

Women in power

The impact of women ministers on
post-devolution Scotland (1999 – 2007)



the *active*
learning centre



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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Active Learning Centre for commissioning this report to add to their work in promoting democracy and rights across the world.

We are indebted to the women who agreed to be interviewed; their insights, experience and analysis of this important period in Scotland's history are not only an important historical record, but will inform the continuing campaign for equality and justice across the world.

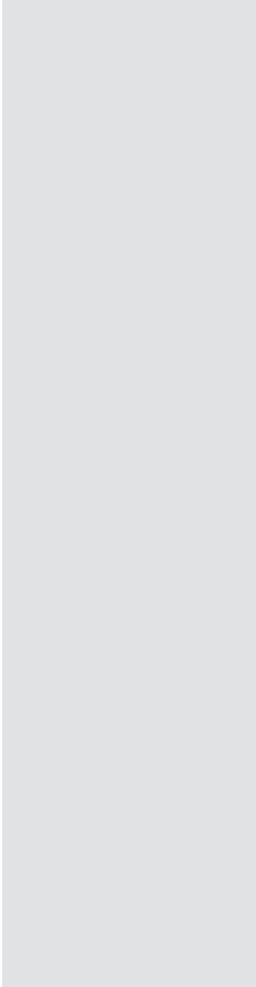
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Photography

Front cover (large image): Robin Gillanders; Chris Hall

The First meeting of the Scottish
Parliament, 12 May 1999

Scottish National Photography Collection,
Scottish National Portrait Gallery



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Foreword

The Active Learning Centre was founded in Scotland 16 years ago, to capacity build and research in support of democracy, community organisations and human rights. Since 1993 we have worked with parliamentarians, councillors and election candidates in countries where democracy is new, fragile or under threat. Powerful interests will always find a way to influence politics. At the Centre we believe that poor communities also need a voice. Dialogue between community and government, lobbying and campaigning are vital to the maintenance of a healthy democracy. International funds and greater freedom, have encouraged organisations across the world; developing a voice for the poor, dispensing micro-credit, defending rights, protecting workers and building peace and reconciliation. These organisations are beginning to provide a challenge to unaccountable and ineffective governments worldwide.

Over the last sixteen years we have worked with thousands of groups and for the last five have brought almost one hundred post-graduates from charities and rights campaigns overseas, to the University of Glasgow to observe, reflect and debate the relationship between people and government. The Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Charity Regulator and many others have helped us in this task, forging links between groups across the world and their counterparts in Scotland. We have also trained hundreds of volunteers to give rights education in Africa, China and the Middle East, because we believe that the poorest communities suffer most from discrimination and corruption. Women's rights are a particular priority because women predominate amongst the poor and are active in demanding an end to violence in families and communities and discrimination in access to livelihoods

Women can bring particular values and experience to politics. Scrutiny of policy, budgets and legislation from a gendered perspective depends on the ability and willingness of elected individuals to carry out this task. It also depends on the policy and practice of political parties. Research shows that non-governmental pressures often drive good policy for women. Our work with women politicians discusses party and parliamentary processes and the government's relations with the community.

Women are new to politics, but their presence in increasing numbers makes it possible to record their effect over time. There is support for the idea of a critical mass of women making a difference. Scottish experience would suggest that the level of organisation might be just as important as numbers in driving change. We believe that the study of the political process and institutions, which either hinder or drive the process of inclusion, will yield the most useful results. Understanding the barriers to women wielding equal influence with men in political decision-making is a more interesting enquiry. To contribute to this body of knowledge we decided to record and learn lessons from our own experience here in Scotland. Since the election of the first Scottish Parliament a group of relatively young women has held power. Their insights are one part of an important historical record. The story of how they got there and what they achieved is of the benefit to us all in understanding the process of political change.

Mike Dailly
Chairperson
The Active Learning Centre

Methodology

This research used qualitative, semi-structured interviews carried out between October 2009 and January 2010 to capture the narrative accounts of eight women who served, as government ministers, in the Scottish Executive between 1999-2007. (See Appendix 1) We also interviewed one woman who served as the chairperson of a Scottish Parliament committee during this period.

The researchers recognised the need for participants to fully express their views and perspectives, while at the same time reflecting the researchers' role in shaping the process and discussion. Participants were encouraged to speak openly through the use of general open questions and to think more deeply through questions that challenge their assumptions.

Each participant was asked six broad areas of questioning:

- What effect their gender had on their experiences of becoming a MSP?
- What effect their gender had on the support structures they developed and maintained in government, in parliament and in the community?
- What pressures were on them as ministers e.g. from the media, civil service, the parliament, campaigner and women activists because of their gender?
- The decisions they made as ministers and whether they made an impact?
- Did they feel that they met the expectations placed on them because of their gender?
- Does having a critical mass of women in parliament and women in cabinet government bring a different style of politics and policy making.

Speaking to former ministers two years after the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections (when there was a change of administration) allowed them to speak more freely than if they were in power. It also allowed them some reflective distance.

Reflections on the methodology

This is a unique investigation; the first to use qualitative methods to investigate the effect of women in cabinet on social policy development.

There is a growing body of literature looking at the influence of increasing numbers of women in parliament on policy development. However, there is little concerned with the impact of women ministers and any research we have seen examines this question using quantitative research methods.¹

¹ SEE ATCHISON, AMY AND DOWN, IAN (2009) "Women Cabinet Ministers and Female-Friendly Social Policy," Poverty & Public Policy: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2, Article 3. Available at: "<http://www.psocommons.org/ppp/vol1/iss2/art3>" "<http://www.psocommons.org/ppp/vol1/iss2/art3>" DOI: 10.2202/1944-2858.1007

Also none has looked exclusively at the Scottish experience.

Our findings bring a fresh perspective to this area of growing interest. They will be of interest to those who want to make a difference to women's lives; support others working to improve women's participation and support organisations which are campaigning for women's rights.

It is also important for Scotland to capture these narratives at this time. The Scottish Parliament is only ten years old. Scotland is a country with a long history of social democracy, which has well educated women making a contribution at all levels of Scottish life. Yet these were the first women in the country's history to hold office in a Scottish Executive.

Interviews

Interviews are a valid research tool precisely because they capture experience from the inside. They are a powerful way of understanding processes, explaining the dynamics of why things happen, recording the views and opinions of those who took part, bringing personal reflections to bear on an analysis; and providing in-depth detail, all of which cannot be understood by other methods.

However, we need to be cautious in generalising from specific interviews to a wider population. We must also recognise that interviews are an interaction between each interviewee and researcher and do not provide data from interaction with others.

Lastly, improving women's representation is a matter for all political parties in Scotland. However, all but one, women interviewed were from one political party, the Scottish Labour Party.

This is because:

- The Scottish Labour Party was in partnership government with the Scottish Liberal Democrats from 1999-2007. The Scottish Labour Party has had the greatest success in gender equality and they had nine women ministers during this period. The Liberal Democrats had no women ministers during ten years in office
- The Scottish National Party (SNP) was the second biggest party both in number of MSPs and in percentage of women and they were in opposition between 1999-2007. They have been in power since 2007
- The Conservative Party and smaller political parties were not in government in between 1999-2007.

The international story

The road towards true equality between men and women has been a long, often hazardous one, with no realistic end in sight.

Women still carry an unequal burden of poverty. According to UNICEF women perform 66 per cent of the world's work, producing 50 per cent of the food, but earning only 10 per cent of the income and owning one per cent of the property.

Health care for women remains inadequate, resulting in millions of premature deaths from preventable causes, such as childbirth. Every minute, at least one woman dies from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth – that means 529,000 women a year.

In addition, the World Health Organisation says that for every woman who dies in childbirth, around 20 more suffer injury, infection or disease – approximately 10 million women each year.

Violence against women remains a significant social problem across all classes. Between 15 per cent and 71 per cent of women around the world have suffered physical or sexual violence committed by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives.

The abuse cuts across all social and economic backgrounds. Violence has serious health consequences for women, from injuries to unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, depression and chronic diseases. (World Health Organisation).

And the World Bank warned recently that the current global crisis would have serious consequences for women in poor countries, including higher infant mortality, more girls being pulled out of school and reduced women's income.

Critical mass

It is generally accepted that women bring a different set of values, knowledge and skills to the political process. Their experience of life – their narrative – and their networks are usually different to those of male politicians.

And it has long been argued that getting sufficient numbers of women into power is central to addressing women's economic, social and cultural well-being.

The observations of American sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kantor in the 1970s followed by those of Drude Dahlerup, a Danish political scientist a decade later, suggested that a critical mass of at least 30 per cent of women was essential, but not necessarily sufficient to achieve real change.

Their theory took the basis of nuclear physics and applied it to human behaviour, a persuasive theory that led the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations to adopt a resolution in May 1990 that urged governments and other public and representative bodies to increase the proportion of women in leadership positions to at least 30 per cent by 1995.

The council went on to agree an aspiration, that with hindsight seems naïve: that by the year 2000 there would be equal representation between men and women.²

When the United Nations Conference on Women gathered five years later – fifty years after the founding of the UN – in Beijing, the delegates could scarcely ignore the stark fact that little or no progress had been made in achieving the target endorsed by the Economic and Social Council five years earlier.

By 1995 women accounted, on average, for 11.6 per cent of members of national parliaments and the dream of equality by the start of the new Millennium seemed as far away as it was when women first achieved the vote.

The Beijing Conference's response was to agree a global agenda for women's empowerment – the Beijing Declaration. The participating governments avowed their "*determination to advance the goals of equality and development and peace for all woman, everywhere, in the interest of all humanity*".

And they drew up a Platform of Action to ensure that a gender perspective was reflected in "all our policies and programmes".

The Platform for Action set out 12 strategic objectives covering areas of critical concern such as poverty, violence against women and the media.

The conference agreed two objectives for women in power and decision-making:

- Strategic objective G.1: Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making
- Strategic objective G.2: Increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

And it set out a series of actions to be taken by governments, political parties, trade unions, NGOs, the private sector and others to bring about gender equality.

² **ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL RESOLUTION, E/RES/1990/15 (24 May 1990)**

Recommendation VI!: Governments, political parties, trades unions and professional and other representative groups should each aim at targets to increase the proportion of women in leadership positions to at least 30 per cent by 1995, with a view to achieving equal representation between women and men by the year 2000, and should institute recruitment and training programmes to prepare women for those positions.

Slow progress

More than a decade later the UN Division for the Advancement of Women prepared a compilation of major findings on each of the twelve Critical Areas of Concern in the Platform for Action in order to guide the work of Member States, the United Nations, NGOs and other stakeholders.

This report showed that women's representation in national parliaments had increased to only 17.3 per cent by May 2007.

According to the most recent research from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), published on 31 December 2009 women now hold 18.7 per cent of the world's parliamentary seats.

There are now 24 parliaments that have reached the 30 per cent target. The IPU research shows that 40 per cent of these Parliaments are based in Europe, one-third in Africa and 23 per cent in Latin America.

And there are ten countries, including Qatar and Saudi Arabia, that do not have a single female Member of Parliament.

Rwanda leads the world

There is only one country in the world where women form the majority in their national parliament. The small African nation of Rwanda became the world's first gender equal parliament in September 2008 when women's representation increased to 56.6 per cent.

Rwanda was a failed state in 1994, following the genocide where nearly one million Rwandans were murdered in 100 days.

The surviving population was estimated to be around 70 per cent female, and so many women were forced into non-traditional roles to support their families and rebuild their shattered nation.

But there is more to Rwanda's remarkable record in gender equality than a pragmatic response to a terrible bloodbath.

In 2003 Rwanda's new constitution agreed to build: *"a state governed by the rule of law, a pluralistic democratic government, equality of all Rwandans and between women and men reflected by ensuring that women are granted at least thirty per cent of posts in decision making organs"*.

The Honorable Soline Nyirahabimana, one of the authors of the constitution and now a Minister in the Office of the President, explains the rationale behind the decision to enshrine gender equality in law:

"During our discussions about the constitution we considered the causes that kept girls behind, access to education, the high drop-rate. More than half of our resource was in the kitchen. We knew we had to fill that gap."

“As our President {Paul Kagame} says, equality is a “not a favour, it is a right.”

“I say to other countries, be firm, be bold. Do it.”

Numbers or substance?

An early analysis of the effect of increased women’s representation in the Rwandan parliament by Devlin and Elgie suggests that while there has been a change in the culture of politics there is yet to be a significant impact on policy output.

They argue that the most significant laws for women, such as Category One status for rape and the inheritance law, were passed before the large increase in women’s representation.

Their conclusion, in Rwanda’s case, was that numbers of women alone do not necessarily bring policy results. The government’s commitment to women’s rights proved to be as important as the number of women in influencing legislative outcomes.

This argument is echoed in Aitchison and Dow’s 2009 study of 18 parliamentary democracies, where they suggest that it is the representation of women in cabinet positions that is the key to explaining the extent of female-friendly social policy.

They too argue that while achieving critical mass at parliamentary level may be important in shaping women friendly policies, there needs to be sufficient women in ministerial positions to drive through change.

This paper investigates the dynamics of a political process as it was understood from the inside, by examining the experience and motivation of women ministers within the Scottish Government from 1999 to 2007.

Did these women in power make a difference to the lives of women in Scotland?

But first we reflect on how Scotland achieved critical mass in women’s representation.

Ten years to reach critical mass in Scotland

Scotland's constitutional position in the UK has long been part of the country's political debate.

In the decade leading up to devolution in 1999, three constitutional positions were proposed by the main political parties:

- Full independence from the UK (The Scottish National Party)
- Devolution (The Labour Party and Liberal Democrats)
- The status quo, with all matters governed from the UK Westminster Parliament (The Conservative Party).

Women in politics in Scotland

From 1918 to 1990, only 21 women had represented Scottish constituencies in Westminster. In 1987 Scotland returned just three women out of 72 MPs, below the UK average.

Paradoxically women in Scotland have long played leading roles in tenant and community groups, single issue campaigns and voluntary sector organisations.

The women's movement in Scotland began to focus increasingly on the constitutional debate. They recognised that devolution presented an historic political opportunity for the advancement of women.

Women's campaign in the run up to 1992

In the run up to the 1992 General Election detailed ground work for what eventually would become the Scottish Parliament begins. It has a gender dimension from the start. Many commentators refer to this period as a "third wave" of feminism in Scotland." A fair gender balance becomes intertwined with plans to build a more democratic new parliament.

In 1989, The Scottish Constitutional Convention was established to prepare options for a Scottish Parliament. Membership included representatives from political parties, although the SNP and Conservative Party chose not to join, local government, churches, trade unions, and civic organisations. The Scottish Convention was 90 per cent male.

The Convention set up several working groups including the Women's Issues Group, chaired by the Labour MP Maria Fyfe. Its role was to examine women's representation in any future parliament.

At the same time, a network of women activists formed The Women's Claim of Right Group (WCRG), separate to the Convention. It argued that "*once again major proposals and decisions affecting the life and*

well-being of Scottish people would be made with women being significantly under-represented”.

In 1990 the Convention committed itself to the general principle of equal representation, calling for new selection procedures for candidates, a new voting system for parliament, and a family friendly parliament.

1992 General Election

The Conservative victory in the 1992 general election was a setback for devolution as the Conservatives did not support a Scottish Parliament.

However they won only 15 per cent of the seats in Scotland and this democratic deficit provided further momentum for the campaign.

The Convention set up the Scottish Constitutional Commission which, in 1994, recommended that all political parties be asked to achieve 40 per cent representation of women in the Scottish Parliament in the first five years, but was not in favour of a statutory mechanism.

Around the same time, the Scottish Trade Unions Congress (STUC) promoted the Scottish Women’s Co-ordination Group, a coalition of women’s organisations which continued the campaign for full equality. This group successfully argued that equal opportunities should be one of the four founding principles of the Scottish Parliament. This was included in the final published report *Scotland’s Parliament, Scotland’s Right*.

Writing in the Scotsman in 1994, Professor Tom Nairn echoed the views of many when he argued that equal representation had *“become an emblem of the kind of country and the style of nationalism people really want”*.

Labour win UK General Election in 1997

On 1 May 1997 the Labour Party won the UK general election with a landslide.

The Convention report had formed the basis of the devolution policy for the Labour Party manifesto, and so on 11 September 1997 the UK government held a referendum to ask Scots if they were indeed in support of a Scottish Parliament. Over 75 per cent of Scots voted in favour and in 1998 the UK Parliament passed the Scotland Act which proclaimed: ‘There shall be a Scottish Parliament’.

With devolution now a reality, campaigners anticipated a new style of inclusive politics, with equal gender representation and a parliament that would deliver women friendly policies.

A series of recommendations was called for:

- A standing committee on equal opportunities
- That a mainstreaming approach should be adopted
- An equality unit should be established in the Scottish Parliament
- That the parliament should run in a family friendly manner.

But before any of these aspirations could become a reality, there had to be women elected to the new parliament, and that fell to the political parties, as the Scotland Act did not include a legal commitment to greater equality.

There was no shortage of advice and support on how they could best achieve gender equality.

The Consultative Steering Group was set up by the Scottish Constitutional Convention to seek a commitment from political parties that they would field equal numbers of men and women.

The Equal Opportunities Commission offered the parties advice on the best legal means to ensure equal representation through 'positive action'.

And as the elections for the new Scottish Parliament used the mixed member proportional system, which combines a first past the post and an additional member list system,³ there were interesting opportunities to explore.

There was no cross-party consensus however, with the parties each taking a differing view on how best to reach gender equality.

After much internal debate and an experiment in women only shortlists for the 1997 UK election, the Scottish Labour Party adopted a 'twinning' system. Under this system the members of the two constituencies come together for the purposes of selecting candidates. Party Members have two votes – one for a woman and one for a man. The man and woman with the most votes are selected. Between them they agree who should have which seat.

The Liberal Democrats agreed to undertake 'promotional activity', but a proposal to zip list seats was rejected by the party membership. Under the 'zipper system' the names of women and men alternate equally in the critical top positions of the Party list of candidates in the election

The SNP leadership also supported zipping list seats, but this too was rejected by its membership.

³ As well as a constituency vote each elector has a regional vote. They vote for a political party with party candidates elected in order from the top or the party list. The political parties decide the order of the candidates on their own list and regional seats are allocated proportionately according to the number votes cast for each party across the region. There are 8 regions, 56 regional and 73 Constituency MSPs across Scotland.

However, the party subsequently placed women in the upper end of its regional party lists.

The Conservative Party maintained its opposition to any special measures to increase the representation of women.

When the results of the first elections for the new Scottish Parliament, held on May 1999, were announced it was clear that the Labour Party's decision to impose an obligatory quota had achieved a critical mass of women Labour MSPs.

Labour returned 56 members – half were women.

The second biggest party, the Scottish National Party (SNP) also reached critical mass with 15 of its 35 MSPs – 40 per cent.

The Conservative and the Liberal Democrat groups remained stubbornly male, with three women Conservatives MSPs out of 18 (16.7 per cent) and only two women Liberal Democrats out of 17 MSPs, a lowly 11.8 per cent.

The Green Party and the Scottish Socialists each had one male member, with Denis Canavan the sole independent MSP.

Scotland had not only elected a new parliament, it had achieved a critical mass of women in its new legislature, making it one of the most women friendly in the world.

Expectations for the new parliament and its members ran high, particularly among the women who had campaigned long and hard for equality of representation.

Professor Alice Brown, whose writings comprise the most substantial body of work on women in Scottish politics in the 1990s, wrote in 1991:

“Women across the party divide, and no party women, strongly believed that more women in parliament would make a substantial difference to political life in Scotland.”

“They would bring their specific life experiences and expertise to the job, and would alter the style of political debate.”

“Often used phrases were ‘women are more consensual’, ‘women are less confrontational and better at getting things done’, ‘women have a much more open and sharing approach’ or ‘with more women the whole political ethos would change.’”

There was also a broad consensus that the policies of a new Scottish Parliament would be different with equal participation of women.”

In the next chapter we explore whether these new women in power went on to make a substantial difference to politics and Scotland.

Women in power

At 9.30 am on May 12, 1999 a sixty nine year old woman made a solemn affirmation to serve the people of Scotland.

Dr Winnie Ewing, a veteran Nationalist politician, was the first of 129 people to be sworn in as a member of the new Scottish Parliament.

“It was indeed *“an historic day”* as Ms Ewing asserted in her speech at the end of the first session.

She was referring to the three hundred years that had elapsed since the last session of the Scottish Parliament on 25 March 1707 and in particular the campaign for devolution that had dominated Scottish politics in the last half of the 20th century.

There was another, equally compelling, reason for historians to take note of the proceedings that day in the Church of Scotland’s Assembly Hall. The new Scottish Parliament had achieved the all-important critical mass with 48 women elected out of 129 members – 37.2 per cent.

Quite what the 227 men who were members of the last Scottish Parliament would have made of its successor chamber can only be guessed at, but with more than a third of the new legislature female, Scotland’s new parliament came close to reflecting the society its members had just sworn to serve.

Every woman expects...

As the previous chapter shows, the election of so many women had not been accidental and expectations what these 48 women – and those elected in 2003 – could achieve ran almost as high as the country’s aspirations for its new parliament.

The active networks of women across the trade union movement, political parties and community politics looked to their sisters in the new parliament to create a new Scotland, one where female friendly policies would take root.

There was unfinished business, particularly in the area of domestic abuse and sexual violence.

There was an expectation that the processes of equality, such as gender budgeting and mainstreaming, would be put in place, particularly as equal opportunities was a founding principle of the Scottish Parliament.

And as the building blocks of daily life – health, housing, education, transport, justice and economic development – were all devolved to the Scottish Parliament, there was a general hope that this critical mass of women politicians would deliver a different type of policy making – that these women in power would significantly improve the lives of ordinary Scottish women.

This hope of a new, women-friendly governance heightened when Donald Dewar, Scotland’s first First Minister announced his ministers on 19 May 1999.

One quarter of the twenty-strong Scottish Executive (excluding the two law officers) was women – all of them relatively young.

This was pattern that the next two First Ministers, Henry McLeish (2000 – 01) and Jack McConnell (2001 – 2007) were to repeat.

From 1999 to 2007 ten women served as government ministers and Jack McConnell appointed Elish Angiolini as Scotland's first female Solicitor General in 2001. She was installed as the first female Lord Advocate on 12 October 2006.

These expectations weighed heavily on the women. As one explains:

"You were very aware of an expectation being placed on you...responsibility to the party, to our gender. People were watching us, ready to be critical. We knew we had to hit the ground running, we need to prove ourselves, not just as Labour Ministers, but as women Ministers."

Another put it like this:

"I'm aware of it in all my politics because I have a feminist perspective. So that's part of why I'm in politics, because I have this view that there are still many barriers to a lot of people and women still experience major barriers. So I wouldn't say it weighed on me, but it's just part of whom I am and what my politics is".

The press pack

Dewar chose three young women: Susan Deacon, Sarah Boyack and Wendy Alexander to sit in the Scottish Executive's first cabinet, with two women deputy ministers, Jackie Baillie and Rhona Brankin. Their portfolios ranged from sport to transport, housing to health.

None had any experience of holding an elected position before, let alone running national government departments with billion pound budgets, or steering complex legislation through a national parliament.

And they had to navigate two of Scotland's bastions of male domination – the media and the senior civil service.

Their gender, coupled with their relative youth and inexperience, made them an easy target for the Scottish political lobby – which in 1999, as it remains today, was largely dominated by male journalists.

Their perceived 'misogyny', often disguised as sketch writing, was as unexpected as it was hurtful.

All the women interviewed recorded difficulties in dealing with the media. One minister was asked during a press interview when was the last time she had seen "an erotic film".

She recalls: *"I got appointed [and was] interviewed and he started firing questions at me very rapidly and all of a sudden in the middle of them one of them was, "What was the last erotic film you saw?"... He wouldn't have asked a man that... So, you know, small things like that that they would never have done to a man."*

"I am a woman who behaves like a women," explains one interviewee. "If you have got a smile on your face, you are judged as ineffective. The media judge women by male behaviour. You can work your butt off, you can be hugely effective behind the scenes, but if you don't have the killer line in a four minute debate, you are not a good politician."

Another women minister says: *"There were virtually no women in the political press and I think women politicians did get treated differently."*

"Male politicians tended to network closely with male journalists. They drank together, they talked about football."

"And we got remarks about what we looked like all the time."

Another argued that the male dominated lobby skewed the policy debate.

She says: *"We have a media which is very male dominated... so the reporting of parliament is through a prism of what male journalists regard as important and very often that is about the debate and the argument as much as about the result."*

"You get lots of credit for generating headlines about having a fight, you get less for working behind the scenes to deliver a result."

The not so civil service

Perhaps more surprising than the attitudes of Scotland's male dominated political correspondents and commentators was the response of some of Scotland's senior civil servants to their female political masters.

The women had a mixed view of the civil service with several working well with the government bureaucracy. Several also stress that many of the women ministers were young and inexperienced and those attributes may have contributed to their perceptions of the civil service.

The majority concur with the views of one woman that *"the civil service is very male dominated...and traditional,"* and there was a tendency among the senior civil service to patronise them, verging at times on a refusal to take them seriously.

One interviewee said that *"in government a softer approach is often looked down on by civil servants"* while another described how some senior civil servants *"would quite happily pat you on the head."*

Her response to that was *"to work harder to make sure they respect you. I think women are so used to doing that..."*

Other women found it hard to penetrate the male networks that senior civil servants took for granted. *"The justice system does operate as on what is essentially a male networking system and I think people had to think hard about how a woman Minister would slot into that."*

Another reflects that as there has never been a female permanent secretary in Scotland, then *"female ministers under 40 was a shock to the system."*

Another challenge was the impact ministerial duties had on personal lives and working patterns.

"The whole process of having a private secretary was just novel to me, and I suppose I just kind of rebelled a little bit, because suddenly they were in control of my life. I hated all that, the men took to it like ducks to water, but the women, to varying degrees were uncomfortable with it."

And this enforced separation from real life had political implications too. *"I was terrified I would lose touch, because we were cocooned with each other, cocooned from the outside world,"* says one.

Networks

If the Scottish media, and to a lesser extent the civil service, was to offer the women little or no support then their networks, built up during the long struggle to get women into power, proved to be invaluable in supporting women ministers and crucially provided a firm foundation for policy development and delivery.

As one explains: *“When the women MPs – Blair’s Babes (sorry) were elected in 1997 it was as if the women’s movement stood back and said “right, we have achieved our goal”. But we had not, it is just not about getting there, it is how women politicians are supported.*

“So I was very conscious that we had to keep up our links with women in the trade unions...with women in communities, that we had all worked with in different guises. And with each other... a lot of us had come through together, we all knew each other and we all trusted each other.”

These networks, forged early in their career, stood each one of them in good stead as they steered legislation through the parliament and implemented new ways of tackling issues such as domestic abuse, poverty and public health.

As one put it: *“I think for a lot of women who had a background in community politics, their instinct was to link more with communities rather than to see the parliamentary process as the place to be. The Parliament serves a purpose, rather than it being an end in itself.”*

Another describes how her work in the voluntary sector informed her style of working: *“Because of my background in the voluntary sector...and also my background in education, I link easily to people in those sectors.”*

“But also because of my feminist beliefs, I think it’s really very important to make sure I’m linking in to all parts of society, including the groups that wouldn’t have been seen as being important, whether it’s the voluntary sector or whether it’s grandparents’ group... or people in local authorities.”

What did they achieve?

The first two sessions of the Scottish Parliament saw over 100 pieces of legislation passed. Some were housekeeping bills, such as the annual Budget bill, others righted old wrongs, such as the feudal tenure.

The rest, successive governments and parliamentarians would argue, were based on the principles engraved on the Parliament’s mace: Wisdom. Justice. Compassion. Integrity.

But did the women ministers meet the expectations that swept them into power? Did the critical mass of women in the parliament lead directly to better lives for the women of Govan, Stranraer or Thurso?

Any analysis of the impact of devolution on the issues of substantive importance to Scottish women needs

to take into account that key policy areas such as benefits, pensions and equal pay legislation remain reserved to Westminster.

But with control over most areas of social policy, this generation of women politicians was better placed than any women before to bring about real and lasting change to the lives of their peers.

Unfinished business

Most commentators regard the actions to tackle domestic abuse during the first decade of devolution – which included the first bill from a committee – as the most significant achievement for women by the women in power.

This was unfinished business for the women of Scotland. In 1992 Edinburgh District Council launched the UK's first crime prevention campaign to tackle the issue of male violence against women and children.

The Zero Tolerance campaign unleashed an international movement against domestic violence and it is an area that is often used to measure how much influence women have on policy and legislation.

It is an area that the Scottish women put forward as one of their most important victories.

As one explains: *“We took the first national action on domestic violence because I recall.... how few refuges there were and how much that depends on [where] you lived in and... I was communities minister at the time, and I said we are going to do something about this.”*

Another speaks of the satisfaction of being able to make a practical difference and remembers with some amusement the horror of the civil service at her closeness to domestic violence campaign network.

“For me the highlight...was properly funding domestic abuse services. I was very clear that we needed an expansion in the number of places; we needed to ensure that there wasn't a postcode lottery. That women who had experienced abuse anywhere in Scotland could get shelter anywhere in Scotland. And that we needed to make quite a dramatic change and you do that by resourcing it.”

“I recall the civil service being horrified because I think in the very first week I was a Minister there was a march by Scottish Woman's Aid, along Princes Street, demanding money from the Scottish Executive, and instinctively I joined the march. Which really horrified my private secretary but it was the right place to be.”

The machinery of equality

Many activists and policy makers consider that putting in place the machinery needed to achieve equality, such as mainstreaming and gender budgeting, should be the primary objective of women politicians.

This ambition is reflected in the Standing Orders of the Scottish Parliament, which require that all government bills be accompanied by a statement of their potential impact on equal opportunities.

As we have noted, Wendy Alexander was of the view that: *“We face long term challenges. Setting up of the equality unit, ensuring that equalities will be at the heart of policy making in general, women friendly budgeting...”*

But even amongst the most passionate of women campaigners, mainstreaming is often misunderstood, as the Scottish Government paper, Learning from Experience: Lessons in Mainstreaming Equal Opportunities, published in 2003, points out:

“Mainstreaming is a term which is increasingly used, but is less well understood. There are substantial shortfalls in knowledge, awareness and techniques which appear common to the experience of mainstreaming in most countries.”

That same paper goes on to assert that: *“mainstreaming in the UK is at an early stage”*.

And despite the work of organisations such as the Scottish Women’s Budget Group, gender budgeting⁴ is also still in its infancy in Scotland.

This failure to fully embed the processes of equality in the bureaucracy of government is readily acknowledged by several of the women and summed up succinctly by one who says:

“I think we started well but I’m...to be honest it’s gone down I think in recent years, it’s gone down the political agenda. And it is something that has practically disappeared now as far as I’m concerned. I mean, I don’t know, I mean, I’m not monitoring it closely, but certainly in terms of my perception of what’s happening now it’s virtually disappeared.”

Another argues that while *“you might as well have been speaking Mandarin for all they [the civil service] understood about mainstreaming...it is a battle still worth fighting.”*

“I wouldn’t let it go. I think there still has to be a system that holds people to account.”

And she uses the pertinent example of the current concordat between Scottish local government and the SNP minority government to argue that mainstreaming and gender budgets are essential to achieve equality.

⁴ **THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE DEFINITION OF GENDER BUDGETING:** Gender budgeting is an application of gender mainstreaming in the budgetary process. It means a gender-based assessment of budgets, incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process and restructuring revenues and expenditures in order to promote gender equality.

"The single outcome agreements will determine more government spending priorities. And if you ask the Minister will he accept single outcome agreement without a quality impact assessment done on it, he'll say that's a matter for local authority. And you say to local authority, they say we don't think it's necessary."

"So you say to the Minister, will you refuse to accept a single outcome agreement without any evidence of an equality impact assessment? And he says that's a matter for local authorities. Or it's a matter for the commission equality for human rights."

"So it's just they don't want to do the hard stuff which is making people do things that they don't want to do."

"Take the freeze on council tax as part of an anti-poverty strategy. Anybody who has been around mainstreaming knows that a quality impact assessment would show that's baloney."

Changing women's lives

The women were more passionate about the changes they believed they had brought about for ordinary women through implementing female-friendly social policies in areas such as transport, community justice and childcare services.

Each one of them gave compelling examples of how they had conceived and delivered policies that touched women's lives.

The introduction of free travel for pensioners, the majority of whom are women and poorer than men, was a feminist issue, argues one former minister.

"Having a sufficient number of women allows you to break out of the traditional gender issues...that is crucial, we have got to be as up on transport, the economy and health as men."

"Gender completely underpinned free bus travel for pensioners. It was utterly self evident, women have less access to cars, less money, less time...it wasn't done because it would benefit only women, but to me that fact it benefited women made it a clear priority."

Perhaps surprisingly, several point to the controversial Anti Social Behaviour Bill of 2004 as being a piece of legislation that put the needs of women at its heart.

"The anti-social behaviour issue came directly from my experience as a teacher. I used to talk to children who were willing to risk getting killed in a world that most people did not know existed."

When I was elected I remember thinking, I can't go back and say, sorry there is nothing I can do to help.

Another describes how the anti-social behaviour legislation was for "the women living in fear in their own home. It was women who were the most isolated, the most targeted. We all knew of women who couldn't go out of night...who sat in their homes with the lights out."

Reforms to the Scottish justice system were also described as having been influenced by the reality of women's lives.

The justice system was dominated by "male networks" says one woman, "so there were bits of legislation and policy that I took an interest in that maybe others wouldn't have...some of the stuff around family law."

She goes on to argue that changes in the way courts operate were strongly influenced by the experiences of women victims.

"We got changes made to the justice system in terms of the way the courts operated...putting the victims at the centre...changing the way we looked at justice, so that it was not just about the lawyers..."

Not surprisingly improvements in childcare – long regarded as a women's issue – was highlighted by several of the women.

One woman described the introduction of childcare in Further Education colleges as a policy that was designed specifically to improve the economic circumstances of women, and crucially needed a women's perspective to make it happen.

She explains: "I think it (being a woman) personally shapes a style of decision making. I can give you an example...there was zero provision for women returners in terms of childcare in further education of any kind what so ever in Scotland."

"The experience of being a single parent or a young mother as a student is widely different from your carefree 18 year-old guy and we are going to recognise that with financial support."

She went on to draw out how being a woman affected how she approached policy making:

"I remember going to the first meeting of one of the regeneration task forces...it was about Glasgow and there were 28 men and one women round the table...I thought if you chose 30 women from and asked them what does it take to change this city, the discussion would not be dominated by big buildings and grand infrastructure projects of one kind or another."

"It would be much more human scale like what are we going to do about childcare..."

Interestingly, several of the women – who had all been government ministers at some point in their parliamentary career – raised a rebellion against a government whip as a compelling example of how women approached policy in a different way from their male colleagues.

The majority of women Labour MSPs threatened to vote in favour of the Warrant Sales and Poidings Bill put forward by the Scottish Socialist MSP Tommy Sheridan in 1999, so forcing the government to back the bill.

One woman, who disagreed with the bill, understood the reasons why many of her female colleagues threatened to break the Labour whip and vote in favour.

“Tommy Sheridan’s bill on warrant sales got lots of support from women in the Labour Group. But for many of them managing debt, the indignity of warrant sales, was part of their inherited experiences. It wasn’t a lunatic Trotskyite position, it was an experience that had resonance.”

One of the women who argued in favour of the bill – before she became a minister – recalls how it was *“invariably women, almost invariably women up on their feet, battling away with Donald...and it was an interesting combination of women who came together and said, we are not going to do this.”*

Did they make a difference?

The election of 48 women to the Scottish Parliament in 1999 was of great symbolic importance – as was the elevation of so many young women to positions of authority.

There is an increasing body of evidence that suggests that while the size of women’s representation in a legislature does affect policy development and its impact on women, the real power lies in the cabinet.

Policy typically originates in the cabinet rather than the legislature argues Atchison and Down in their 2009 paper Women Cabinet Ministers and Female-Friendly Social Policy.

“We changed the attitudes and treatment of domestic abuse... there is no going back,” says one.”

“We did lots of things that needed to be done,” says another, “things like financial inclusion measures.”

Another cites the older person’s strategy of 2007 as something that was women-friendly. *“I hope that that work has set a basis for radical thinking around how we think of the role people play in older age...given that there are huge numbers of women.”*

And even a cursory analysis of the social policy legislation introduced in the first two terms of the Scottish Parliament – the majority of it sponsored by the government – suggests that Scotland is a better place for women than it was prior to 1999.

Free social care for the elderly has transformed the finances of frail elderly women; female pensioners enjoy free public transport; public health has been transformed by the ban on smoking in public places; and anti-social behaviour is no longer regarded as nothing more than high jinks, but a pervasive, life-sapping crime against some of the most vulnerable members of society – in particular women.

Female genital mutilation has been banned, the right to breastfeeding in public is now enshrined in law and while the latest figures show that there were over 53,000 incidents of domestic abuse recorded last year, this crime against women is no longer ignored, thanks to the efforts of the women in power.

It could be argued, as one woman suggests, that the women-friendly policies were due as much to the Labour values that the women ministers all adhered to, but that would be to ignore the fact that it was the Labour Party's adoption of the 50-50 quota that led directly to so many women being elected.

And these Labour women "*redefined politics*" claims one. "*There was a reshaping, redefinition of what being a socialist was...a new understanding of how inequality was experienced and it wasn't just about income...at the same time there was an increasing number of strong women in the party.*"

Fears for the future

But all are fearful that the advances made for women by women could be at risk if there is not a new generation of women waiting to take power. They all pointed to the drop in the number of female MSPs in the 2007 election as a warning signal that the advances made in 1999 could be lost.

Women took 43 out of the 129 seats (33.3 per cent) compared with 39.5 per cent in the 2003 elections and 37.2 per cent in 1999.

The Labour Party's 50-50 quota system, which was instrumental in achieving the critical mass, was abandoned after 1999 and no comparable system has been adopted for the 2011 elections.

And there has been no visible effort by the other main parties, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, Conservatives and SNP, to secure gender equality in their list of candidates.

"I don't know what is going to happen when we all start retiring, or losing seats," says one woman. "Who will replace us as the mechanisms are not there to help women?"

"What are we doing to encourage the current crop of activists in our communities," asks another. "My worry is that we might end up missing a generation of women...there has not been effort made to encourage more women to come through...the political parties need to take some responsibility for that."

"Everyone is looking at the constitution {of Scotland}, but it is really significant to me that women are not part of that dialogue."

"The issue for me is how we keep the new stream of women coming in...how do we keep the momentum going?"

"I have suggested to women in other parties, can we do a women's claim of right, mark two."

And perhaps the most telling anecdote is one that was told with a smile, but goes right to the heart of the matter.

"I get asked all the time to go talk about being a woman in politics. I always start by saying 'I wonder if there is a man anywhere in the country tonight doing a talk about being a man in politics...' and of course there won't be because everyone still assumes that if you are in politics you are a man."

Conclusion

As this paper shows, following devolution in 1999 there was considerable expectation for a new era of Scottish politics, one in which women would be more fairly represented.

Further, there was a hope that a more gender balanced legislature would bring a new focus to a range of social policy areas including family life, personal safety, early years education, childcare and health and well being.

On the primary question of whether or not women in power make a difference to the lives of women in general, the answer has to be a qualified yes.

Our research chimes with established studies based on the experience of women in legislatures across the world, including Africa, Europe and North America which show that women bring a different set of networks and narratives to their political life.

These women politicians generally believe that they are closer to grassroots politics than their male peers. They also believe they work differently than men, using their networks, often forged early in their career, both as a sounding board and a support system.

Their political narratives – what drives them as politicians – are different too. The women interviewed believe they brought a gender perspective to their work as government ministers.

This echoes Dr Fiona Mackay's evaluations of the early period of the parliament which showed that female MSPs made a difference to the practice and agenda of the parliament by bringing a gendered perspective to committee work and were more accessible to lobbying from women's organisations.

Our research also builds on that of Atchison and Down whose primary proposition is that *"in parliamentary democracies the representation of women in cabinet is the key to explaining the extent of female-friendly social policy."*

It is not enough to get women into parliament; enough women must also assume ministerial positions if a female perspective is to be brought to government activity and legislation. Further research in this area would provide additional insights.

In Scotland, in first eight years of devolution, women ministers made an impact in four areas.

Iconic feminist issues

Former ministers described with conviction the progress they made in tackling domestic abuse and violence against women, some also cited the debates around prostitution and the action against genital mutilation as significant achievements.

Family matters

Just as important to the women was the progress made in implementing women-friendly policies. They talked at length of achievements such as universal early years education for 3 and 4 years olds, significant improvements in childcare, breakfast clubs in schools, and wrap-around care in schools.

There was recognition that the drivers behind these family friendly policies were varied and not just driven by women.

The public now accepted that governments had a role in providing family support services, when previous governments had argued it was a private matter for families themselves or even that if such services were provided by the state it would lead to the breakdown of family life.

The first eight years of devolution also saw a period of high employment so employers were looking for more entrants to the workplace and there was pressure on ministers to improve childcare.

Nonetheless, all the women interviewed believe strongly that it was their personal networks and narratives that informed their ministerial roles and that this level of progress in social policies would not have happened without women ministers and a critical mass of women in the parliament.

Action against anti-social behaviour is a case in point. Women put this forward as a women's issue about personal safety. They felt the demand for government action came directly from their networks and their observations as constituency MSPs.

And the Labour Party rebellion to support the bill to abolish poinding and warrants sales was led by women backbench MSPs because the legislation had resonance with women in the communities they represented.

The process of equality

In the preparation work for the Scottish Parliament there was considerable pressure for a mainstreaming approach to be adopted by the new lawmakers.

Demands included a standing committee on equal opportunities, an equality unit in government, family-friendly hours in the parliament and that policy mainstreaming be adopted. Campaigners also called for women's audits and gender budgeting.

There was progress: the Equal Opportunities Committee is a standing committee of the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government established an Equalities Unit and the Scottish Parliament does have a family-friendly routine with all voting taking place at 17:00 hours.

However most of the women acknowledged that there had been little or no progress made in the machinery of equality, such as mainstreaming and gender budgeting.

Still a long way to go

The research also highlighted that while the Scottish Parliament and some political parties had made progress on the representation of women, other powerful sections of Scottish society had a long way to go.

Two areas in particular were raised: the media and the civil service.

The political press lobby came in for considerable criticism and while it is often too easy for politicians to blame the media when things go wrong, the women all expressed strong views that Scotland's political media had treated them more harshly than their male peers.

Views on the civil service were less clear cut. Certain departments were seen as very male dominated while the women felt more accepted in other portfolios.

It was noted that during 1999 to 2007 there were very few women in the highest echelons of the civil service, and that throughout this period there were more women in the political cabinet than their civil service equivalent, which may have accounted for the feeling of a male dominated culture.

The strongest theme to emerge from the findings was the fear that the progress in women's representation is in danger of being lost if Scotland's political parties do not make a genuine effort to recruit more women candidates for safe and target seats.

Their concern extends to local government too, with several pointing out that the focus on devolution has led to a perceived diminution in the importance of local government. This is somewhat ironic given that local services such as education and social work are areas where female-friendly social policies could flourish.

This concern is echoed in Mackay and Kenny's article on women's representation following the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections. They argue that unless positive action is taken, the elections of 1999 and 2003 will be seen as the "high tide of women's representation in Scotland.

The recent Westminster's cross-party Speaker's conference on equality of representation suggests a possible solution.

It argues that unless the UK political parties improve the representation of women at the 2010, political parties should be forced to adopt obligatory quotas for women put forward for selection.

The experience of Rwanda – which has obligatory quotas at the heart of its constitution – suggests that making equality of representation a legal requirement is perhaps the only way to ensure that local and national politics reflect the reality of society.

If there is equal representation of women in the legislature, then it is more likely that the future cabinets will also be gender equal. Our research, and that of others, suggests this would lead to more women friendly social policies.

The recommendations of the Speakers Conference were viewed with great interest by all the women we interviewed, leading us to our final conclusion that there should be an inquiry in Scotland into how best to increase and crucially sustain female political representation – at local government as well as national, UK and European level.

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Appendix 1 – Women in power 1999 – 2007

Year	Women	Minister for
1999 – 2002	Wendy Alexander MSP	Communities, Housing and the Voluntary Sector Enterprise and Lifelong Learning
1999 – 2001 2006 – 2007	Sarah Boyack MSP	Environment and Rural Development Transport
1999 – 2001	Susan Deacon MSP	Health and Community Care
2001 – 2001	Jackie Baillie MSP	Social Justice Communities (Deputy)
2001 – 2007	Cathy Jamieson MSP	Education, Children and Young People Justice
2001 – 2007	Patricia Ferguson MSP	Minister for Parliament Minister for Tourism Culture and Sport
2000 – 2007	Margaret Curran MSP	Parliament Communities Social Justice (Deputy)
1999 – 2001 2007	Rhona Brankin MSP	Communities Culture and Sport (Deputy) Rural Development (Deputy)
2005 – 2007	Johann Lamont MSP	Communities (Deputy) Justice (Deputy)
2001 – 2003	Elaine Murray MSP	Culture and Sport (Deputy)
2001 – 2003	Mary Mulligan MSP	Communities (Deputy)

Glossary

'Blairs Babes' When Tony Blair became Prime Minister of the UK in 1997 there was a sharp increase in the number of Labour women MPs, many of them young and attractive. They were dubbed 'babes' by the UK press.

Cabinet Senior ministers of the Scottish Government.

Category One Status Crimes are usually divided into minor and major with correspondingly suitable penalties. Category one places rape in Rwanda in a serious category. Many countries have historically treated rape as a minor offence for which an offer of marriage or money would be suitable recompense.

Conservative Party One of the two major parties in Britain, in office until 1997. Since the 1990s it has had little support and very few MPs elected from Scotland.

COSLA Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

EOC Equal Opportunities Commission, an independent but government funded body in UK, which tackled sex discrimination.

First Minister The political leader of Scotland and head of Scottish Government.

Further Education Term used for post school, non-university education.

Gender Budgeting Analysis of how governments raise and spend public money from a gender perspective with the aim of securing gender equality.

Labour Whip A whip controls the formal decision-making process in parliament and ensure party representatives vote with their party.

Gender Mainstreaming Systematically assessing the different implications for women and men of any policy or piece of legislation.

Women's Policy Machinery A phrase used to describe the formal processes such as gender budgeting and mainstreaming – a crucial tool for engendering the state.

SNP Scottish Nationalist Party, it campaigns for full independence for Scotland.

Scottish Labour Party Scottish arm of the UK Labour Party.

Scotsman One of Scotland's leading national daily newspapers.

Scottish Liberal Democrats The Scottish arm of the UK's third political party.

Scottish Enterprise Scotland's main economic development agency funded by the Scottish Government.

Scottish Executive The executive arm of the devolved Scottish Parliament, i.e. the Scottish Government.

Scottish Constitutional Convention (SCC) An association of Scottish political parties, churches and civic groups which developed a framework for devolution.

Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) Brings together 37 national trade unions.

Scottish Women's Aid An independent non – governmental organisation which tackles domestic abuse and works to end violence against women.

Speaker's Conference The Speaker presides over the Westminster Parliament. A Speaker's Conference recently reviewed parliamentary representation.

Tommy Sheridan A Scottish Socialist Party member of the Scottish Parliament from 1999 – 2007.

Warrant Sales A method whereby creditors instruct legal officers to remove a debtor's property and sell it to repay the debt.

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