

7.2

Gender equality

Sonali Campion and the Democratic Audit team examine the extent to which gender equality provisions in British public life accord with democratic requirements. Are previous historical inequalities and discrimination against women being rectified, and is the pace of recent change fast enough?

What does democracy require in terms of gender equality?

- ◆ Men and women must enjoy genuine equality in terms of civil rights (covering equal pay, employment rights, property rights, access to legal protections, childcare access, and marriage and partnership laws).
- ◆ Political and public life should be organised to maximise the equal chances of women and men to be involved in democratic politics – to vote and stand for election, to take part in party and political processes, to contribute to public debate and discussion, and to stand for public office and rise to the top in political life.
- ◆ Employment in the public service sector (and in firms working on public sector contracts) should serve as exemplars of good practice in improving gender equality more broadly.
- ◆ No gender group (male, female or transgender) should be subject to differential discrimination in political or public life, nor to prejudicial or demeaning discussion in terms of public and media discourses.
- ◆ Where barriers to gender equality are proven to exist, it is desirable for public regulation or interventions to at least temporarily be undertaken to secure appropriate and feasible ameliorative actions (consistent with maintaining the civil rights of all citizens).

Recent developments

Although equal pay legislation for men and women was first passed in the UK in 1970, a substantial pay gap still persists for full time workers. Career parity remains very difficult to

achieve for women with caring responsibilities. Systematic efforts to improve the proportion of women in public life are much more recent, and they have not been effectively backed by statutory powers or firm regulation. For instance, although political parties are not allowed to discriminate against women, they are not obliged to seek gender parity in the candidates they put before voters.

The representation of women in some public roles (such as MPs or member of devolved assemblies) has improved significantly in the last five years. This is reflected by the fact that the Conservative Prime Minister, Scottish First Minister, and the leaders of the Scottish Conservatives, Plaid Cymru, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin are all women, as is one of the Green Party's two co-leaders. However, we remain a long way from achieving parity of representation for women in public life.

Furthermore, some new developments, such as the use of social media or the focus of media attention, have shown disturbing indications of entrenched misogynistic attitudes among substantial groups of citizens. Similarly, although more transgender people are visible in public life, there remains substantial prejudice against them and the Gender Recognition Act 2004 needs updating to reflect the principle of gender self-declaration. Yet government proposals here have **apparently stalled**.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
<p>The proportions of women in politics, public life and the upper levels of the business world have improved noticeably, albeit often from a low initial base (see below).</p>	<p>There is still a pervasive gender bias across the board and the overall pace of change in achieving gender parity shows that existing or 'legacy' ways of operating still restrict women's full participation. For instance, with less than two-fifths of party members being women it has been hard to get local selectorates in some parties (like UKIP and the Conservatives) to choose women candidates.</p>
<p>There is now broad public consensus that achieving an equal gender balance is desirable. This is reflected in increased efforts by both the public and private sectors, for example, to promote diversity in their recruitment processes; offer more family-friendly policies such as flexible working hours; specify clear diversity targets and make people accountable for achieving them; and offering tailored mentoring and support for women to progress within organisations.</p>	<p>In tabloid newspapers and other popular media women in public life continue to be treated in unfair ways, and so, for example, are judged on their appearance (the infamous 'Legs-it' <i>Daily Mail</i> cover) or family roles.</p>

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
<p>After many years of irresolute and piecemeal action, most of the main political parties are working harder to promote women, particularly in Westminster and the devolved assemblies. The commitment is reflected by the growing use of gender quotas among parties that lean to the left.</p>	<p>The recent growth of social media has shown shocking incidents of misogynistic behaviour. Women politicians or participants in public debate (such as those advocating for more women on UK banknotes) have been harassed by virulent ‘trolls’. Police/court action has been prompt, but confined to a few cases.</p>
<p>Using demeaning language about women, or harassing them in the workplace, has clearly become publicly unacceptable and political suicide for politicians. Social media vigilance has increased the level of scrutiny of such issues, previously often swept under the carpet.</p>	<p>Elite behaviours also still show traits that are off-putting for women, such as the frequent raucous behaviour of MPs at question time in the House of Commons. Women are judged negatively for behaviour accepted or even encouraged among men. Credibility is more easily presumed among men, whereas women have to work harder to earn it. In politics and in the workplace, masculine styles of thinking and working are often represented as more ‘natural’.</p>
	<p>Transgender people continue to suffer discrimination and prejudice, including regular unfavourable commentary from some sections of the press.</p>
Future opportunities	Future threats
<p>As women become better represented in public life, and the engagement with gender inequalities becomes more sophisticated and far-reaching, there is potential for greater changes towards ‘feminising’ institutional cultures and practices.</p>	<p>There is a danger of complacency, of seeing intractable issues as resolved, when many years’ work may still lie ahead.</p>
<p>With Labour leading, parties are adopting quotas and other activist methods to boost women’s representation.</p>	<p>Recent experience with social media; the escalating growth of pornography adversely affecting youth attitudes to women; problems such as honour killings, forced marriages, and female genital mutilation among some ethnic minority populations; and continued incidents of sexist behaviours in the media and public life, all show that UK social trends are not all favourable for gender equality.</p>

Future opportunities	Future threats
There are now more women than men in the civil service and more women than men are joining the legal profession every year. In the future, a larger pool of eligible candidates should therefore be available for senior roles.	Public sector austerity and government spending cuts have hit women harder than men and increased relative disadvantage in ways that reduce incomes and childcare support, and may cut back women's employment and opportunities more broadly.
Transgender people are gaining more prominence in public life, especially in cultural, and media fields.	

Women's representation in UK public life

Everywhere in public life women still remain a minority, despite proactive efforts in some areas, illustrating the very long timespans for changing historic patterns of women's under-representation. The Welsh National Assembly in the early 2000s is the only public body in UK history where gender parity was achieved, and this ratio did not endure. This highlights that efforts to support women candidates and elected representatives need to be sustained.

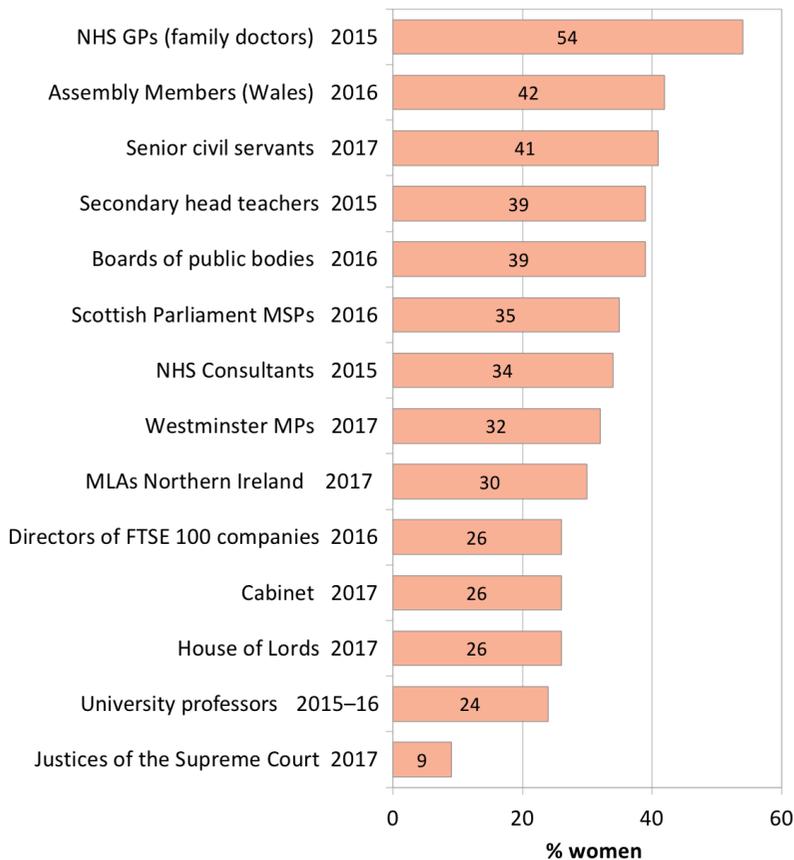
Figure 1 shows that by 2016/17 (or near that date) there were still sharp differences in the extent which women have been able to break into positions of seniority within UK politics and public services. Despite the visibility of women in top political leadership positions, representation in Parliament remains a long way from parity. Only one set of public service positions in Figure 1 (family doctors in the NHS) surpassed 50%, with three others at around 40% (the senior civil service, secondary heads, and the boards of public bodies).

In 2015 less than a quarter of court of appeal and high court judges in England and Wales were women. However, even this was a significant increase on 2010, when only 8% of court of appeal judges and 15% of high court judges were women.

More women have become MPs recently in a large part because most of the main parties fielded more women candidates in 2015 and 2017, and both the Tories and Labour placed women in winnable seats. For example, the Conservatives ran women candidates in **38%** of retirement seats and Labour put 53% of women candidates in winnable seats in 2015. In 2017, the snap election and resultant hurried **candidate selection process** for some seats hindered measures to improve representation. Labour did field **41%** women candidates (up from 34% in 2015) and Conservatives 29% (up from 26%), though not always in winnable seats.

Labour's strong improvements have been **attributed** to using all-women shortlists (AWS). The Conservatives remain resistant to gender quotas and even the 'A-list' system to increase the diversity of Tory MPs in 2010 was **not used in 2015**. However, the flagging Liberal Democrats (previously apathetic about gender disparities) did introduce all-women shortlists for the first time in 2017. They increased their number of women MPs to four out of 12, up from a dismal one. UKIP candidates were predominantly men, and in Northern Ireland only 25% of candidates running for Parliament were women. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) did not field any women for Westminster (although their party leader is a woman).

Figure 1: The proportion of women in a range of major roles in UK public life (2015–17 figures)



Source: Vyara Apostolova, Carl Baker & Richard Cracknell (2017). **Women in Public life, the Professions and the Boardroom**, House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper SN5170

David Cameron fulfilled his promise that one-third of his cabinet would be women by 2015. This contrasted starkly with previous Conservative-majority Cabinets, which had a maximum of two women. Theresa May's first cabinet was 29% women. Her January 2018 reshuffle was presented as increasing gender representation, but in fact **included just six women** out of 23 Cabinet ministers (26%). This was **reduced to five** following Amber Rudd's resignation as Home Secretary, although four other female ministers could also attend Cabinet. Labour's Shadow Cabinet has consistently comprised 40% women and for the first time achieved and maintained gender parity following the 2016 reshuffle, despite numerous changes of personnel.

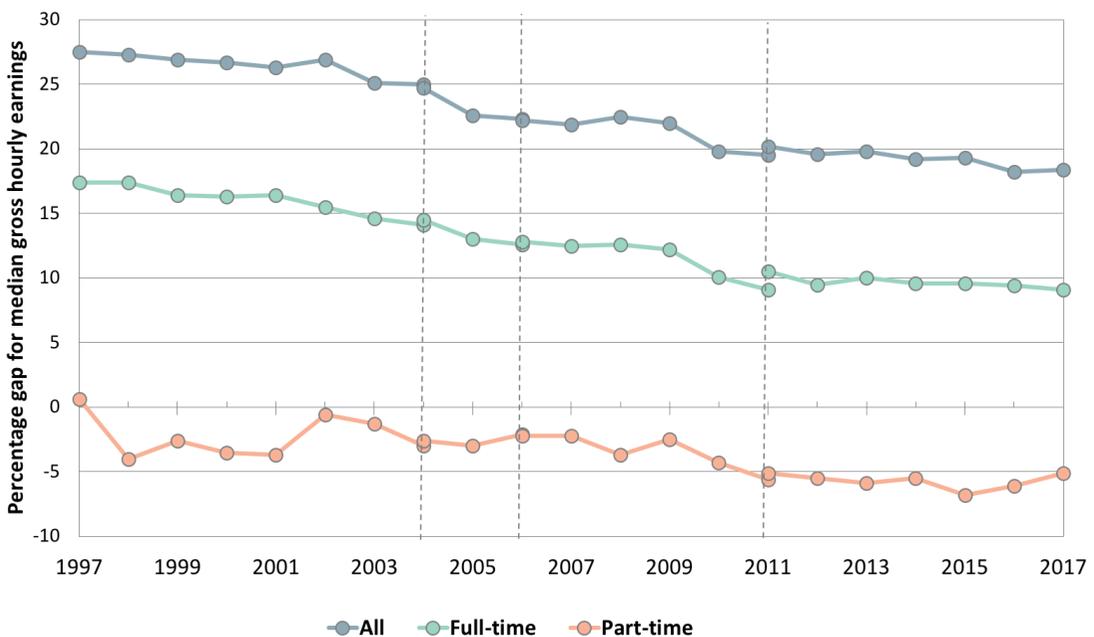
The proportion of women MSPs in Scotland has been significantly better than Westminster. However, recent patterns across three main Scottish political parties (SNP, Labour and the Liberal Democrats) suggest **either a stalling or falling** in the number of women MSPs elected since 2003, a pattern that **still holds**. On the flipside, **positive changes** have come both from the top down, through party rules, and the bottom up, through the civic awakening that accompanied the referendum. For a time, the SNP, Scottish Labour and the Scottish Conservatives were all led by women, though Kezia Dugdale resigned as Leader of

the Scottish Labour Party in 2017 and was replaced by Richard Leonard. Nicola Sturgeon in particular has pushed for the SNP to use quota measures, with some success, and Labour has pledged that 50% of its Holyrood candidates will be women. Encouragingly, recent EU-wide research proved the commonly expressed fear that voters are reluctant to support women candidates **unfounded**.

Employment and income

Figure 2 shows that the gender pay gap for median earnings of full-time employees in the UK was 9.1% in April 2017. Although there has been little progress in recent years, this gap in how much men and women are paid for the same work is the lowest since the survey began in 1997, when the gender pay gap was 17.4%. Furthermore, women in part-time work earn just over 5% *more* than their male counterparts – and their rates of part-time pay have exceeded men’s since 1998. Since April 2018 onwards, companies with more than 250 employees have had to **report their gender pay gaps** (see **Chapter 5.4**). The figures have highlighted the persistence of the pay gap in different sectors, but they do not address problems of pay disparity associated with the inadequate representation of women in senior roles, and of part-time pay disparity.

Figure 2: The gender pay gap for median gross hourly earnings (excluding overtime), UK, April 1997–2017



Source: Office for National Statistics, **Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings**, Figure 6.

Notes: Earnings excludes overtime. Full-time defined as >30 paid hours per week. Dashed lines represent discontinuities in the 2004, 2006 and 2011 estimates; 2017 data provisional. The data shown are for April in each year.

Women's labour market participation, pay and conditions are linked to the amount of support they receive for their **caring responsibilities**. Becoming a mother can still be seriously damaging to women's earnings and the range of jobs that they feel able to take. On average British women do about twice as much as childcare as men, and factors such as a lack of affordable childcare inhibit women's ability to sustain full-time, better-paid employment. ONS data show that the full-time pay gap varies according to age group: the differences are relatively small in age groups up to 30, with part-time incomes for women better than their male counterparts in their 30s. It is during their late 30s, when women are now more likely to be having children, that the gap begins to grow. New rules to make parental leave more flexible for both partners are a step in the right direction, but while the discrepancy between earnings persists, uptake is likely to be limited.

Figure 3: Gender pay gap for median gross hourly earnings (excluding overtime) by age group, UK, April 2017



Source: Office for National Statistics, [Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings](#), Figure 16.

Notes: Employees on adult rates, pay unaffected by absence; figures represent the difference between men's and women's hourly earnings as a percentage of men's earnings; full-time defined as employees working more than 30 paid hours per week (or 25 or more for the teaching professions); 2017 data are provisional.

In addition, welfare cuts introduced since 2010 have disproportionately affected women. Women are statistically more likely to use public services, to be single parents or carers for older or disabled relatives, and to live longer and therefore need greater support in later life. Women's average losses from changes to tax credits, housing and child benefits were **twice as large** as men's as a proportion of net individual incomes, with the lowest earners hit hardest. Furthermore, women make up the majority of public sector workers, so cuts to public services and pay freezes there are also impacting women's employment.

Cultural barriers to change

Quotas and other policies to promote women's participation in the workplace are important developments and help boost the UK's commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (**CEDAW**) to take all appropriate measures, including legislation and temporary special measures, so that women can enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms fully.

However, the majority of these measures treat women as the problem, rather than tackling the bias that has restricted their involvement up until now. A 2015 LSE report **Confronting Gender Inequality** focused specifically on gender imbalances in the economy, politics, law and the media – and recommended much wider measures. These include designing macroeconomic policies which value the reproductive sector and unpaid care work; gender budgeting; applying equality legislation more effectively; improving women's access to justice; monitoring and reporting on gender representation in the media; and efforts to educate people on the root causes of gender inequality across the public and private sectors and at all levels.

With transgender people more visible in public life, the discrimination and obstacles the trans community faces have received far more scrutiny. The Gender Recognition Act 2004 and Equality Act 2010 should be **revisited** in the light of these findings.

Conclusions

Women are now more present and visible than ever before in UK politics and public life. However, the pace of change is slow, and men continue to dominate the most senior roles across the board. Furthermore, it seems debatable whether institutional cultures and attitudes are evolving as rapidly in Britain as elsewhere. Between 2007 and 2016 the UK slipped from 13th to 20th in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. In 2017 it **rose again slightly to 15th**, but still scored poorly on women's economic participation and opportunities. If gender imbalances are to be tackled effectively and in a lasting manner, a much more holistic approach is required.

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