have a positive effect on the numbers of women on the local council. However, the success of community groups often depends on local authorities’ efforts to support them through active women’s units or council-based advisory groups.⁸

Conservative Cllr Mary Taylor: “[Women can become involved in politics through] a playgroup or a crossing, and that way they have to involve themselves with local politicians, and I think I’ve seen it happen where they have taken off from there.”

Labour MP Julie Walker: “We need to do more to encourage younger women to actually get involved because they are very active in community groups, but it is saying to them, ‘join the party,’ I think. I am always impressed when I go out now, whichever community organisation it is, whether it is like Sure Start programmes, whether it is older people’s clubs or whatever; all the key movers and shakers are women.”

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: “[The council needs] to encourage local activity in things like neighbourhood forums or residents associations or mothers’ groups and things like that. In [my city], certainly where I represent, we have had quite a bit of experience in helping the public to empower themselves by setting up their own action groups, then they become very interested in it, when they see that... discussing local issues can have an effect. They start to see how it all works and they may become more interested in it, and then they start coming to public meetings.”

Councils should be aware of the vital role that they play in supporting community networks and women’s groups. And for their part, political parties need to be more proactive in identifying and recruiting local

⁷ *Journal Women Councillors 2004* (Notes 4).

⁸ See Pam Giddy, *A Woman’s Place is in the Chamber*, (London: 2000), p. 7.

female activists to join their parties and to stand for office. Previous research has shown that female prospective parliamentary candidates were twice as likely to cite ‘contacts within the party’ as an enabling factor than they were to mention ‘a network or woman’s organisation’.⁹ This means that candidates need to be well connected within the party even to reach candidacy stage, and networks and women’s organisations are not maximising their ability to increase the participation of women in the community. Outreach work, such as workshops and training, and networking between women’s groups within the parties and from the local community could help with this.

Training

Only around a third of the women we interviewed received training from their party.

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: “No one is given any training and they just expect you to pick it up and some people do and some people don’t. If you don’t, you have a very bad experience and you get out fast. I think it is the lack of training in just how to handle your everyday affairs when you are representing people. It is one of the biggest barriers of all.”

Labour Cllr Janet White: “I didn’t know a damn thing when I entered politics. Things have improved, I must admit, but when I came in...I was taken on a ten minute, literally, tour of the civic centre and that was it – I was on my own. That was my experience of going into politics as a councillor.”

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: “What my party lacks mostly is really the coaching and mentoring and encouragement of women, because women do need that little bit of extra encouragement to stand...I have tried to be a mentor to other women...but I don’t think that it is done enough. It is not institutionalised enough.”

Of the councillors we interviewed, none received training specifically aimed at helping women enter local government. Training was more common among the MPs and the members of devolved chambers. Those councillors who had undergone training had usually done so as potential parliamentary candidates rather than as councillors.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: “Since I’ve become a prospective parliamentary candidate for the Liberal Democrats, yes [I have received training] but not before, no. I certainly didn’t have any help in getting involved in local issues and local politics...More recently...the Liberal Democrats have started to do a special training for women prospective

⁹ Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 3.

parliamentary candidates.”

Labour MP Julie Walker: “There were some excellent training programmes pre the 1997 election that were specifically directed at female candidates. They were actually very good...I can recall that there was some excellent media training...The sessions were immensely valuable because it brought together women candidates...many of whom were encountering quite a lot of hostility back in their constituencies, particularly if they had been selected from all-women short lists.”

Many of the women from the Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties who did not receive training have since noticed an improvement in the training offered today by their parties. A substantial number of them have been involved in introducing new training initiatives themselves.¹⁰

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: “There is some training available within the Liberal Democrats more recently, but when I first started off there wasn’t really. I joined in 1983 and there wasn’t anything specific at that time, but now they have the Gender Balance Taskforce.”¹¹

Labour MP Kathleen Evans: “I was one of the people that introduced such training [specifically aimed at helping women enter politics] and I did a lot of it myself... As a trainer, [it was] extremely worthwhile.”

Liberal Democrat Cllr Dorothy Turner: “I set up a group called ‘Do It’...Through that we’ve offered speaker training for young women. So though I haven’t always had training myself, I did organise lots of training for other women.”

The Labour Party offers a wide range of women-only training and mentoring programmes through the Labour Women’s Network, and training for councillors through the Labour Local Government Unit. EMILY’S LIST also provides a mentoring scheme. The Labour Women’s Network claims that one of their prime objectives is “easily accessible training.”¹²

The 2005 Liberal Democrat conference accepted the motion that “the approach of training, mentoring and support developed by the Gender Balance Taskforce (now known as the Campaign for Gender Balance) has proven to be the best hope for tackling the problem of gender imbalance in the long term.” The Liberal Democrats offer more training

¹⁰ One Labour woman and one Liberal Democrat woman introduced training programmes, three other Labour women and one other Liberal Democrat woman had trained or mentored other women.

¹¹ The Gender Balance Taskforce is now known as the Campaign for Gender Balance

¹² The courses aim to cater for women at a number of levels from a start-up course that focuses on speaking up in meetings to more advanced and tailor-made courses. Courses are usually held in Birmingham, although they can be constituency based (<http://www.lwn.org.uk/training.htm>).

at their conferences than any other party, including courses specifically for councillors, run by the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, and specifically for women, run by the Women Liberal Democrats.¹³

The Conservative Party now offers general training to men and women both nationally and regionally to encourage them to enter government.¹⁴

Conservative MDC Jean Davies: "All candidates benefit from the same kind of training irrespective of gender. At [my devolved chamber] the Conservative [Members] have also played a supportive role, but I don't believe I've ever received any special treatment just because I am a woman...I don't feel that women require a different kind of training to men."

An Equal Opportunities Commission survey found that nearly twice as many Labour parliamentary candidates undertook women-only training as Conservative candidates, and this tallies with our findings.¹⁵ Only one Conservative interviewee received women-only training, but this was through the 300 Group and not her party.

Conservative Cllr Mary Taylor: "I've actually [trained people] as well [as receiving training] as part of the 300 Group...it's an integral part of the movement of women into politics...It was formed in 1983 and its aim initially was to bring more women into politics. It was apolitical...We offered workshops to people who were interested in a career in politics."

The Conservative women we interviewed tended to think that women-only training either damaged the position and image of women or was counter-productive.¹⁶ Most tended to think that training directed specifically at women gave them an unfair advantage over men. They felt that women do not need any exclusive training because they face no different or extra barriers to men, and thought instead that women benefit from training alongside men as it prepares them for working together in their political careers.

Conservative MDC Christine Wilson: "It is much better that women have training with men as well, because the most important thing I think is that

13 Much party training takes place at Federal Conferences, but training is also available at state and regional conferences. There are further special training events and made-to-measure constituency based training. Training is available on a wide variety of topics to both men and women party members and activists. There is women-only training in 'what women need to know about the party', an 'introduction to party policy', and 'public speaking', run by the Women Liberal Democrats, and training specifically for parliamentary candidates run through the Gender Balance Taskforce (*Liberal Democrat Training Prospectus 2006*).

14 See <http://www.conservativewomen.co.uk/>

15 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 4.

16 Five Conservative women thought that it damaged the position and image of women, and three thought that it was just counter-productive.

women have to work out how men think. I know that men don't bother to work out how women think in politics, so women most certainly have to get on their wavelength in some way to find out just how they think."

Conservative Cllr Mary Taylor: "[I am against all-women training because] while seeking to be equal in the wider stratum of society, which is politics, it's seeking to be exclusive in that same area. To me it's counter-productive, and they tend to turn people off, [especially] the opposite sex. So I'm firmly against that."

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: "I do feel that it is the best person for the job, so why should you exclude men [from training]? If you are a woman and you feel that politics is something you want to get into, I don't think there are any barriers there anyway."

In contrast, the women we interviewed from the other parties were overwhelmingly in support of women-only training.¹⁷ They tended to think that it prepared women for the specific barriers they face when entering politics and meant that they were more likely to go on to stand for office.

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: "Having done the [women-only] training sessions, there were questions that were asked that were specifically relevant to women really, such as the childcare issues, and it made them feel more comfortable about how it would fit in with their lives, so yes I would say it was beneficial rather than harmful."

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: "[Women-only training events] are necessary, because there are some people who in the early stages when they are considering a political career, do need to be able to talk about some of the problems of mixing family life and career, and politics, and may feel that they have a lack of confidence initially. So some of the initial training I think perhaps does need to be women-only to give them the confidence to move forward."

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: "I have been asked to be involved in a couple of training sessions that are directly aimed at getting younger women into politics in [my city] and they have been run both by the council and by the party... It was very good actually. My part in it was really just to go along and talk to them about what being a young woman councillor meant in [my city]. We had a whole range of people turn up, from all of the communities in [my city] and they were all very keen and enthusiastic. They had all the general questions that I had before I got elected: what powers do we have; what difference can we make; what is it like being a woman in politics; do

¹⁷ Only one other woman thought that women-only training damaged the position and image of women and thought instead that women needed to work with men.

you find it makes a difference being a woman candidate? And we were able to answer some of those questions for them really and they seemed to be very enthusiastic about it afterwards. It seemed to have armed them with the information they need to go out there and start on the process of becoming involved in politics locally or becoming a councillor.”

It seems that the Conservatives’ unwillingness to recognise the benefit of women-only training events - in terms of addressing the very specific barriers that women face, such as childcare provision, balancing home life and a career with politics and working in a predominately male environment - will impede their attempts to improve women’s representation in their party.

All three main parties offer training and mentoring. However, the courses that they provide are much more accessible to women already in office.¹⁸ Another problem comes from the costs of training; although all parties subsidise their courses, they do not always cover all the associated costs. The fee required may only be nominal, but participants must also cover their travel expenses and possibly overnight accommodation.¹⁹ All three main parties offer constituency-based training but it is residential courses which allow participants to develop networks with other party members from all over the country. This disadvantages those who are not in a position to cover the expenses associated with these training events. What is more, smaller parties find it difficult to fund any training programmes at all.

Liberal Democrat MDC Ann Kelly: “There is quite a lot [of training] available if you seek it out...It did involve a degree of expense, not all of it is local – you may have to travel. We had an excellent residential weekend at Peterborough, which was very accessible but quite a long way away. It was subsidised but it did involve expenditure. I was lucky that I could afford it, maybe for people on low incomes it might be more problematic.”

Small Party MDC Karen Wright: “We’re such a small organisation that we couldn’t possibly afford to do [training].”

¹⁸ Information on training from the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrat Party was very hard to access which suggests that its availability is limited to those in office or active party members.

¹⁹ Courses run by the Labour Women’s Network cost in the region of £5-£10. Their training usually takes place in Birmingham, although constituency-based training is available if 6-20 women desire it, and expenses for the facilitator must be covered, (<http://www.lwn.org.uk/training.htm>). Constituency-based Conservative Party training usually costs in the region of £5, with travel costs, the cost of hiring a room, and providing lunch for the trainees to be covered. Liberal Democrat training usually takes place at federal, state or regional conferences (*Liberal Democrat Training Prospectus 2006*).

Support

Lack of resources is also a problem when it comes to party support. This was identified as a particular problem by interviewees from the Liberal Democrats and from smaller parties who found that it hindered the creation and entrenchment of formal networks of support.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: “Support could definitely be improved, I suppose [by] running training sessions specifically for women, providing mentoring networks, those sorts of things. There is a woman’s organisation within the party but it is difficult to say what it is for... We are not a large party and you rely on voluntary support [so] it is often individuals who have encouraged me rather than the party itself.”

Small Party Cllr Joan Robinson: “[Party support] could [be improved] because we’re so small and so hard-pressed [although] everyone’s trying to do their best.”

Small Party MDC Karen Wright: “Support from [my party], in some ways it couldn’t be improved, because it’s quite good, and also we don’t have the money to send people on training courses and that sort of thing, but women in [my party] do tend to encourage and support each other. We’ve got a women’s network...and we meet at the conference every time, and if somebody’s got a problem then they get onto the e-mail list and get the support.”

The Conservative women we interviewed, in particular, thought that the lack of support was due to the failure of the party centre to coordinate a strategic approach to encourage any potential councillors, and not specifically women candidates.

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: “We need an awful lot more support from our actual administrative party centre, put it that way, for the members.” She went on to say, “I don’t think it is because I am female in this case, I don’t think they are very supportive at all to anyone running [for local council elections]. I think they are just keen to find somebody who will do the job and stand.”

Conservative Cllr Susan Jones: “I am not really conscious of [assisting women to become candidates] as a policy.” She later said, “I don’t think [the lack of support is] because I’m a woman or anything, I just think it’s a rather badly organised group.”

Conservative Cllr Mary Taylor: “Considering they are not terribly good at encouraging women, [the Conservative Party] are awfully good at paying lip service to it... They have a very well-established theme, if you like, which is women’s advisory committees which will operate at national and local level. Lots of what they do is basically fundraising. I think they’re

actually dying a natural death because there aren't women who can spend the day being ladies who lunch."

Childs et al concluded that political parties are the gate keepers which determine the levels of women's representation in Parliament.²⁰ Other research into female parliamentary candidates showed that they are more likely to say that they are 'pushed' or 'persuaded' to stand than male candidates. They also say that enabling factors are more important in encouraging them to put themselves forward.²¹ It seems likely that this would also translate to local level, meaning that more activity and support from parties could help to increase the number of female candidates for council seats. The lack of formalised support structures affects the ability of the party to encourage new women to engage with the local party and to stand for selection as a councillor.

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: "If there was more activity again from the administrative centre and more support from various parties for their candidates and more information, I think more people would come forward."

Conservative Cllr Elizabeth Williams: "Encouragement could be improved; support is there once somebody has got the nerve to [stand]. It's the encouragement to, as I said before, have the courage to do it."

Another key point is that Elgood et al found that women standing for Parliament feel that their skills and experience made them suitable for the role.²² This was true of the councillors in our survey as well. The main factors discouraging female parliamentary candidates from standing were practical, and enabling factors centred on their involvement with a political party or with politics in general.²³ Indeed, most of the Labour women we interviewed spoke about support in terms of their party's guarantee to involve them in the selection process, due to its policy of selecting female candidates.²⁴ There is evidence that the supply of female parliamentary candidates was less of a problem for Labour in the 1990s when they

20 Childs et al, *Women at the Top 2005*, p. 84.

21 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 3.

22 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 2.

23 The main factors discouraging the women from standing, in order, were 'financial', 'relocation to a winnable seat', 'family commitments', 'effect on their career' and 'House of Commons working hours'. 'Contacts within the Party', 'previous experience in local politics', and 'involvement in national politics' combined were the enabling factors cited the most by the women. See Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 3.

24 Five out of eight Labour women interviewed spoke of support in these terms. For the 2006 local elections, for all-out elections, one in three candidates had to be a woman, or one in two if it is a two-seat ward. For authorities that elect candidates by thirds or halves, the rule of thumb is that if the sitting councillor is retiring then their replacement must be a woman, and where there are more women councillors retiring than men, the current proportion has to be maintained.

increased their demand for women through the use of quotas.²⁵

Labour MP Julie Walker: “I have got no complaints [about the amount of support received]. I think I have been [supported], certainly at a local level. When the Labour party was first considering the idea of having all-women shortlists, we actually gave all the members in [my constituency] a personal vote on do you or do you not want to consider [the constituency] having an all-women’s shortlist and in fact, by a margin of I think three to one, they actually supported it. I have always had a lot of encouragement from the local party. Certainly I think the party nationally has, as far as I am concerned, have done their best to encourage women to stand for elected office.”

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: “[I felt] very supported actually. It is something that the Labour Party takes very seriously. They always ensure that there are going to be women on a shortlist for selection so that although you may not automatically be awarded it because you are a woman, which I actually think is wrong, you will be given a fair crack at the whip.”

Labour Cllr Rebecca Green: “As regards the Labour Party, they’ve got to have in their short-list a woman candidate...and they’re all in agreement, there’s nobody arguing against that policy. They can all see why it’s necessary. They’re all supportive in trying to get more women on the council.”

Labour Cllr Emma Jackson: “The Labour Party actually pursue a direct policy of trying to get more women involved and to get more women elected as councillors. So to that extent I think the Labour Party actually has done their part.”

Despite this, more than two thirds of the women we interviewed felt that support from their party could be improved. Political parties lack financed and structured support networks that are proactive and practical in recruiting able women for local government.

²⁵ Childs et al, *Women at the Top 2005*, p. 26.

Women's Experiences of becoming Councillors

Selection

Candidacy

The failure of political parties to recruit candidates for council seats leaves selection processes lacking formality. Just over one third of the women we interviewed found that the selection procedure was not very competitive.

Conservative Cllr Susan Jones: “[The selection process] was a joke really because there wasn’t one...They asked me really.”

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: “I just went along and answered the questions, and it was fine. If there had been more competition, like I know some other constituencies have, I think maybe I would have seen things differently.”

Liberal Democrat MDC Ann Kelly: “There was no competition. They were giving [seats] to anyone who wanted one!”

Small Party Cllr Joan Robinson: “It wasn’t a formal selection process in which I was in competition with anybody else...The selection process was really more like just not saying ‘no’ often enough or soon enough.”

Although the lack of competition may make it seem easy for anyone to become a councillor, a lack of procedural uniformity at selection means that processes are not transparent or accessible. This may be a factor in discouraging some women from standing in the first place. Furthermore, as councillors often progress to regional or national politics, ad hoc procedures for local government may leave them unprepared for selection at this level.

The women we interviewed from national and devolved government

were more likely to describe their experience of selection as “daunting,” “frightening,” or “tortuous.”¹ The experience and image of the selection process in these more high profile areas of government may fuel the shortage of candidates locally. There is also evidence to suggest that the experience of selection is much more likely to put off women than men.²

Much research has been done on parliamentary selection procedures and the findings are in line with ours: a survey of parliamentary candidates for the 2001 General Election found that selection processes were institutionally sexist, with women being discriminated against even though their qualifications and political experience were very similar to the male candidates.³ Improvement in the 2005 General Election was minimal, with male parliamentary candidates outnumbering women by four to one, although there were strong party differences.⁴

Furthermore, the lack of formal procedures for local council selections leaves the process open to abuse. Just under two thirds of the women we interviewed were aware of prejudice or sex discrimination in the selection process.

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: “[The selection process was] not very pleasant. There had been a lot of occasions when everything had been decided beforehand, and a small cabal of people - I call them the boys’ club - who had pre-organised this, and you knew you were going to selection meetings and completely and utterly wasting your time. There’s a lot of that about, it’s the culture, that male boys’ club culture. The women sort of got through with the permission of the men, or by accident in my case.”

Party Differences in Selection

In the 2005 General Election, the Conservative Party were the least representative, selecting women for little over one fifth of seats. This was despite reforming their selection process.⁵ Although men and women

1 Four out of six MPs and MDCs described their experience of selection in this way compared to three out of seventeen councillors.

2 For example, Conservative parliamentary candidates were most likely to declare intentions to re-stand. However, only 32% of Conservative women said they were likely to stand again compared to 61% of Conservative men. See Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 6.

3 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 1.

4 Lisa Harrison, 'Election Strategies and Female Candidacy: Comparing Trends in the 2005 and 2001 General Elections', (Paper presented to the Elections, Parties and Public Opinion Specialist Group Annual Conference, University of Essex, 9-11 September, 2005), p.6. <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/EPOP%202005/Papers/epop2final.doc>

5 This compares with 49% women candidates for Labour and 43% women for the

performed equally well at the skills based selection by the Conservative central party, women were less likely to be selected at local level when they applied to individual seats in the second part of the process.⁶

Discriminatory attitudes in Conservative Associations are likely to hinder Conservative women applying to contest local council elections as well, especially since the party has no enforceable central policy for selection of local council candidates. There are only guidelines for selection and each Association has its own rules. In fact, of the three main parties, the Conservatives have the lowest proportion of female councillors, at just 27% in 2005.⁷

Female Conservative parliamentary candidates made the most – and some of the strongest – complaints and were much more likely than women from other parties to agree that male candidates are favoured by selection committees.⁸ However, the Conservative women we interviewed were less likely to mention prejudices or sex discrimination in the selection process than women from any other party. There are two possible explanations for this. First, that there is no discrimination in the Conservative Party's local council selections despite the clear evidence of discrimination at local level against female parliamentary candidates. Or second, that the uncompetitive nature of the selection process at local level has obscured biases.⁹ For example, in their survey of councillors in Northern Ireland, Wilford et al found that the lack of men willing to stand may have secured opportunities for women which would not otherwise have arisen.¹⁰

The main complaint from the Conservative women we spoke to was that they were perceived to be lacking commitment to politics due to the assumption that they were primarily responsible for childcare. Conservative parliamentary candidates also spoke about this problem. They suggested that selection committees tended to be made up of

Liberal Democrats. Harrison, 'Election Strategies and Female Candidacy', p. 5.

6 Fawcett Society, *Conservative Candidates: Where are the Women?*, pp. 2-3, http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/ConCan03_000.pdf

7 *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

8 52% of Conservative women parliamentary candidates were aware of prejudice and sex discrimination in the selection process compared to 47% of Labour women and 39% of Liberal Democrat women. 81% of Conservative women agreed that male candidates are favoured by selection committees. 60% Labour and 33% Liberal Democrat women agreed with them. Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, pp. 4-6.

9 More Conservative women who we interviewed than women from any of the three main parties found the selection process uncompetitive: five out of eight Conservative women compared to two out of five Liberal Democrat women and no Labour women found the process uncompetitive.

10 R. Wilford, R. Miller, Y. Bell and F. Donoghue, 'In their own Voices: Women Councillors in Northern Ireland', *Public Administrative* 71 (Autumn 1993), pp. 341-355, cited in Sarah Morgan, *Equality and Diversity in Local Government in England: A Literature Review*, (London, 2003), p. 23.

older party members with traditional attitudes towards parliamentary representation and working women, especially those with families.¹¹

Conservative MDC Christine Wilson: “[Selection committees] need a bit of training as to what women have to be, because we do know sometimes there’s a bit of unfairness there... If it’s a young woman [and] she’s got a family, they’re a bit worried about the time element, you know, how much is she able to give... I think that is always in the backs of the minds of the selection committees.”

However, women from the other parties tended to be much more aware of prejudice and sex discrimination in the selection process. Three quarters of the Labour women, all of the Liberal Democrat women and half of the women from smaller parties we interviewed mentioned discriminatory practices, compared with three out of eight Conservative women. Some interviewees from the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties thought that men were seen to be the ideal politicians by selectors. This tallies with the findings of Elgood et al at parliamentary level. In total, three quarters of female parliamentary candidates agreed that ‘women have to be better than men to be selected.’¹²

Labour Cllr Janet White: “In certain areas, you have a stereotype of a woman and that stereotype is not of a politician, it’s of a home-maker and a carer.”

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: “If you have a particularly elderly branch of mainly men, which mine is, they do struggle to see how a woman can represent their views, certainly some of the elder members of the Labour group, the men, tend to see you as doing it until you decide to have a family and then go off to do what you are supposed to do.”

Liberal Democrat MDC Ann Kelly: “The biggest barrier I think a woman has is being selected... middle aged or elderly female members of the party look down a list and their natural choice would be the man. That is their subconscious image of what they are looking for, and I think that has been the biggest single barrier to women getting on in politics. When we get more women in politics that subconscious picture will change.”

Labour MP Julie Walker: “I think there is still a lot of prejudice out there. There are still a lot of bad attitudes and people who seem to think that you are not really a proper politician unless you are a kind of middle aged, white, heterosexual male in a grey suit.”

Elgood et al found that one in five parliamentary candidates felt they had been asked inappropriate questions at selection, and some of the women we interviewed spoke about this as a problem.

11 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 6.

12 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 5.

Small Party MDC Karen Wright: “On the selection process...it was more about them undermining me, and asking me questions that they didn’t ask the other candidates, and in fact the other candidates would have fared worse if they had been asked those questions, and the question was only asked to me.” She went on to say that, “I did tackle a couple of them and said, ‘you’re actually tougher on me than you are on my male colleagues.’”

Conservative Cllr Mary Taylor: “In the Conservative Party, the ladies that lunched and didn’t work would ask you how you could combine politics with a job and raising your family but I haven’t really ever been asked that question. I know people who have but I don’t think you would be asked it so much now.”

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: “One person in one of my short-listing interviews said to me, ‘how will you manage as a woman on your own in London if you are elected?’”

Discriminatory practices at selection are reflected in the allocation of winnable seats. Women at both national and local level are more likely to be selected to contest the least winnable seats.¹³ At the 2005 General Election, the Conservatives only chose three women to contest their twenty most marginal seats; the Liberal Democrats chose six women.¹⁴

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: “I was selected for two reasons. One was that the seat was held by another party and I wasn’t perceived to win, and the second was that I would be nicely controllable if I got it.”

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: “[Parties] put women candidates in places where they are less likely to win.”

One Liberal Democrat woman we interviewed thought that women were less likely to be selected because party members thought that the public were less likely to vote for a woman candidate. Research by the Fawcett Society found that the Liberal Democrat Party lacks an equal opportunities culture at local level with some constituency members viewing women as a risk, especially in rural areas.¹⁵

Liberal Democrat Cllr Dorothy Turner: “What I find about Lib Dem members when we had this debate was that – it’s not that they think that they’re in any way sexist, it’s their perception of what they think the voters

¹³ Borisjuk and Thrasher, ‘Gender Imbalance in Representative Democracy: Women Candidates and Councillors in English Local Government, 1973-2002’, a paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia; Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 4; Equal Opportunities Commission, ‘Open Letter to the Conservative Leadership Candidates’, <http://www.eoc.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=17945&lang=en> - 27k

¹⁴ Harrison, ‘Election Strategies and Female Candidacy’ pp. 23-4.

¹⁵ Fawcett Society, *Liberal Democrat Candidates: Where are the Women?*, p. 1, <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/LDpm-PR.pdf>

want that has meant they've been more restrictive in their choices, and actually, evidence has shown that voters like women, keep women longer and will elect women time and time again in seats... So you can't any longer turn round and say, 'voters don't vote for women because they're sexist,' it isn't true... You know, 'they'll only vote for a man like him, it's a rural area,' when actually I think it's been proved that's not the case any more and it's getting harder to justify."

Research shows that in seats where a female MP was elected to Parliament, turnout among female voters was nine percentage points higher than in seats where a man was elected. Turnout among male voters also rose by five percentage points in seats which elected a female MP.¹⁶ Over four-fifths of the women we interviewed thought that they had at least an equal chance of being elected compared with men.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: "There has been research done that [shows] women are more likely to vote for women."

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: "Your chance of being elected [depends] on the campaign you run and that really doesn't matter on whether you are a man or a woman, it depends on how well you know the electorate and how well you know [how] to run a campaign [although] I tend to find that women will go out and vote for a woman more eagerly than they would for a man."

Informal procedures in local council selections is allowing prejudicial practices to permeate proceedings. Furthermore, the failure of selectors to appear transparent and fair will deter women from coming forward to stand as local council candidates in the first place.

Political will

Reform of the culture and practices of political parties themselves is needed in order to overcome discrimination at selection and to attract more female candidates.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Dorothy Turner: "I think leadership's a key issue. Local Chairs, Council Group Leaders and other people in key positions have to make it a positive mission [to get more women involved]... If you can use your leadership at that more local level to create a culture of wanting to find women to stand for council, wanting to have a woman on [the] council, going out of your way to make that happen, then that will ultimately impact on how your whole local party perceives women who go for parliamentary seats."

¹⁶ Electoral Commission, *Gender and Political Participation*, (London: 2004), p. 49.

Small Party Cllr Joan Robinson: “It’s very difficult to separate out what’s political will and what’s the prevailing status quo and atmosphere in politics isn’t it? I suppose then you could say, well, you need the political will to make things happen, you need to spend time and energy on countering those trends.”

Around two-thirds of the women we interviewed agreed that there was a lack of political will to turn promises of more female candidates into policy commitments aimed at increasing women’s participation in government. Nearly all of those who agreed thought that the lack of political will stemmed from the leadership of the political parties. However, there were strong party differences and, of the three main parties, Labour women were much more likely to comment on a lack of political will than any of the other women.

Despite this, Labour is the only one of the three main parties to have introduced measures that guarantee the presence of women in Parliament, the devolved chambers and local councils.¹⁷ Their target is to have 50% women by 2006/7.¹⁸ Labour also undertake promotional strategies through the Labour Women’s Network.

Labour Cllr Helen Thompson: “With Blair and the Labour Party leadership generally, I think they have shown by their actions, in terms of the kind of rules under which the Labour Party operates, and they are genuine about ensuring that women are well represented at all levels in the party. Within the party structure (branch, constituency, regional) and within councils there are women with positions of responsibility within the covenant system and within that their ongoing efforts to ensure that women do get elected to our national Parliament.”

All the Labour women spoke of some lack of political will, but half of these women thought that their party compared favourably to the other main parties.

Labour Cllr Rebecca Green: “I don’t see the leaders of any of the parties as

¹⁷ For the purposes of this pamphlet, equality guarantees require an increase in the proportion of women candidates with guaranteed outcomes, such as all-women shortlists that place women in target seats, twinning, or zipping. Measures such as balanced shortlists for candidacy or training are not equality guarantees because they do not guarantee that women will be elected although they may help in this aim. Labour used all-women shortlists for the 1997 and 2005 General Elections; twinning for the 1999 and 2003 Welsh Assembly elections and for the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary elections; and, for the 2006 local elections, for all out elections, one in three candidates must be a woman, or one in two if it is a two-seat ward. For authorities that elect candidates by thirds or halves, the rule of thumb is that if the sitting councillor is retiring then their replacement must be a woman, and where there are more women councillors retiring than men, the current proportion has to be maintained.

¹⁸ Rachel Saunders, Labour Party statement August 2004.

being particularly interested in [implementing policies to increase the levels of women's representation]." She went on to say, "I think the measures that have been taken in the Labour Party have worked reasonably well."

The Liberal Democrats chose not to use equality guarantees, instead they have used balanced shortlists for Parliament and the devolved chambers, although not for local councils.¹⁹ They have also set a target aiming for 40% of MPs and 25% of the Parliamentary Party to be women after the next General Election.²⁰ The Campaign for Gender Balance also provides other measures such as training and mentoring.

Liberal Democrat interviewees stressed the need to go beyond equality rhetoric and take practical measures to ensure women are elected.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: "There has to be some very strong leadership [to allow good initiatives to be implemented at the local level]. It would have to be made very clear by the leaders that they welcome women, but in the end, say selection training has to be part of the process."

Liberal Democrat Cllr Dorothy Turner: "You [need to] have positive action schemes that people can latch onto and say, 'I will make this happen and therefore more women will come into Parliament, or more BME people will come into Parliament,' and the party needs to perceive what their role is in doing that, and I think we need some real practical models." She went on to say, "There's a will, there's just not the know-how about how to make that happen in a more positive way, in a very physical way, and sometimes we need to think about the big things in local politics, about what the things that will make the big changes are."

David Cameron has created a 'priority list' of potential parliamentary candidates, for around one hundred 'winnable' parliamentary seats, of which more than half are women. However, the party has no measures or targets for devolved or local government. Measures such as training and mentoring are carried out by the Conservative Women's National Organisation.

At the time of the interviews, the Conservative party had done the least of the three main parties to implement measures to increase the proportion of women in politics and David Cameron had not yet been elected leader. Yet, only three Conservative women thought that there was a lack of political will on this issue. What is more, the women who did perceive a lack of political will did not see it as a problem and expressed a preference for incremental change over policy commitments to increase

¹⁹ The Liberal Democrats have used balanced shortlists for the 2005 General Election and the 1999 and 2003 Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections. See Childs et al, *Women at the Top 2005*, pp. 35, 45.

²⁰ The Liberal Democrats approved this motion that at their 2005 conference.

female representation.

Conservative MDC Jean Davies: “We all recognise this as something that needs to be changed; however, we would be doing an injustice if we did not take the time to find an appropriate solution.”

Conservative Cllr Christine Wilson: “What [the leadership are] going to do now, as it were, has to cascade through the party, and it is just takes a little time to get to the bottom to the selection committees and change their perceptions... There’s no doubt the culture is changing...and there are opportunities for women now. Just when the time’s right for women, then lots of women can get to the top.”

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: “I think the only thing that will improve [the number of women in politics] is time.”

The successes of individual women were often cited by Conservative interviewees as evidence of political will within the party.

Conservative Cllr Susan Jones: “I don’t think [the lack of political will] is an issue locally. I think they are just desperate for anybody to stand really, and anybody [is] welcomed into any of the party groups. Nationally, I think there is a positive effort on the part of the Conservative leadership to make themselves look a little bit more broadly represented and the women have done quite well in the party so I think that they have got their women in there, some tough ladies who will be the cabinet if the Conservatives win.”

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: “I have certainly not seen [a lack of political will] locally. Whether there is a lack of will nationally, I don’t know...I mean, you see high-flyer women in politics anyway. If there was much of a problem they wouldn’t be there, would they?... Maybe they have had to work harder, I don’t know... I think possibly I may work harder than some other councillors.”

In general, the Conservative women saw no need for any further measures to be taken by their party to assist women in entering government. This was generally based on the assumption that if some women can succeed to positions of authority and leadership then the path is open to all women, if only they try hard enough. And any barriers that did exist would be overcome in time without any real need for purposeful action. This was especially the case with the under-representation of women in local government; typically, the women did not see the lack of local council candidates as the responsibility of their party, but as a failure of women to present themselves for selection.

However, the sex discrimination evident in Conservative Associations’ selections of parliamentary candidates shows that prejudices are likely to

be ingrained and institutionalised.²¹ Although this may not prevent women from being selected as council candidates on account of the uncompetitive nature of the selection procedure, it is bound to be a factor in preventing women from considering standing in the first place. What is more, the Conservative Party leadership's lack of emphasis on increasing women's representation in local councils, and the absence of regulation in selection procedures at this level, must also contribute to the unwillingness of women to stand for local office.

Increasing the proportion of female candidates depends upon the political will of the parties to implement policies aimed at increasing representation at both grass-roots and leadership levels. The level of political will itself is determined both by party organisation and by ideology.

Equality Guarantees

Party ideology not only determines the extent of a party's political will to increase women's representation but also the specific actions, if any, they take to do so. The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2000 permits parties to adopt positive measures to redress inequalities in the proportion of male and female representatives at national, devolved and local levels.²² A survey of parliamentary candidates found that whilst there was majority support for the principle of positive action, support for specific measures, such as the use of all-women shortlists, varied greatly by political party, with only Labour candidates strongly supportive of these measures.²³ This is borne out by our research which also found strong party differences. In all, just over two in five of our interviewees supported the use of equality guarantees, yet three quarters of Labour women backed such action.

Labour Cllr Helen Thompson: "I was initially anti [all-women short lists], but we were just getting nowhere in many respects until John Smith's initiative. It was excellent." She went on to say, "I think the all-women shortlists were very good because the previous system was very, very biased towards men."

Labour Cllr Emma Jackson: "You've got to give women a chance, basically...you're looking at trying to diversify councils and making them more representative of the local people."

21 For evidence of discrimination in the parliamentary selection process see Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, 'Open Letter to the Conservative Leadership Candidates', <http://www.eoc.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=17945&lang=en> - 27k; Harrison, 'Election Strategies and Female Candidacy.'

22 'Positive measures' encompasses training and mentoring aimed at women, twinning, zipping and quotas for women.

23 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 1.

Labour Cllr Rebecca Green: “On balance I’d say I’m for [using equality guarantees], but I can see a point when hopefully in the future it won’t be necessary any more.”

When Labour used all-women shortlists in the 1997 General Election they almost tripled the number of their female MPs and even in 2005 Labour managed to increase its number of female MPs despite losing seats overall.²⁴ Labour women now make up just over three-quarters of all women in Parliament. The results of the 2001 General Election, when all-women shortlists were not permitted and the number of female Labour MPs fell, shows the effectiveness of this kind of action in guaranteeing that women are selected for winnable seats.²⁵ In 1999, Labour used twinning for elections in Scotland and Wales and achieved parity between male and female representatives, although in 2003 they dropped the system in Scotland. The effectiveness of equality guarantees is evident in Europe as well; all the countries with 25% or more female representatives have used some form of equality guarantee.²⁶

There seems to be a connection between the Labour Party’s willingness to implement equality guarantees and the extent of awareness of sexual inequalities among our Labour interviewees. In fact, lobbying and grassroots campaigns in the Labour Party were vital in the party’s decision to adopt equality guarantees.²⁷ However, there is not always such a harmony between the aims of Labour women activists and the implementation of these measures:

Labour Cllr Janet White: “I was very angry about the fact that we had been made a women-only selection, and then we were left with just one woman who really I felt was quite past it. So I was a little bit angry about that because if you’re going to have a women-only selection, you should have it held first with all the women, not just with one woman.”

There have been other high profile examples of these measures being poorly implemented. In the 2005 General Election, Labour’s candidate for Blaenau Gwent, Maggie Jones, selected from an all-women shortlist, lost to

24 In the 1997 General Election Labour increased its number of female MPs from 37 to 101, and in 2005, from 95 to 98 despite losing 45 seats overall. <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/notes/snsg-01250.pdf>
http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Women_MPs_May05.pdf
24-97 of the 127 women in Parliament are from the Labour Party. http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Women_MPs_May05.pdf

25 The number of female Labour MPs fell from 101 to 95 after two male Labour Party members successfully challenged the use of all-women shortlists in an industrial tribunal. They were found to be illegal under the Sex Discrimination Act. <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/notes/snsg-01250.pdf>
http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Positive_action.pdf

26 B. Sones, *Women in Parliament: The New Suffragettes*, (London: 2005), p. 199.

27 Childs et al, *Women at the Top 2005*, p. 42; Stephenson, *Gender and Democracy*, p. 24.

Peter Law, a local former Labour Party member who stood independently in protest at measures which were perceived to undermine the local party's autonomy. The Welsh Labour Party has since apologised for forcing an all-women shortlist on the constituency. However, it is unclear whether opposition in this case was aimed at all-women shortlists per se or at the imposition of a non-local candidate at the expense of a popular local party member.

Implemented sensitively, however, equality guarantees need not oppose local autonomy but can work as part of a holistic approach that sets in place working practices to recruit and select local female candidates. Equality guarantees can serve as a catalyst to recruitment both by demanding that more female candidates be identified and by attracting more local women by guaranteeing their involvement. Some of the Liberal Democrat women we interviewed spoke about how their party's adoption of zipped lists for the 1999 European elections complemented the use of other promotional measures to recruit women. Zipping involves alternating male and female candidates in proportional elections which use party lists. It was supported by the majority of Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidates.²⁸

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: "My views [on equality guarantees] have changed over the years. I used to think, 'oh no, that is not fair' but I think the affirmative action needs to be in training, mentoring and giving encouragement to women, but also to a certain extent it needs to be a quota, and my party wimped out this time with the European elections because we had a zipped list the previous time... We had got half and half men and women elected to the European Parliament. They need it if they are going to get more women into politics." Later, she added, "[Affirmative action] is something that would help to get candidates of both sexes to stand for local elections because we have really got quite a crisis at the moment."

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: "I actually did vote for women lists and zipping etc initially, not as something for the long term, but certainly in Europe, the zipping that went on that first time. It's never been repeated, but the number of women MEPs is 50% among the Lib Dems [but we also need measures such as] making sure there's always women on the selection list, making sure that women have got the training and support they need to build their confidence."

In the Liberal Democrat Party as a whole, support for the principle of positive action is mixed, however, notably more female than male Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidates were in favour of it: 67% of women against 41% of men (this compares to 89% female and 80% male Labour parliamentary candidates).²⁹ Female Liberal Democrat parliamentary

28 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 8.

29 Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 7.

candidates were also more likely to be in favour of equality guarantees than men, although the majority of both were against them and, in total, 77% of Liberal Democrats disapproved of all-women shortlists.³⁰ This is reflected in our survey in which three out of five Liberal Democrat interviewees were against equality guarantees.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Dorothy Turner: “When you’ve got a problem you need to take some fast and rapid action to sort it out.” She went on to say, “I certainly wouldn’t go for all-women shortlists in the party again, but I’d want to think about something.”

Liberal Democrat MDC Ann Kelly: “We have never as a party gone for positive discrimination. [The issue of quotas] is something that I have wrestled with long and hard, and I cannot bring myself to think that it is the best way to do it. However, in [my devolved chamber], we have benefited enormously, incalculably, from the fact that Labour did do positive discrimination, and Labour – on their 50/50 policy – delivered a very high female representation in [my devolved chamber]. That has done so much to challenge perceptions... [However] you can’t have positive discrimination for one group without having negative discrimination for another.”

The Liberal Democrat Party accepted the Gender Balance Taskforce motion at their 2005 conference that “quotas, zipping and all-women shortlists are tokenistic and damage local democracy.”³¹ Having achieved parity in the 1999 European elections through zipping, they have now abandoned the use of any form of equality guarantee. This approach was reflected by the responses of our Liberal Democrat interviewees: on the whole, they preferred to tackle the problem of women’s under-representation through training, mentoring and support rather than through equality guarantees.

Some of the Conservative women we interviewed also preferred support and education to equality guarantees as a means to increase the number of women in politics.

Conservative Cllr Mary Taylor: “The positive discrimination idea in the Conservative Party – they wouldn’t be too fine with that. I think support for young people, young working people, would be more important.”

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: “The only way forward [in terms of increasing the number of women in politics] would be to bring a bigger politics curriculum into schools.”

In fact, all the Conservative women we interviewed opposed the use of equality guarantees. This reflects Elgood et al’s finding that 80% of female

³⁰ Results from the BRS survey, cited in Harrison, ‘Election Strategies and Female Candidacy’, p. 8.

³¹ http://reflectingbritain.org.uk/?page_id=4

and 96% of male Conservative parliamentary candidates were against equality guarantees.³² Furthermore, the Conservative Party was the only major party where the majority of parliamentary candidates were against even the principle of positive action.³³

Typically, the Conservative women we interviewed felt that candidates ought to be selected only on individual merit, and that any system of selection that recognises gender – such as equality guarantees – would violate these meritocratic principles. They did not believe there were any barriers strong enough to prevent women from being selected according to their merits. Therefore, by suggesting women were less able to be selected than men, some Conservative women thought that equality guarantees were condescending.

Conservative MDC Jean Davies: “I don’t like the idea of women-only shortlists. It is condescending to women and unfair to men.”

Conservative MDC Christine Wilson: “Women-only lists: I don’t think it’s a good idea because it’s not good in the long run because if a woman gets forward under a woman-only list, people are saying ‘oh well, she’s only there because it was a woman-only list,’ and I don’t think that’s good enough. We just have to keep on, keep fighting the good fight...Women have a lot to give, a lot to give, there’s no doubt.”

Conservative Cllr Elizabeth Williams: “I think [selection] should be on ability and not on your sex.”

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: “I am dead against any positive discrimination in any form. It must be on merit. I think in actual fact, I think everyone should go forward, I don’t think that there should be any gender in politics at all and I think it should be totally unbiased one way or the other. Somebody should be selected on merit and nothing else...I think it undermines the whole system if they do [introduce equality guarantees].”

In general, the Conservatives we interviewed thought that a method of selection which employed equality guarantees would fail to select candidates on merit and therefore would allow women who were inadequate to become candidates.

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: “Where I think the government has made a grave mistake – and I think it is beginning to show – is in encouraging so many women forward who I don’t feel are actually very good in their role.”

³² This is the result for the female Conservative parliamentary candidates who opposed the use of all-women shortlists, however, both Conservative men and women were also against twinning and zipping. Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, pp. 7-8.

³³ Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 7.

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: “*The Daily Express* picked up on this because I think Labour wants to have lots more women candidates, and locally they are only going to select women candidates that weren’t going to be particularly the best person for the job, and they did pick up on that and they said, ‘actually if you’ve got a man out there that’s going to do a much better job than Mrs Jones [for example], then just because she’s a woman doesn’t mean that she should have the job.’”

Conservative interviewees tended to believe that any measures aimed specifically at helping women - from women-only training and mentoring to equality guarantees - would give women an unfair advantage. However, the implementation of equality guarantees will not introduce gender bias into politics; it is already there. Candidates are already chosen because of their sex, otherwise men would not be so predominant in government. Men make up 80% of parliamentarians and 71% of councillors. It is possible that this discrepancy could be explained by arguing that men are more willing to contribute politically and to put themselves forward as candidates. However, Childs et al found that this was not the case at parliamentary level; women did not become MPs because parties did not select them for winnable seats.³⁴ The Equal Opportunities Commission declared that, “positive action is not required because women cannot succeed on their merits but because all too often they are not given an opportunity to do so.”³⁵

Small Party MDC Karen Wright: “We have reached a stage when clearly women often have better educations, better brains. They’re still not achieving their potential in politics. And therefore, you have to start to think, ‘is this a system that actually enables men and disables women?’ I think that’s what we’ve got.”

There is sex discrimination in the local parties that affects the selection and election of women councillors. However, it is clear that some local party members – particularly those from the Conservative Party – do not recognise this as a problem. This attitude will allow discriminatory practices to persist and prevent the correct implementation of positive measures aimed at improving women’s representation.

The anecdotal evidence from the women in our survey suggests that the supply of candidates for office is a much greater problem at local than at national level. Yet it is still the responsibility of political parties to take measures in order to tackle this shortage and to attract candidates who are representative of the communities they serve. Discriminatory practices in local parties at parliamentary selections will contribute to the parties’ particular failure to attract women to stand for council, especially

³⁴ Childs et al, *Women at the Top 2005*, p. 82.

³⁵ Equal Opportunities Commission, *An Equal Chance: Your Guide to Promotion, Selection and Election of Women Candidates*, (London) p. 6.

given that the voluntary nature of the job requires parties to make it as attractive a post as possible.

Section II

Women's Experiences as Councillors

Women's Experiences as Councillors

Background

In recent years, the composition, working practices, ethical codes and financial allowances of local authorities have been reformed. Since the Local Government Act 2000, the majority of councils have opted to introduce cabinet-style Executives. Up to ten councillors, appointed by the council leader or directly elected mayor, hold responsibility for decision-making and for the day to day running of the council. The remaining councillors have a 'backbench' role, which may include committee work and scrutinising the cabinet's decisions.

The Local Government Act also provides a new statutory ethical framework for local authorities, setting out general principles of conduct and model codes as part of the council's Constitution. The code includes 'respect for others' as one of its general principles, which involves the promotion of equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person.¹

The Act allows councillors to receive a basic allowance set at a level intended to compensate them for the time and energy they put into playing their vital role. A special responsibility allowance is set for councillors with significant responsibilities, such as roles within the Executive and potentially for some or all chairs of Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Each local authority has a statutory duty to establish an independent allowance and remuneration panel, although the allowance scheme can only be decided by the full council.²

The impact of these reforms on the experiences of our interviewees is

¹ The Stationery Office Limited, *The Local Authorities (Model Code of Conduct) (England) Order 2001* (London: 2001), p. 2.

² Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 'New Council Constitutions: Guidance on Regulation for Local Authority Allowances', Now available at http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1133830#P59_2545

difficult to assess. However, between 2001 and 2004 the number of female councillors increased by less than it did in the period from 1997 to 2001.³ Improvements in women's representation do not happen by accident, and if Labour's modernisation of local government has not helped to achieve equality, then the reforms have missed an opportunity to break with the culture and practices of male dominance that exist in local councils and to effect political change.⁴

Almost 70% of local councillors are men. This predominance of men in local government has a serious effect upon the way local authorities operate, in terms of both culture and practices. With such a majority of men, seemingly neutral ways of operating will favour men, either directly – by actually disadvantaging women; or indirectly - by not taking account of the barriers that are created by the usual practices. The barriers to women's equality in local councils include direct and indirect sex discrimination, outdated attitudes about the role of women, family unfriendly working practices, inflexible employment and financial problems.

Their respective retention rates suggest either that women are more likely to be selected for more marginal seats or that there is a difference in men's and women's experiences as councillors which causes female councillors to stand down early. Female councillors currently serve an average of 7.2 years in office; for male councillors the figure is 8.7 years.⁵

A visible improvement in women's experiences in local government would also change perceptions of local government as a male domain and may attract more women to become councillors. In turn, greater numbers of female councillors would re-enforce initiatives to effect political change and to widen women's representation.⁶

³ From 1997 to 2001 the percentage of women councillors increased by 0.7%, from 27.8% to 28.5%, whereas from 2001 to 2004 the percentage of women councillors increased by 0.6%, to 29.1%. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

⁴ See Stephenson, *Gender and Democracy: What Works? Strategies to increase women's representation*, (London 2004)

⁵ *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

⁶ Despite the inability to prove a direct causal relation between women's descriptive representation and substantive representation, there is much evidence to suggest that women do make a difference to the way political institutions function and they do effect change that benefits women. See Childs et al, *Women at the Top 2005*, pp. 48-73.

Women's Experiences as Councillors

Local Government Culture

Political Conduct

About two thirds of the women we interviewed said that there is a difference in men and women's way of doing politics. This echoes Sarah Child's findings from her interviews with female Labour MPs in 2000; in another study, female politicians throughout the world argued that they have brought something different into politics.¹

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith²: "We are not as confrontational as men...I think women are more subtle and more skilful in debate, they don't just bang it out."

Three-fifths of the women we interviewed found that the style of political debate and the culture of political activity in their chambers affected them adversely. Furthermore, many recognised that the perception of the political process as confrontational and aggressive can discourage women from seeking office in the first place.

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: "I think the culture of politics has to become less [of a] competition, less masculine, less chest-beating, less [of a] testosterone culture...That's not a positive way of conducting things, it's not the civilised way of conducting things. Until we change that culture,

¹ Sarah Childs interviewed female Labour MPs first elected in 1997, of whom about two thirds felt men and women had a different political style. In Childs, *New Labour's Women MPs*, p. 183; see also Stephenson, *Gender and Democracy*, p. 33. The views of a wide range of British politicians, both male and female, at the local, national and sub-national level, agree that there are gendered political styles, see Childs et al, *Women at the Top*, p. 70.

² All names have been changed, using a list of popular names supplied by the Office of National Statistics. Any resemblance to the names of real-life councillors is entirely coincidental.

the majority of women are not going to want to have anything to do with it.”

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jacqueline Murphy: “Sometimes it can be like in the school playground. The aggressiveness of the cut and thrust haven’t always appealed to women. That’s not how you get things done. Women like to sit down and debate things and get things done.”

Small Party MDC Karen Wright: “I loathe all that knockabout, absolutely loathe it, and most of the women I know who are elected loathe it as well. They just think it’s just an utter, utter waste of time and energy. They’d rather be out there talking to people on the streets, or getting something done...Prime Minister’s Question Time and all that, it’s like a boxing match or something. Most women don’t have that much support for [that]...it is clearly alienating.”

Most of the interviewees who perceived a difference between their style and that of their male colleagues classified their own way of working as more active, results driven, involving co-operation and teamwork, and focused on constituency work. Similar sentiments were recorded by both Childs and Sones when they interviewed female MPs. Sones found that the women “see themselves as ‘social entrepreneurs’ who listen to what their constituents have to say and work hard to develop strategies to bring about the desired improvements.”³ Female councillors spend more time than men on nearly all aspects of council business, and this time difference is particularly marked when it comes to holding surgeries and dealing with constituents.⁴

Conservative MDC Jean Davies: “I’m involved in all sorts of things, and I think that’s very important. [It is] very important to find out all the difficulties that other people have in the community, because that’s what we politicians are supposed to do: [we] are supposed to help.”

Labour Councillor Janet White: “I think women work their wards in a different way from men... I go in to have coffee with the elderly on a Monday morning for an hour. I just talk to them and find [out] any issues... If women get into politics, they’re actually far more likely to work from the ground.”

The qualities which female politicians describe themselves as possessing and the types of political activity in which they engage are so fundamental to their role that it is dismissive to characterise them as a ‘style’. When

³ Boni Sones interviewed 83 women MPs in office between May and October 2004, see *Women in Parliament*, p. 65. See also Childs, *New Labour’s Women MPs*.

⁴ Women on average spend 3.7 hours on surgeries and dealing with constituents compared to the 3.2 hours that men spend on this, and 5.6 hours on all constituency business compared to 4.8 hours for men. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

considered with the 'style' it is opposed to – overtly oratorical, combative and 'uncivilised', with less opportunity to 'get things done' – it is clear that if women feel that they are hindered in practicing politics due to the predominance of a masculine style or culture then they are being marginalised and discriminated against in their work.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: "If you don't have the same set of skills or if you are not aggressive and not a man, then they don't really rate you for what you do. I have had a specific experience of that recently: I was on a negotiating panel and I think some of the attitudes I get are just awful, perhaps because we have got quite a high age profile amongst the councillors. I get this because I am a woman."

Conservative MDC Christine Wilson: "If you want to do something for the community, you can't let your own pride and status get in the way, and it's a question of giving something in order to get what you eventually want, and I think it's worthwhile doing... I think men don't really have that." She went on to say, "[Men] worry about whether women have the toughness to get through politics. I don't think they need to be tough; I think they need to be determined and fair-minded."

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: "[The barriers women need to overcome are] men and male values, upheld by women I might add, it's not just men that create the barriers. There is an expectation that people will conduct themselves in a competitive and manipulative way, it's not something that I subscribe to but [I] get marginalised because of it. I think the whole manner of conduct has to be re-examined and challenged."

The dominant masculine 'style' which inhibits councillors from conducting their business is a culture of discrimination maintained in the attitudes of some people in local authorities and which the council's institutional framework and working practices allow to perpetuate.⁵

Small Party Cllr Joan Robinson: "It's more about the way politics feels and looks, that it's a very competitive, cut-throat sort of thing. I think there are plenty of men as well as women who want to work in a less competitive, more co-operative sort of way."

It should be noted that the Conservative interviewees were significantly

⁵ Childs et al found that the political institutional framework demands adversarial conduct; see *Women at the Top*, p. 70. However, in local government, fewer women than men want a return to the committee system (9.8% compared to 13.9%). As a committee system is seemingly a more consensual style of government than the more adversarial style of the new cabinet model, it is evident that a problem of 'political style' runs deeper. One possibility is that the new composition of local government gives councillors more defined roles to play and therefore men are less likely to be able to dominate proceedings. See the *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

less likely to want to work in a different way.⁶ Although most of the Conservative women recognised a difference between men and women in the style of political debate and culture of political activity, their answer was to ‘toughen up’.⁷

Conservative MDC Christine Wilson: “There is no doubt that there is a difference between men and women in debate, and women just have to get a little bit more tough, a little bit more determined than perhaps they would be otherwise.”

Conservative Cllr Mary Taylor: “I suspect that [the style of debate] affects some but it doesn’t affect me. I always feel like I can fight my corner.”

However, this solution of dealing with the masculine culture of politics has its own problems. More than half of the interviewees felt that there was a backlash in attitudes against them when they challenge accepted notions of femininity in their behaviour, they were often labelled ‘difficult’ or seen as a threat.⁸

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jacqueline Murphy: “If any women step out of their boundary of what they are supposed to be seen as doing, I think it’s always a threat to somebody.”

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: “I’m described as difficult, dangerous, frightening and scary, all negative things because I don’t fit within the [female] stereotype and I will not be intimidated by the stereotype.”

Labour Cllr Janet White: “You’re made to feel pushy if you try to raise things that concern you. I suppose I’ve caused a few waves on several occasions because I haven’t agreed with things that have happened or should be happening.”

Significantly fewer Conservative interviewees – just over one third – recognised this as a problem, despite their preference for conforming to a more masculine style.⁹ However, their admission that they needed to ‘toughen up’ or ‘fight’ in order to conform is in itself evidence of a problem.

6 Only three out of eight Conservative women found the political style and culture off-putting compared with five out of eight Labour women and four out of five Liberal Democrat women.

7 Childs recognises party identity as a determinant of political style. See Childs, *New Labour’s Women MPs*, p. 191.

8 Similar accounts of a backlash are reported in Sones, *Women in Parliament*; Childs, *New Labour’s Women MPs*; Childs et al, *Women at the Top*, pp. 70-1; Stephenson, *Gender and Democracy*, pp. 7-8.

9 Only three out of the eight Conservative women recognised a problem with a backlash compared to six out of eight Labour women and three out of five Liberal Democrat women.

The fact that women feel a backlash against them even when they conform to the masculine style of politics indicates a culture of discrimination aimed specifically at women. Women are disadvantaged for using a 'feminine style' of politics but are also attacked if they adopt a more 'masculine style'.

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: "I think it is the man's way out of an argument by saying that you are just being difficult. I think they try to treat us very much in a supportive role."

Sex Discrimination

Despite the emphasis on creating a new ethical framework and establishing new codes of conduct - including policies for bullying and harassment - as part of the modernising reforms of local government, three-fifths of our interviewees (including two thirds of the councillors) had experienced some form of sex discrimination.¹⁰

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: "I have been subjected to serious bullying, marginalisation, myth-making, story-telling, you name it, all these techniques." She went on to say, "in the same room, at the same time, colleagues will be addressed as councillor and they will turn around and use my first name. So it's a lack of respect - infantilism, you know, being spoken to as an infant, being addressed in a manner that implies that I am a junior to people by people who are in fact [more] junior than myself."

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: "Some of the men, particularly the Conservative men, [make] comments about figure, legs. Just things like: 'the Liberal Democrats know how to select a woman who's got good legs,' or whatever. Just comments about a woman leader being like a fishwife or that 'she doesn't know how to stop talking, like all women.'"

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: "One of the elderly men on the council - who is no longer a councillor - walked passed and said: 'Ah Linda, it's fantastic to see you here, it's nice to have a bit of crumpet on the Labour Group eventually.'"

Some of the women did not feel that they were affected personally by any sex discrimination and some did not find sexism to be a problem:

Labour MP Julie Walker: "[I am aware of sexist attitudes] from the odd Neanderthal male, but, not personally, no."

Small Party Cllr Joan Robinson: "There's a different sort of teasing for

¹⁰ There are many accounts of women politicians' experiences of sex discrimination. See Sones, *Women in Parliament*, pp. 66-83; Childs, *New Labour's Women MPs*; Childs et al, *Women at the Top 2005*, pp. 69-71; Stephenson, *Gender and Democracy*, pp. 8-9.

women, maybe, but I don't feel its sexism.”

Conservative MDC Jean Davies: “There is a certain amount of institutional sexism, across party, within politics. However, this is rare and I have certainly never experienced it.”

Conservative Cllr Susan Jones: “I sometimes wonder if I'm a bit sexist...I'm probably just as bad as the rest of them in making sexist comments, and so I'm sort of a closet male chauvinist.”

Far from the ethical framework normalising an equal opportunities culture, these women seem to have normalised discriminatory behaviour in order to continue with their job. This is not a response which all women can adopt. Furthermore, these attitudes and behaviours, allowed to persist by council rules and procedures, will create an image of local politics which potential female councillors will find unattractive.

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: “When I first came on [the council] there was a second woman...who in actual fact gave up because she just couldn't stand some of the remarks made by our colleagues, our male colleagues. They are very difficult. It is a case of really digging my teeth in and hanging on to stay there sometimes. They are rude, they are arrogant, and you are just the little woman if you are not careful.”

Outdated Attitudes

Many interviewees brought up the fact that the people who held these attitudes in local authorities were more likely to be from the older generation, with older women as well as men perpetuating the masculine culture.¹¹ In fact, Childs found that older successful female MPs were regarded as employing the traditional masculine ‘style’, whereas ‘new men’ were considered more likely to share women’s political ‘style’.¹²

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: “Most of the people who are in local politics certainly are of an older generation perhaps – particularly men – it's very off-putting for young women to get involved at a local level, and some of the comments can be the kind of comments that would get a man a sacking in the private industry.”

Labour MP Julie Walker: “You do get [backlash attitudes] from older women who feel that perhaps they never had the same opportunities that younger women in the party have now.”

Conservative Cllr Elizabeth Williams: “[Ambitious women are seen as] a

¹¹ The women interviewed brought this problem up even though they were not specifically asked about it.

¹² See Childs, *New Labour's Women MPs*, p. 185.

threat maybe, [men] don't really know how to cope. This is the older ones not the younger ones."

The average age of local council members is fifty-eight and only 14% of councillors are under forty.¹³ By failing to attract younger people, local councils are not reflecting their local communities. This may be a factor in perpetuating outdated attitudes about the role of women, which are then reflected in the conventions and practices of the council.

Expertise

Around three-quarters of all the women we interviewed felt that their skills were utilised and expressed no problems competing with their peers for positions of authority:

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: "The reason that probably I got the cabinet position was because I feel that I am quite good at time management... That all reflects in my business life anyway because I am organised: I know where I'm going, I know what I've got to do, and I think that was well transferred."

Conservative MDC Jean Davies: "I have been given the position of Conservative Spokesperson for Sport. This is a role that I was delighted to take on as I have a particular interest in sport, [which has] provided me with a good knowledge of this subject."

However, other interviewees found that old-fashioned perceptions about the role of women have meant that their expertise has been overlooked and the types of roles that they have been given in politics are stereotypically 'feminine'.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: "When I first became a county councillor I was already a doctor and a research scientist at [a major university], specialising in agricultural crops and bio-diversity and genetic resources. That turned up at a county council meeting, and there was something on the agenda about bio-diversity or something. So I spoke from a position of authority, and was told by a Conservative councillor, a farmer, to be quiet, because I couldn't possibly know what it was all about, and just to go back to the kitchen, basically."

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: "I think my child raising skills are about the only thing that are recognised on county council!" She went on to say, "as soon as I got onto county council I was put on Education and Social Services because that was what was expected of me, and that is because I am female... I am actually interested in budgets and things like that; I

¹³ *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales.*

don't deal with the budgets in my part because I have a male colleague on Social Services who does the money side - and he is useless at it, and I understand it!"

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: "There is the expectation that there are certain roles within politics that are okay. I was on the Labour shadow cabinet until this year and to my fury I was given the environment when in fact I'm very well known and very high profile in issues of regeneration... Now there is only one woman on the shadow cabinet and she has been given a combination of environmental, arts, heritage and leisure. You're given things that are marginal."

This anecdotal evidence is borne out by other research. Catherine and Hugh Bochel concluded from the results of their survey of councillors in 2000 that women are likely to have portfolios related to 'caring' areas, such as social services and social inclusion, education or community or neighbourhood services, and less likely to have responsibility for fields such as economic development and regeneration or corporate affairs.¹⁴ This is not to say that these areas are insignificant in themselves, and the Bochels' previous research also suggested that women appear to be happy in these positions. However, that is clearly not the case with some of the women we interviewed, and if women are assigned portfolios based on a stereotype rather than reflecting their individual preferences and skills, then valuable expertise will almost certainly be overlooked.

Promotion

The majority of interviewees said that there was enough encouragement from their party for women considering running for positions of authority or leadership; compared to about a third, and just under a quarter of those who were councillors, who felt that encouragement was lacking.

40% of female councillors are Chair or Vice-Chair of a major function or policy area compared to 44% of male councillors.¹⁵ The same percentage of women and men are Chair or Vice-Chair and Members of Boards, and overall there is only a 5% difference between the proportions of women and men holding one or more positions.¹⁶ However, women make up

14 C. Bochel and H. Bochel, 'Women and Labour's Modernisation of Local Government in the UK', European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions, (Copenhagen, 14-19 April 2000), p. 9.

15 Major function or policy areas include Chair/Vice-Chair of the Council, Overview, Regulatory, Area, Standards, Main Policy or Other Major as defined by the *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

16 1.2% of both men and women are Chair or Vice-Chair of a Board and 3.7% of both sexes are members. 55% of men hold one or more positions compared to 50.1% of women. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

less than 30% of all council members, so although the proportions are similar, the numbers are not. Women still find themselves in the minority whatever position they hold.

What is more, women are being excluded from the very highest positions within local councils and also within their parties. About half as many female councillors as male councillors achieve the position of Leader or Deputy Leader of the council, or Group Leader.¹⁷ Women are also proportionately less likely to be Group Deputy Leader or to gain a place on the council Executive, which means they are also less likely to receive a special responsibility allowance.¹⁸

Labour Cllr Janet White: "It's in some ways very much a male-dominated world. You are much more likely to get on if you are male. For instance, I am the only woman on the Executive from our party." She went on to say, "[More women would enter politics] if they saw a lot more women in top jobs...I look back at the women who have been in politics over the years, some very good women, but we have never had a woman leader."

Labour Cllr Emma Jackson: "I certainly think that to rise through the ranks in politics – it's the old glass ceiling thing – not only do you have to be seen to be good, but you have to be seen as better than men, to offer some form of added value."

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: "Women don't push themselves forward enough and are not encouraged to do so... We should probably be giving more support to the women in our group than we do. So it is not institutionalised enough."

Female councillors are just as qualified and experienced as their male counterparts.¹⁹ Yet all parties are failing to offer women equal opportunities to gain cabinet positions especially leadership, deputy leadership and group leadership. This is important because if women councillors do not feel that they are fulfilling their potential and progressing according to their ability and experience then they are more likely to stand down. It also means that women in local authorities are less visible and therefore are less likely

17 5.7% of men are Leaders or Deputy Leaders of the council compared to 2.7% of women. 8.2% of men and only 4.4% of women are Party/Group Leader. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales.*

18 6.2% of men are Party/Group Deputy Leader as opposed to 4.7% of women. 15.3% of men are Cabinet Members compared to 12.9% of women. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales.*

19 Fractionally more male councillors have a degree or equivalent (51.4% compared to 47.1%) yet more women hold 'A' Levels and GCSEs or equivalent (12.6% compared to 11.5%, and 18.6% compared to 10.2% respectively). A slightly higher proportion of female councillors are engaged in other types of public activity such as holding school governorships (51.2% compared to 46.5%) or doing unpaid voluntary work (54.1% compared to 48% of men). *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales.*

to be seen as role models by potential female candidates.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: “It’s the fact that [if] one woman gets through, she acts as a role model, and also in the district council group, at one stage – I know the numbers have dropped since - but at one stage we had 50% women councillors and 50% men, and I think that was really encouraging [to] women.”

To a large extent, the promotion of women to positions of authority and leadership in local authorities depends upon the support available from their parties at both constituency and national level. Women from the Labour Party spoke of the encouragement that they received both in terms of promotional measures, such as mentoring and training, and through their party’s policy of promoting women to positions within their parties, in the council and in the wider community.

Labour Cllr Helen Thompson: “The rules are that for positions within your branch or constituency, or the direct party, there must be at least a third women or a third men.”

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: “The party is very supportive as well, they will always try and make sure that any appointments that need to be made – appointments on outside bodies as well as in the council – they try and do it on an equal basis so that there are so many men for a position and so many women.”

Labour Cllr Emma Jackson: “If you actually become a councillor the training is excellent.” She went on to say, “[The party have] got a women’s conference, they’ve got women’s officers in all branches to promote women’s issues.”

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: “Something I’m doing directly is something I’ve suggested but never benefited from and that is mentoring. I’m mentoring, formally mentoring, I suggested the system in [my district] for the council and I’ve suggested it for the party... I mentored this year a new woman councillor.”

However, despite these examples of formal structures within the party, half of the Labour women we interviewed thought that the party’s culture undermined such measures.²⁰ A much greater proportion of Labour women than of women from any other party expressed dissatisfaction with the encouragement for women considering running for positions of authority or leadership.²¹

20 This includes two councillors and two MPs.

21 Only two Conservative women out of eight and one Liberal Democrat woman out of five felt that there was not enough encouragement from their party for women considering running for positions of authority or leadership.

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: “There is encouragement by structures but not a lot of support once you get in there.”

Labour Cllr Janet White: “They don’t encourage you to move forward. Maybe it’s because they have vested interests – the ones who are at the top already!” She went on to say, “I haven’t found it difficult, I have moved forward quite steadily. But if I hadn’t been a woman, I think I would have got there a lot quicker.”

Labour MP Julie Walker: “I still think there are difficulties in parts of the country, perhaps where there are proportionally more males than women in the party and you know you do get the old boys’ network at work and often it is through trade union branches... I am sure it is far more difficult in the Tory Party, but even in Labour in some areas at a local level I think it is still difficult for women to progress. [However,] we have always gone out of our way to encourage women to get involved and stand for office.”

In contrast, three quarters of the Conservative interviewees saw no problem with party support for promotion. They suggested that positions were available to able applicants regardless of gender and cited their own progress or the progress of other individual women as evidence of this.

Conservative Cllr Susan Jones: “Although traditionally the Conservatives have been men in suits, I think that that is changing nationally and certainly on the local level. There is no question that there’s a gender bias, I mean the leader of our group is a woman.”

Conservative MDC Jean Davies: “Our party chairman in [my area] is a woman, as was her predecessor. There is no barrier for women considering running for high office within our party.”

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: “Certainly as a cabinet member I certainly haven’t...had [any]body say that it shouldn’t have been me or anything like that... They didn’t show me support because I was a woman, they showed me support because I was the right person for the job.”

Other Conservative women experienced no problem with being promoted due to the lack of councillors available to fill positions of authority.

Conservative Cllr Elizabeth Williams: “[There is] no problem [with encouragement for promotion]. In fact, sometimes you are forced.”

Conservative Cllr Mary Taylor: “Generally when I wanted a position I got it, and I haven’t had to walk on anybody to get it.”

Compared to the Labour interviewees, Conservatives were far less critical of their party in its efforts to support them for promotion. In general, the Conservative women spoke of the lack of competition for

positions or cited examples of individual women who had succeeded as proof of the possibility of success for all women. However, none of the Conservative women mentioned any specific structures of support for women considering running for positions of authority or leadership. This suggests either that the formalised support networks of which the Labour women spoke are largely inadequate and counter-productive, or that Labour women are more aware of the barriers to promotion that women face and are more likely to conceptualise these barriers as being part of a systemic bias against women. The existence of structures of support in the Labour Party may be a result of those attitudes held by Labour members. However, the evidence of these women also suggests that these structures are undermined by the attitudes and behaviour of some local councillors and members of Constituency Labour Parties.

Women from the Liberal Democrats and from smaller parties commented on the lack of resources available for implementing support measures and creating formal structures of encouragement. But on the whole, they expressed satisfaction with the support they received for promotion.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Dorothy Turner: "I think we've got a very supportive party. We've got a culture that's about trying to get the best out of people, and making them do things they would never quite have expected before, and our local party encourages ambition."

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: "You can always say things can be improved. I think if the Liberal Democrats had more finances, they would improve things. The will is there, it is the resources that are needed to really make sure that it does happen."

Small Party MDC Karen Wright: "I think if we were bigger and richer we would be able to support the women more."

Although there is a greater problem with the lack of women in local government than with their progression within the role, there is still a significant absence of women in the very top positions. What is more, the lack of female leaders may be a factor in discouraging women from entering local politics in the first place. Despite important distinctions between the experiences and attitudes of the women from the different parties, it is evident that without both fully resourced structures and a culture of support in local parties, women will remain excluded from leadership roles.

Women's Experiences as Councillors

Local Government Practice

Work-Life Balance

One Labour councillor suggested that the main reason for women's difficulty in progressing in politics was their lack of time due to other commitments:

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: "It is very difficult for women to break through to the top levels of politics, I think, because you need to demonstrate that your commitment is to nothing other than politics to be able to do their jobs because of the time frames that they involve and the general complete dedication they involve. It is probably more difficult for women to be able to surrender everything else in their lives to be able to do that, the way that men can."

Rao's survey of female councillors in 2000 found that the difficulty of balancing the responsibilities of home life with council work was the most reported barrier to women's progression in local politics, cited by 74% of respondents.¹ This supports our findings: two-thirds of the women we interviewed – and three-quarters of the councillors - faced difficulties in combining their home and family life with their political careers.

Conservative Cllr Patricia Brown: "Young women start working and are involved in their careers and then they start a family and they can't combine politics work with their family. It's like having three jobs."

Conservative MDC Christine Wilson: "I didn't see I'd have a career in politics at first because I was also looking after my elderly father... So there was a lot of juggling at that time... I'm finding difficulty now that

¹ N. Rao, 'A Survey of Women Councillors in Local Government: Preliminary Findings', (2000).

I'm a member [of a devolved chamber] balancing all the things I do, but it's always important I think to have a really broad aspect of life in the community."

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: "The main barrier is trying to combine career, family and politics all together. I have to say that women still do take on the majority of the family role, and the housework role, even amongst younger women it still can be a problem."

The increasing numbers of women in employment has not resulted in a greater sharing of childcare responsibilities.² This is demonstrated in local government by the fact that in both 1997 and 2001 there were proportionately more male than female councillors with pre-school and primary school age children, while the proportions of male and female councillors with secondary school age children showed little difference.³ Women do not become local councillors until their children are older and they have fewer caring responsibilities, whereas men do not necessarily treat having children at home as a barrier to entering local politics.⁴

Labour Cllr Janet White: "A lot of women don't get into politics until much later in life because we have families to bring up, families to look after, elderly relatives who we are caring for."

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: "When men decide to go into politics there is the assumption that their families will be supportive but when women go into politics, you have to do everything else as well as the politics. It is difficult."

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: "I've got a very supportive husband - I still have to clean my house and cook the dinner and go to council meetings... Certainly in my house my husband doesn't clean...he doesn't clean, he doesn't iron, he doesn't do all those things... OK, my husband earns more than I do, but I find myself the primary carer of everything - the house, the home, the children, everything like that. You don't feel

2 K. Hinds and L. Jarvis, 'The Gender Gap', chapter 5 in R. Jowell, J. Curtice, A. Park, K. Thomson and L. Jarvis, (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: Focusing on Diversity* (17th Report), (London, 2000).

3 In 1997, 10.2% of women and 13.7% of men had pre-school and primary school age children; in 2001, this decreased to 7.8% of women and 11.7% of men. Yet in 1997, 14% of men and 14% of women had secondary school age children; in 2001, 10.1% of women and 11.4% of men did. *First and Second Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*

4 This reflects similar findings for entry into national politics: in a survey of parliamentary candidates more men than women cited family commitments as the most important barrier discouraging them from standing for selection. This suggests that family commitments prevent women from even standing for selection in the first place. 44% of men and 41% of women cited family commitments as the most important barrier that discouraged them from standing for selection. In Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?*, p. 3.

that you can let any of those things slip, because if you start to let those things slip, it changes everybody's life, doesn't it?"

Almost three quarters of both male and female councillors have no caring responsibilities, suggesting an incompatibility between council work and family commitments.⁵ This results in a lack of young people, and particularly young women, on local councils.⁶ The women who are councillors have had to fit their lives around council work, either by making sacrifices or by working in different ways.

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: "I think that it is now just accepted that our commitment is no less than anybody else, we just have to run our lives differently. I tend to find that women can take on much more anyway."

Labour Cllr Rebecca Green: "I've made choices in favour of my family and my career has taken a back seat, but that's what I'm happy to do. It's frustrating at times and I feel that I've missed opportunities, but you can't have it all."

Whilst some women do adapt their lives in order to be councillors, this option is not available to all women. Gill's survey of councillors in 2000 showed that family-unfriendly working practices are one of the main deterrents to women considering becoming councillors, or standing for a second term.⁷ Women are far more likely than men to use their free time for caring and domestic work and local authorities need to be aware of this.⁸ Many of the women we interviewed commented that council meetings are scheduled at difficult times for those with family commitments. Furthermore, recent changes to parliamentary hours have set a poor example for councils adopting family friendly hours, and reinforces the perception that politics as a whole is hostile to women with young families.⁹

Small Party MDC Karen Wright: "Parliament has just gone back on some of the child friendly sitting sessions...it's the rise of a male lobby that is totally unsympathetic to the female agenda."

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: "[Councils] could look more closely at the working hours and things like that and the structure of when most of our meetings are supposed to be held because most of them are held in the evenings

⁵ 76.6% of men and 70.7% of women have no caring responsibilities. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

⁶ There are fewer female councillors under 40 than male councillors: 6.3% and 7.8% respectively. There are also more female and male councillors who are retired than engage in any other category of employment. 36.1% of women and 39.7% of men are retired. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

⁷ B. Gill, *Losing Out Locally: Women and Local Government*, (London, 2000), p. 10.

⁸ Fawcett Briefing, 'Balancing Work and Home Life', (London, 1999).

⁹ Since May 2005 the sitting hours in the House of Commons have changed from 11:30am to 7:00pm on Tuesdays to 2.30pm to 10.30pm.

and that can be quite difficult.”

Conservative Cllr Patricia Brown: “The meetings are scheduled at tea time or late at night when you should be or want to be at home looking after your children.”

What is more, the ability of female councillors to participate in decision-making is undermined when council business is conducted in an informal and unaccountable manner at places and times where women may feel excluded.

Labour Cllr Janet White: “Sometimes I feel a little bit excluded. Things seem to happen that I haven’t seen, because they’ve been down the pub... I must admit I don’t like the pub, I don’t like the smoke. So it’s not somewhere I’d go, and anyway, I have a disabled husband, so I can’t just go off and spend an evening down the pub chatting over things... I’m not in the discussions and the things that the lads get up to... People get discussed behind their backs.”

It is instructive to compare the piecemeal improvements of the recent local government reforms with the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd. Women’s input in deciding the working practices of the Scottish and Welsh chambers has led to family-friendly working hours, with no late night sittings and recesses timed to coincide with school holidays. On the other hand, despite cutting the number of committee meetings, the Local Government Act made no mention of changing the times of meetings which are left to the individual councils to schedule. This leads to considerable discrepancies in the working practices of different councils which is reflected in the huge differences in the levels of women’s representation across local authorities.

Labour Cllr Rebecca Green: “[Working practices] would need to change across all councils because otherwise it would be unfair. They just need to accept that if they want people with younger families to get involved than they need to make it clear to people that they can be flexible.”

There is an important distinction between the devolved legislatures and local government. Members of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are full-time politicians whereas councillors are volunteers receiving an allowance. As Gill argues, working practices in local councils cannot change to become ‘family friendly’ if council work relies on people giving up their free time outside of normal working hours in order to participate in local government.¹⁰ However, despite this fundamental inflexibility of council working practices, there are measures that could be implemented in order to complement present arrangements and help councillors achieve a work-life balance.

¹⁰ Gill, *Losing Out Locally*, pp. 11, 20.

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: “[There needs to be] better childcare provision, looking at the way council meetings are structured and the way that timetables are structured allowing it to be more flexible to fit in with the rest of your lives really. I mean there is a general expectation that being a councillor should take up three days of your working week but in reality it takes up every minute that you have possibly got because there is always something that you could be doing as a councillor. So I suppose if you put structures in place to provide better admin support and better officer support for the wards that would make it a lot easier for women.”

Finance

The 2002 Equal Opportunities Commission survey of parliamentary candidates shows that although men were more in favour of providing measures relating to childcare and less likely to want financial support for women, this was in fact the biggest barrier that woman cited as discouraging them from entering politics.¹¹ This was reflected in our research: around four-fifths of the women we interviewed identified finance as a major barrier to women considering entering politics.

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: “The remuneration from local government doesn’t compensate...nearly enough, and that’s the problem: juggling. I still have to earn a living, I still have a family to support.”

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: “I think it comes back to the fact that you don’t want to penalise your family... You have to get the money from somewhere, so if you are out at work obviously the politics is an added load on top of that, so it can be a barrier.”

Many of the women we interviewed felt that the pressures of supporting a family left no time for local politics. Gill’s 2000 survey found that the lack of time to participate in local government was more of a deterrent to women than to men.¹²

Labour Cllr Janet White: “I have spoken to several people who’ve said they probably would have entered politics a lot earlier if they hadn’t had to work for a living, but they couldn’t have worked for a living, run their home and do all the things that they had to do being re-numerated, because obviously, to be a woman and try and hold down a job and be in politics, it’s a balancing act, because let’s face it, politics takes over your life.”

¹¹ Elgood et al, *Man Enough for the Job?* pp. 3, 8.

¹² See Gill, *Losing Out Locally*, p. 10; Rao also found that young women, compared to older women, are more likely to lack the time which would enable them to participate in local government, because they are already juggling careers with home/family responsibilities, in N. Rao, 'Representation in local politics: a reconsideration and some new evidence' *Political Studies* 46, (1998), pp. 19-35.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jacqueline Murphy: "It's poor pay [but] to have a full-time job and do council work, or even a part-time job, it's far too physically straining... I tried to do part-time work and it's physically impossible, you just run yourself ragged."

Councillors from low-income households obviously face greater barriers. They are less likely to be able to sacrifice income from waged jobs to spend time on council work. What is more, women are disproportionately concentrated in the low pay service sector.¹³ Women in full-time work earn on average 17% less than men. This rises to a pay gap of 41% for women in part-time jobs.¹⁴ Over a quarter of all female councillors are employed in administration, clerical, secretarial or sales work.¹⁵

Liberal Democrat Cllr Nicola Clarke: "Women tend to be low earners, on the whole."

Labour Cllr Barbara Roberts: "I think there is a huge barrier for ordinary women because there is no way that as a local member that you can make a living out of it. People who are financially strapped for cash find it very, very difficult to justify doing this when they can be doing another job and being paid more."

Labour Cllr Helen Thompson: "I finished up leaving politics and going back into full-time teaching because I needed the money to look after my children on my own."

For women who are balancing jobs and family commitments, council work is impossible without some form of employment release. Section 50 of the 1996 Employment Rights Act provides a statutory right for local authority members to be released from work for public duties. However, the "amount of time off which an employee is to be permitted to take under this section, and the occasions on which and any conditions subject to which time off may be so taken, are those that are reasonable in all the circumstances." These circumstances include how much time off is required; how much time off the employee has already been permitted under Section 50 of the Act or for trade union duties and activities; and "the circumstances of the employer's business and the effect of the employee's absence on the running of that business."

The weakness of the Employment Rights Act lies in the fact that it is extremely open-ended and does not necessarily guarantee adequate

¹³ K. Hinds and L. Jarvis, 'The Gender Gap'

¹⁴ This is the gender pay gap for 2005 as measured by the median. The part-time gender pay gap is based on the hourly wage of men working full-time and women working part-time, which is defined as being less than 30 hours a week. http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/pay/pay_facts.htm

¹⁵ 26.6% of female councillors are employed in these jobs compared to only 9.3% of male councillors. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales.*

release from work for the performance of council duties. What is more, it does not grant a uniform amount of time for each council member, and so it is more likely to penalise those in less flexible occupations. Many of our interviewees suggested that council duties may warrant more time off than that which their employer may see as "reasonable in all the circumstances". Furthermore, fewer employers of female councillors are aware of their role.¹⁶ This may be because women are four times more likely than men to be in part-time rather than full-time work; and the proportion of female councillors in part-time work is more than double that of their male colleagues.¹⁷ Therefore, they may not even use their entitlement to employment release.

Labour Cllr Emma Jackson: "The problem is [for] women who work in other paid jobs involving very strange hours – nursing, catering, that kind of thing - it's the sort of position where your employer isn't necessarily going to be very sympathetic."

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: "A lot of companies now will not give people time off. They deeply resent it, and we have had that problem a number of times and in all parties. People have lost their jobs because they have been elected."

Conservative Cllr Sarah Johnson: "I'm lucky because I'm self-employed, so actually I can choose whether I employ someone at my place of business and then I do more council work, but if you are employed in a job and need to provide for your family, then that is going to be very difficult for you to say to your employer, 'I'm sorry, I can't work Mondays and Tuesdays anymore,' be prepared to take a pay cut and be a councillor. I think that is a huge issue, actually, I think it's something that really needs to be looked at because otherwise we're not going to have people going into politics or local government."

Labour Cllr Emma Jackson: "Employers, although they are happy to let you have time off for your council meeting, you have so many other meetings, you actually struggle to do your job properly. I cannot see how anybody can work full-time and do this job properly." She went on to say, "Rather than the employee, go to the employer and ask for the time off. There should be no element of asking, it should be a right that will not be penalised by lack of opportunities being presented in the future."

The difficulty for women of combining the responsibility of a young family, full-time work and a career in local government means that council work

¹⁶ 7% of women said that their employer was not aware that they were a councillor compared to 5.7% of men. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

¹⁷ K. Hinds and L. Jarvis, 'The Gender Gap'; 18% of female councillors are in part-time work compared to 7.8% of male councillors. *Third Census of Local Authority Councillors in England and Wales*.

is far easier for women who are able to retire or those who have the support of a financially secure partner. This excludes a great many women from entering local government and also affects the ability of local councils to represent the communities they serve.

Small Party Cllr Joan Robinson: "A lot of people in politics...are retired, and theoretically women can do that too, but if women have had a long career working part-time, then they may be less able to retire early."

Conservative Cllr Margaret Smith: "We are lucky in a sense to be able to rely on husbands...As long as you have some support from your partner, I think it is probably easier [for women]."

Labour Cllr Rebecca Green: "What the allowances do in respect to the councillor is they exclude people with skills, say the more professional people. Their job is so demanding that they can't combine the two. It becomes a choice and there's no way that they could give up their salary to be in local politics. So you're excluding people with professional qualifications."

Many interviewees described the hidden financial demands involved in being a local councillor, from childcare to travel expenses and electioneering costs. Gill found that, although there is a carer's allowance and travelling and subsistence rates, most of the women she surveyed did not claim their full remuneration entitlement. She cited the stigma attached to claiming expenses and the image of corrupt politicians as the reason for this.¹⁸

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: "We actually don't get paid that much in [my council]...which is why you get so annoyed with the general public when they say 'Oh, you are all just in it for yourselves.'"

Labour Cllr Linda Hall: "With things like elections, the parties are supposed to pay for them but there is always a cost to yourselves as well. The day to day job in terms of transport, getting from one place to another, and arranging for people to look after your children. Things like that can be difficult to finance."

There is not a set rate for childcare allowances across local authorities, and, although many councils will reimburse the "actual expenditure incurred," this is only up to "a maximum sum per hour," and is often not above the minimum wage.¹⁹ Recent research by The Daycare Trust found that an average weekly nursery bill for a child under two is now £142, and some parents are paying more than £20,000 annually for full-time care.²⁰

18 Gill, *Losing Out Locally*, pp. 15, 19.

19 Quoted from Cotswold District Council's 'Summary of Members Allowances' 2004/2005. www.cotswold.gov.uk/

20 Polly Curtis, 'Childcare Bills shoot up by 27% in Five Years', *Society Guardian*, 8 February 2006.

Reimbursement at the minimum wage clearly will not always cover the costs of the actual price of childcare.

As well as remuneration costs, it is at the discretion of local authorities to set both the basic rate of allowances and the special responsibility allowances for their members. However, this has led to wide regional differences, with basic allowances varying by thousands of pounds.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Jennifer Wood: “You need nationally to set a decent income for councillors because at the moment we do it part-time and we don’t get enough money to live on... A nationally set fair rate for being a councillor would help a great deal in getting both men and women into politics.”

Conclusion

Our research suggests that it is the tradition of the councillor as a dedicated amateur which underpins the under-representation of women – and particularly young women - in local government. There are two strands to this. In the first place, it is a matter of practicalities: the timing of meetings, lack of childcare facilities, and the financial implications of office-holding. The second part relates to the political culture of local government. Codes of conduct do not seem to protect councillors as rigorously as they do council staff and members of the public. Again, this seems to be born of the perception that local politics is a voluntary activity and as such is largely self-regulating within and between the political groups.

Rather than expecting individual women to challenge the difficulties they encounter – from institutional barriers to overt sexism – we believe that there are a number of ways in which local authorities and political parties could begin to redress the balance. It should be noted that many of our suggestions will have the effect of improving the life of councillors in general and will be beneficial to men as well as to women.

At the most basic level, improvements might include additional administrative support for councillors, adequate childcare allowance and a more modern style of debate. A more radical approach could extend to parental leave, crèche facilities or a full-time wage.

Allowing councillors some of the rights of employees would be likely to make the role more attractive to both men and women and make the selection process more competitive. Although there would be a risk that this would make discriminatory attitudes and practices in the selection process more visible, it should also pave the way to a more rigorous approach to fair and equal practices.

As well as these more structural measures, political parties clearly have a vital role to play in increasing the number of women in government. Their recruitment methods, policies of promotion, and culture have all been shown to be key to women's success in politics. Parties must not hide behind any anti-interventionist or "meritocratic" ideology to defend their lack of efforts to promote women's success. Clearly the current situation is not meritocratic: there are inequities which need to be levelled out so that women's opportunities are as open as men's.

Approaches will necessarily vary from party to party according to their individual ideologies but may include greater use of equality guarantees, a more consistent approach to mentoring and training, and a commitment to fair and transparent selection procedures. Local government is not only an important tier of government in its own right, it is also a key training ground for national-level politicians. If the under-representation of women is not tackled here, it seems unlikely that it will be tackled at all.

Proposals for Change

Reform of Non-Party Institutions

A more modern debating chamber

The Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons was established to consider reforms that would make the conduct of the House of Commons more inclusive and relevant to modern-day life. We believe that a similar review of debating practices within local authorities is long overdue. Aggressive “yah-boo” politics not only dissuades many women from putting themselves forward for office, it also perpetuates the perception that politicians are ego-driven and disconnected with the realities of their constituents’ lives.

Administrative support for councillors

If councillors had administrative support, this would reduce the amount of time they had to spend on routine council duties. They could then increase their commitment to meetings without detracting from their careers or home life.

Reimbursement of employers’ expenses

Government should provide reasonable financial reimbursement to employers to reduce the disincentive of allowing employees to miss work for council business.

Financial help towards childcare

Currently it is up to the individual councils to decide whether or not they offer financial support towards childcare. A requirement for all local authorities to offer financial support would be a step towards levelling the playing field for those who have caring commitments – both men and women.

Meeting times/sitting times

So far as possible, councils must ensure that meetings are held at times and in locations which do not inconvenience any group, and this includes those with caring responsibilities.

Outreach work

Councils should be aware of the vital role that they play in supporting community networks and women's groups. These links could be used to provide information on their work and on the role of councillors. If greater numbers of local residents feel connected to the council and understand its political structure, they will be more likely to join political parties and to seek local office themselves. If the pool of potential candidates is widened, it would be almost certain to contain a more representative proportion of women.

Proposals for Change

Reform in the Parties

Outreach work

Political parties need to be more proactive in identifying and recruiting female community activists to join their parties and to stand for local office. Networking between women's groups within the parties and from the local community would be a good first step.

Training for female candidates

Many of our interviewees, especially those from smaller parties, mentioned the lack of outreach work and training programmes. Given that the under-representation of women in local politics is also a problem for the wider democratic process, there may be a case for state grants to be available for recruitment and training programmes.

Training for selection committees

The importance of training selection committees to make sure that they are recruiting a representative set of candidates was highlighted by several of the councillors. The major parties all claim that they already have training programmes for selection committees in place. Parties would be well-advised to ensure that these are genuinely effective measures, and not just token gestures.

An audit of expertise

Many women interviewed in this survey felt that their professional expertise had been overlooked when council roles were assigned. It makes sense for any political group to keep a note of its members' skills and talents, to ensure they are used to best effect. Not only will this benefit female councillors, it will also benefit the parties themselves.

Media training

All council candidates should be trained to deal with the media and especially to handle harmful press attention. And whilst it would be a slow task to alter the culture of the media, any small change may help both to increase public confidence in politics and to encourage a greater number of candidates from all walks of life to stand for office.

Party image

The perception of the parties as sexist and made up of 'boys' clubs' is perhaps a common image. However, the parties do not do enough to counter this belief. All the parties need to clearly, publicly and repeatedly state their desire to attract more female candidates. They should also include information on their websites about policies for the recruitment of women and their stance on broader matters of equal opportunities.

National leadership

Despite local government's well-founded suspicion of impositions from the centre, it may be that this is one area which could benefit from leadership at a national level. Improved communication between national and local parties could really assist the way in which local parties respond to equalities issues. All three main parties have shown a commitment to tackling the under-representation of women at national level; it is important that this is not hindered by inaction in localities.

Appendix

Anonymised List of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Position	Party	Region
Margaret Smith	Councillor	Conservative	Yorkshire and the Humber
Susan Jones	Councillor	Conservative	South West
Mary Taylor	Councillor	Conservative	Yorkshire and the Humber
Patricia Brown	Councillor	Conservative	Yorkshire and the Humber
Elizabeth Williams	Councillor	Conservative	South East
Sarah Johnson	Councillor	Conservative	South East
Jean Davies	Member of a Devolved Chamber	Conservative	*
Christine Wilson	Member of a Devolved Chamber	Conservative	*
Julie Walker	MP	Labour	North West
Kathleen Evans	MP	Labour	East of England
Linda Hall	Councillor	Labour	West Midlands
Barbara Roberts	Councillor	Labour	Yorkshire and the Humber
Helen Thompson	Councillor	Labour	Yorkshire and the Humber
Rebecca Green	Councillor	Labour	Yorkshire and the Humber
Emma Jackson	Councillor	Labour	Yorkshire and the Humber
Janet White	Councillor	Labour	South West
Jennifer Wood	Councillor	Lib Dem	South East
Jacqueline Murphy	Councillor	Lib Dem	Yorkshire and the Humber
Dorothy Turner	Councillor	Lib Dem	London
Nicola Clarke	Councillor	Lib Dem	West Midlands
Ann Kelly	Member of a Devolved Chamber	Lib Dem	*
Joan Robinson	Councillor	Other*	Yorkshire and the Humber
Karen Wright	Member of a Devolved Chamber	Other*	*

* This information cannot be disclosed for the sake of anonymity.

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Recent NPN Publications

Anti-Politics and Political Parties: The case for state funding

Dr Alan Whitehead MP, April 2006
£5 from info@new-politics.net
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The decline of British political parties has been well-documented. Low levels of membership and activism have left many local parties unable to fight effective campaigns, still less to maintain a presence between elections. This trend is accelerated by a political culture which assumes that party politics is a nasty business and that those involved in it are to be mistrusted and denigrated.

Our polity depends upon political parties. It is therefore vital that they are healthy and that they are able to inspire trust in the populace. This pamphlet argues that a system of regulated state funding for political parties may go some way to restoring that trust. It may also create a deeper understanding of the role of political parties in maintaining our democracy.

British Muslims and Political Participation

£1.50 from info@new-politics.net
Download free: www.new-politics.com/blog

At a time of intense scrutiny and unease among Britain's Muslim community, it is important that the political system is able to sufficiently represent Muslim interests. Disaffection with the process

of parliamentary politics combined with discontent with its outcomes is a worrying mix that seems to be creating a very damaging sense of alienation among many British Muslims.

As with many other marginalised groups, there remains a gap between Muslims' desire for representation and their perception of the opportunities for them to influence political outcomes. The authors of this pamphlet, including Sadiq Khan MP, Dr Abdelwahab El-Affendi and Arzu Merali, consider some of the ways in which that gap might be narrowed.

People and Policy Making

NPN & British Council UK-SEE Forum
CD-Rom & Website: www.uksee.net/policymaking/

The New Politics Network and the British Council's UK-South East Europe Forum have launched a new CD-ROM and website to promote new ways of engaging members and the public in the policy making process for political parties.

The guide is the result of an 18-month project in which parties from across South East Europe and the UK participated, including the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens, SNP, Plaid Cymru, the SDLP and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland.

It is intended as a practical guide for local party activists on the myriad ways in which policy making can be used to encourage greater political participation.

Politicians and commentators often talk about the need to increase public participation in politics and this is one of the few resources that actually shows political activists how they can do this.

We have explored a range of schemes of differing sizes from Labour's Big Conversation down to Liberal Democrat-style street politics, and explored how parties in different countries conduct their policy development. There are downsides to these approaches - parties which consult a lot but rarely change their policies accordingly invite public cynicism - but done well they do a lot to connect people and politics.

A Europe for Citizens

Edited by Olaf Henricson-Bell, November 2005

£1.50 from info@new-politics.net

Download free: www.new-politics.com

If Britain is to engage with the European Union in a constructive manner, it is vital that its citizens feel involved with a genuine, open debate on the future of this relationship. The much-discussed European democratic deficit is as much the product of a lack of proper debate at a national level, as it is of structural inadequacy at the European level. This paper examines a number of ways in which such a debate could take place.

General Election 2005: What the Voters Saw

Emily Robinson and Dr Justin Fisher, September 2005

£7.50 from info@new-politics.net

Despite the intense media scrutiny of national election campaigns, very little attention is generally paid to the campaigning material delivered through potential voters' letterboxes or to the contact they have with parties on the telephone or the doorstep. This project set out to analyse both the quality and quantity of literature delivered by parties in Great Britain during the General Election campaign of 2005.

The pamphlet includes an analysis of the style and content of campaign leaflets; a study of the use of immigration and asylum as election issues; and detailed case-studies of the campaigns in five very different constituencies.