Women’s Representation via Parliamentary Questions

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Political Studies Association Conference Manchester April 2014

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Introduction

The questions of whether an increase in women MPs makes a difference for women, whether women MPs work in the interests of women by raising ‘women’s issues’ and whether such ‘women’s issues’ even exist have been the cause for much academic debate. The representation of women in parliament also remains an issue of contention in the public sphere and has recently even been used for political point scoring on parliament’s front benches. In February 2014, Labour leader Edward Miliband mocked David Cameron’s 16-man front bench at Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs). Miliband accused Cameron of failing to improve gender equality within the Tory party, highlighting the lack of women on the front bench (Muir 2014). Attempts to deflect the criticism were unconvincing but Cameron was surrounded by women at the following weeks PMQ (Hinscliff 2014). Green MP Caroline Lucas’ protest against media sexism in parliament during a Commons debate in June 2013 is another example of recent events highlighting the issue (BBC 2013).

Given that more than 15 years have passed since Labour’s landslide election victory which saw the number of women in parliament double to 120, this paper considers whether the increase in the number of female representatives and the presence of a significantly larger proportion of women over the last 15 years have challenged views on ‘women’s issues’ and perspectives, plus the potential interest in such issues in parliament. So far, there has been a lack of conclusive evidence on whether female politicians act decisively to defend or promote specific gender-based interests. The question of whether there is even a distinct set of ‘women’s issues’ is also still contested by many. After a review of the most poignant theoretical perspectives on these issues, this paper aims to advance the debate on the representation of women in parliament through the analysis of a set of preliminary data that allows the tracking of change in the interest in ‘women’s issues’ and perspectives in the House of Commons. Using parliamentary questions, the paper examines whether female representatives are currently more proactive in asking questions on ‘women’s issues’ and concerns than their male counterparts and how this interest compares to the situation 15 years ago. Based on our preliminary analysis (of a larger data set), the paper concludes that men are now more likely to ask questions on certain gender-specific topics than they were previously. We suggest that specific issues that were previously defined as ‘women’s
interests’ seem to have become part of a more mainstream political debate. In fact, it appears as if some of these issues are now considered to be less of a concern for women in the UK and that many MPs now focus on the issues affecting women abroad; especially those living in conflict areas and/or developing countries.

Women’s representation
After the initial large increase in women MPs from 60 to 120 in 1997, the number has since grown at a much slower rate with 128 after the 2005 election and 147 currently (see graph 1). After the 1997 election women accounted for 18% of MPs. In 2012 there were only about 4% more women in Parliament than in 1997 (see Table 1) (House of Commons Information Office 2010:7). These figures fit with a general trend of stagnation in the number of women MPs in countries across the European Union (Fuchs and Hoecker 2004).

Graph 1: Women MPs 1918 to 2010

Despite visible progress over the last three decades there is still a great deal of discussion about getting more women into parliament. Women are still not seen to “fit the model of the archetypal candidate” (Durose et al 2011: 13) and many female MPs feel that their skills are still undervalued and sexism remains a problem (ibid.).
Evidence suggests that few women get into politics to represent women’s interests (Sapiro 1998; Mezey 1978, 1977; Vallance 1979) though it has been shown that women are more likely to campaign on social issues (Dabelko and Herrnson 1997). Signs of ambition and assertiveness in politics are not recognised as female qualities and arguably make it difficult to challenge the current political culture (Tremblay 1996; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Durose et al 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>female MPs</th>
<th>male MPs</th>
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<tr>
<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>78.0%</td>
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Source: House of Commons Information Office 2010: 7

A great deal of research has been conducted into what difference an increased number of women MPs can make to women’s representation. Scholars widely predicted that an increase in women MPs would mean that Parliament would “gradually come to reflect the diverse concerns of society as a whole” (Norris 1996: 92). This paper looks to test that prediction by first considering the different theoretical perspectives on the political representation of women. These include ‘descriptive representation’, ‘critical mass theory’ and ‘substantive representation’.

**Descriptive representation**

Descriptive representation refers to the representation of politically relevant descriptive characteristics such as ethnicity and gender, which is often argued to lead to a ‘presence’ within an elected body (see Philips 1995). There has been much discussion over whether this is an effective measure for improving representation with many questioning whether it has anything other than a symbolic effect (Pitkin 1967; Hansen 1997; Burns et al. 2001; Childs 2004; Norton 2005), specifically when it comes to effecting changes in political behavior and attitude (Dolan 2006) or interests (Koch 1997). Studies on descriptive representation, particularly in the United States, suggest that increased descriptive representation of minorities can enhance political support.
and increase participation (Barreto et al. 2004; Gay 2001; Tate 1991), political efficacy (Banducci et al. 2004) and trust in government (Howell and Fagan 1988) as well as reducing feelings of alienation (Pantoja and Segura 2003).

**Critical Mass Theory**

Critical mass theory has been widely used in relation to women's representation. The theory anticipates that an increase in the number of women will lead to greater substantive representation (see Grey 2002; Studler and McAllister 2002; Bratton 2005; Chaney 2006), the potential for co-operation and promotion of women's issues (Saint-Germain 1989 and Thomas 1994), and the feminisation of institutions (Studlar and McAllister 2002; Brunsbach 2011). Critics argue this presents an over-simplified view (Grey 2002; Lovenduski and Norris 2004; Childs 2004) and Childs and Krook (2006: 125) state that the theories' assumptions, such as a precise tipping point for feminised change, cannot be proven. They prefer to analyse ‘critical actors’, rather than men and women as distinct political units (Childs and Krook 2006: 126). There has been little to support the idea that any shared experiences or identities, like those of women, will result in the promotion of similar goals or collective action (Phillip 1995; Mansbridge 1999), though more recently Childs and Witney (2004) found evidence of Labour women working for women via the signature of particular Early Day Motions (EDMs).

**Substantive representation**

The discussion on women's representation has generally shifted from a focus on 'presence' and descriptive representation to one on substantive representation. This type of representation is more concerned with the representation of certain societal groups by their elected representatives, while acknowledging that they may have contrasting identities or interests to the groups they represent. Some suggest that women will act for women once their presence has been established hence, linking descriptive and substantive representation (Phillips 1995, 1998; Tremblay 1996; Mansbridge 1999). Several authors argue that the relationship between these types of representation should reflect gender interests. However, there are several other factors and predictors of political attitudes such as party membership and ideology that also need to be considered (Norris 1996; Tremblay 1996; Childs and Krook 2009) as well as other influential institutional and cultural factors (Matland 1998; Rule 1987). After over
15 years of a more significant number of women MPs in the House of Commons, this paper tests whether the increase in female MPs has really led to an increased discussion of gender-specific issues.

Regardless of the type of representation and its effectiveness there remains a strong feeling that few women representatives appears undemocratic and undermines public confidence in institutions (Norris 1996: 91; Karp and Banducci 2008). It is said that women appear to be less interested, engaged and knowledgeable of politics than men (see Inglehart 1981; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Christy 1987; Verba et al. 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Burns et al. 2001; Inglehart and Norris 2003). However, there is significant evidence demonstrating the positive effects that an increased presence of female representatives has for women. Such as 'feeling better' about those in power (Mansbridge 1999; Lawless 2004), increased trust in local governments (Ulbig 2005), an increase in political interest, knowledge, discussion and a stimulation of political engagement (Verba et al. 1997; Hansen 1997; Atkeson 2003; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Karp and Banducci 2008). Despite finding no evidence to suggest that women are any more likely than men to be mobilised by female representatives Karp and Banducci (2008: 114) found that the presence of women does have a role-model effect and that it leads to policy outcomes that benefit men and women.

Linked to the debate over the likelihood of women acting for women is the discussion over whether women behave differently politically, with many suggesting this to be the case (see Norris 1996: Childs 2000 2004; Bochel and Briggs 2000; Mackay 2001; Sapiro 1998; Childs and Withney 2004). It is often argued that women are more compassionate and prefer collaboration and discussion to confrontational approaches (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Norris 1996; Bochel and Briggs 2000; Lovenduski 2012). Studies have also shown that female MPs tend to be more liberal than male MPs (Childs and Withney 2004: 552; Jelen et al. 1994).

However, it has also been suggested that there is little difference in behaviour between male and female MPs (Childs and Krook 2009; Witt, Paget and Matthews 1994). Bird (2003: 28) for example, argues that generalisations do not account for figures like Margaret Thatcher. The lack of behavioural difference may be due to the feeling that the
norms of legislative institutions create a bias towards stereotypical masculine behaviors with standard practices often maintaining traditional gender roles (see Norris 1996; Lovenduski 2012; Childs and Withney 2004: Childs 2004; Bird 2005; Childs and Krook 2009; Krook and Mackay 2010). Some women MPs believe the style of the House of Commons is not conducive to a ‘feminised’ way of working (Childs 2004: 3), which can make it more difficult for women to integrate their views into public policy-making (Carroll 2001).

‘Women’s issues’ and perspectives

Debates on ‘women’s issues’ show that there is no clear set of issues and that women and women’s representatives tend to identify with such issues to varying degrees. Lovenduski (1997: 708) separates ‘women’s issues’ from women’s perspectives concluding that female representatives may have views and perspectives on all issues across the political spectrum, in contrast to the idea of women’s issues which are issues that mainly effect women. Interviews by Bochel and Briggs (2000) provided evidence supportive of a ‘woman’s perspective’. Although some respondents stated the importance of promoting women’s issues, others feared they would be marginalised for doing so.

A considerable amount of research on women’s representation has argued the case for the existence of ‘women’s issues’, though definitions and interpretations of what those issues tend to vary. One definition states that the term ‘women’s issues’ “usually refers to public concerns that impinge primarily on the private (especially domestic) sphere of social life and particularly those values associated with the children and nurturance” (Sapiro 1998: 165). Some authors have focused their idea of ‘women’s issues’ on concerns affecting women’s everyday lives (Swers 2002) or those relating to the changing roles and opportunities for women (Dodson and Carroll 1991). Women’s interests may be gauged against a number of indicators, such as the current priorities of women’s movements (Celis 2006) and policy outcomes (O’Reagan 2000; Bratton and Ray 2002; Bratton 2005; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005).

Norris (1996: 92) states that a distinct set of women's issues is best explained using a sociological rationale. This can help describing the ways in which men's and women's
lives differ whilst accounting for structural differences such as the division of labour, in education and those with responsibilities of care. These differences then provide a basis for the assumption that women have a distinctive perspective on issues ranging from more obviously gendered policy issues such as women’s health care and nursery places to issues like public transport. It can be argued that despite changes regarding the division of labour in the home and work place, there are still aspects of domestic life and public policy which affect women disproportionately (Banyard 2011; UK Government 2011; Sapiro 1998). Several reports have for example claimed that women have suffered disproportionately as a result of recent austerity cuts (see Fawcett Society 2012: 5; Browne 2011; Women’s Resource Centre 2012).

Obviously, not all female representatives have a feminist agenda or are concerned with, what are often considered to be ‘women’s issues’ (Brunsbach 2011). A survey conducted with Canadian female mayors for example, found that 71% rejected the idea of female political representation. However, the author concluded that most of the interviewed mayors, despite rejecting the idea of acting as representatives for their sex/gender, admitted that there were structural as well as societal problems that women (including themselves) faced in 1990s Canadian society (Tremblay 1996). Many authors believe that women have a common interest, yet there is recognition that this may not translate to a consciousness of this common interest (Diamond and Hartsock 1998: 194; Phillips 1998).

As indicated above, the use of the term ‘women’s issues’ poses several difficulties and the intention of this paper is not to emphasis the idea of a separate set of ‘women-only’ issues. There has been significant discussion as to how this categorisation by identity may reinforce traditional gender roles, emphasising some differences whilst overlooking others, that they are exclusionary or force analytical inconsistencies (Diamond and Hartsock 1998; Carroll 2001; Childs and Krook 2009). However, we still find this frame of analysis useful and the purpose of using the idea of ‘women’s issues’ and perspectives is to test how these issues are currently viewed in parliament by both men and women compared to when there was an initial, more substantial, increase in women MPs. In fact, Philips (1998: 234) asks “if there is no clearly agreed and
recognised ‘women’s interest’, does it really matter if the representatives are predominantly men?”

Methodology

The nature of representation, be it substantive or descriptive, depends on which mechanism is used (see Bird 2003 and Banducci et al. 2004). The mechanism of focus in this paper is both written and oral parliamentary questions, asked in the House of Commons during the 1997-1998 and 2012-2013 sessions. The huge influx of female MPs in 1997, which gave a total of 101 Labour women, led to the expectation of a ‘feminised difference’, i.e. a greater priority given to women’s concerns (Childs and Withney 2004: 552). However, what followed was significant criticism of Labour’s women MPs who were often presented as failing women with the prominent example of the lack of rebellion against lone-parent benefit reductions (Cowley and Childs 2003). By analysing parliamentary questions, this paper contributes to testing whether a ‘feminised difference’ has been made to parliament over a greater period of time.

Parliamentary questions may be asked in oral and written form. Oral questions that are chosen by ballot (representing a fraction of those submitted) are asked of Ministers in the House of Commons during designated sessions and may be followed up by supplementary questions. The majority of questions are submitted as written questions with over 20,000 being asked per parliamentary session. Written questions are seen as a quick and value for money option, costing significantly less than other mechanisms (the average question cost £149 as of December 2008 – Hansard 2008). Questions are submitted for a wide variety of reasons such as maintaining government accountability, influencing or criticising policy or putting forward the concerns of interest groups and constituents. The effectiveness of questions is debatable. A Procedure Committee survey found that 60% of Members believed written questions were an effective way of bringing information into the public domain, though 30% were dissatisfied with the quality of the answers (House of Commons 2002).

Previous empirical research with a focus on parliamentary questions and issues of representation has shown an increased likelihood of ethnic minorities and women asking questions on issues that are considered to be related to their specific concerns.
Saalfeld (2011) has looked at the use of questions as representative instruments for black and ethnic representatives showing that representatives with a visible minority status were asking a significantly higher number of questions of issues of ethnic diversity and equality. Bird's (2005) work, examined parliamentary questions in order to identify political issues and their relation to gender. She found that MPs appeared to share an understanding of a set of issues associated with women and that female MPs asked questions of a wider range of departments than men, including certain policy areas often considered to be masculine.

This paper will examine the levels of questioning by MPs on a selection of issues commonly associated with ‘women’s issues’ and perspectives. The selected issues were chosen with great consideration. Issues chosen we deemed to be some of those still closely associated with the idea of ‘women’s issues’, particularly those highlighted by findings in earlier literature. For example, research on questions by Bird (2005: 367) showed that employment, domestic violence, political representation and health were the most frequently addressed issues by women MPs. Similarly women MPs in Finland and Norway demonstrated that they were more likely to ask parliamentary questions related to issues such health, reproduction, family, while men were more likely to ask questions on productive aspects like energy and labour (Norris 1996: 93). Childs and Withney (2004: 553) found that EDMs on VAT on sanitary products, Mike Tyson, domestic violence and right to breastfeed in the House of Commons were disproportionately signed by women and demonstrated Labour’s women MPs acting collectively.

The seven selected terms analysed in this paper are ‘women’s rights’, ‘abortion’, ‘women’s representation’, ‘women in politics’, ‘equal opportunities’, ‘gender equality’ and ‘domestic violence.’ Questions were selected that contained these terms in the question, demonstrating an interest in the issue therefore, supplementaries to oral questions were not included. We acknowledge that our terms do not include all issues of interest to women or all those questions that may show some interest in women’s issues or perspectives, however, the inclusion of several topics which are generally considered by the results of previous literature to be of greater interest to women MPs than male MPs should allow us to gauge interest in the issues.
**Preliminary Results**

Our preliminary analysis shows a substantial increase in questions which are concerned with ‘women’s issues’ and perspectives. Our search for a selection of key terms in written and oral questions during the 1997 - 1998 session resulted in only 23 relevant results. However, the same search terms resulted in 221 relevant questions that were asked in the 2012 – 2013 session. There is thus evidence for a significant increase in the interest in these issues, possibly reflecting a more general public debate and awareness of these topics. About three-quarters of the questions asked in the 1997-1998 session were prompted by events and therefore the result of external stimuli. Many questions referred to new directives on aspects of employment such as part-time work and getting more women on executive boards. Several referred to upcoming events at the UN and the EU. Those that appear not to be prompted by external stimuli were largely asking about the issue of violence against women and the number or involvement of women in parliament. Two questions asked specifically how women’s interests would be taken into account in each Government Department and two inquired about steps that may be taken to encourage the greater involvement of women in elected politics. Of the 26 questions asked, three were asked by different male MPs, whilst 21 of the 23 questions asked by women (asked by 19 different questioners), were asked by women in the Labour Party, which supports Childs and Withney’s (2004) analysis that Labour women were acting for women, despite criticism at the time.

26 of the 34 different female questioners in the 2012-2013 session were Labour party members (perhaps showing that they are still more likely to act for women) with only seven questioners from the Conservative party, one question from the Liberal Democrats and six questions from the only Green party MP. When looking at female questioners who asked four or more questions on the chosen topics (of which there were 10: 8 Labour, 1 Conservative and 1 Green Party member), three asked questions on a wide variety of subjects affecting women, one asked a variety of questions affecting women in the developing world, while the other six asked all their questions on one topic. These included domestic violence (2 questioners), abortion (2 questioners), issues around maternity leave (1 questioner), and Afghanistan (1 questioner). This shows a fairly even split in those showing an interest in one particular issue affecting women and those with a more general interest.
Of the 63 male questioners in the 2012-2013 session there was a more even split in numbers, with 32 different questioners from the Labour party and 25 from the Conservatives, 4 from the Liberal Democrats and 2 from the Democratic Unionist Party. When applying the same analysis to those asking four or more questions, which included three Labour MPs and three Conservative MPs, it provided a similar result. Three MPs asked a variety of questions, one asked questions on Egypt and Pakistan, while three asked a series of questions on domestic violence.

During the 2012-2013 session there were some search terms which showed a more obvious increase in interest than others: domestic violence (7 to 96), gender quality (1 to 27), women’s rights (4 to 67) and abortion (2 to 47). Questions on women’s representation and equal opportunities had very similar numbers or had fewer questions than those asked in the 1997-1998 session.

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<tr>
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<th>questions by female MPS</th>
<th>questions by male MPS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1997-1998</strong></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>87.0%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2012-2013</strong></td>
<td>111</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.2%</td>
<td>49.8%</td>
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Our analysis also shows that, whereas during the 1997-1998 session questions on ‘women’s issues’ were predominantly asked by women (almost 90%), the divide between questions asked by men and women during the 2012-2013 session was almost exactly even. However, this does not mean that the questions asked by male and female MPs are proportionally equal. Proportionately, women make up less than a quarter of MPs and our figures support earlier studies (Skard and Haavio-Mannila 1985; Lovenduski and Norris 2003), showing that women remain more likely to ask questions on ‘women’s issues’. However, it appears that that some ‘women’s issues’ have recently had more political attention from MPs of both sexes. Each topic also had a fairly even split between male and female questioners and little difference in gender between those asking questions on the UK or abroad.
‘Women’s rights’

The increased attention is most obvious when studying the results for the search term ‘women’s rights’. Whereas studies in the 1990s (e.g. Norris 1996; Thomas 1994; Dobson and Carroll 1991; Thomas and Welch 1991; Reingold 1992) showed that around this time “women proved [to be] consistently more strongly in favour of women’s rights” (Norris 1996: 95), our research suggests that during the 2012-2013 session the issue of women’s rights has become more widely questioned by both men and women. In fact, our results for the search term ‘women’s rights’ show that more men asked written and oral questions about the topic than women.

Interestingly, our results for the 2012-2013 session show that MPs (of both sexes equally) are no longer just concerned with women’s rights in Britain. On the contrary, it can be observed that 82% of the questions which triggered a discussion on women’s rights actually dealt with the interests of women outside the country. The questions focusing on other countries, including Somalia (2), Mali (2), Colombia, Burma, Sudan, Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, Bangladesh (2) and several on Pakistan, covered a wide variety of issues but common topics included sexual violence, the effectiveness of overseas’ aid and access to health and education. There were a larger number of questions relating to India, particularly the New Delhi rape case and 18 questions on Afghanistan, mainly concerned with the adequate representation of women and access to health and education. Those questioning domestic issues were also varied but included several questions on family planning, pensions, discrimination of pregnant women and maternity leave. Most of the questions in this category were prompted by events or pieces of legislation and raises questions concerning the role of external stimuli. The Delhi rape case, for example, achieved substantial media coverage over a longer period of time. Future research could assess how such external stimuli impacts upon the public consciousness regarding these issues in Britain and abroad and how this impacts upon political discussion and decision making. Research of other mechanisms may help to confirm how much long-running interest in these issues there is, or whether interest in these issues is rather short-term prompted by external events.

Our observation that more than three quarters of the questions on women’s rights were concerned with women abroad raises the questions whether the political
representatives of the British electorate are more concerned about women’s rights abroad, and, if this development is a result of improvements made in regard to women’s rights at home? Our observation also suggests that what other authors defined as ‘women’s issues’ seems to be space and time bound. It could be argued that issues which are important for women change over time and are dependent on the geo-political situation of these women.

| Table 3: Relevant Questions relating to Women’s Rights in 1997-1998 and 2012-2013 |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| RELEVANT QUESTIONS                     | 97 to 98        | 12 to 13        |
| ASKED BY MEN                           | 0               | 31              |
| ASKED BY WOMEN                         | 4               | 36              |
| % MEN                                  | 0.00            | 46.27           |
| % WOMEN                                | 100.00          | 53.73           |
| NUMBER OF MEN ASKING QUESTION          | 0               | 25              |
| NUMBER OF WOMEN ASKING QUESTION        | 4               | 18              |
| RELATED TO WOMEN IN THE UK             | 4               | 12              |
| RELATED TO WOMEN ABROAD               | 0               | 55              |

The focus on women’s rights abroad led us to a broader analysis of interest in these issues in Britain and abroad. When analysing our data set we observed that during the 1997 - 1998 session only 4.5% of questions can be clearly linked to women abroad. During the 2012 - 2013 this increased to one third (33.5%) of all the questions asked. The gender distribution of those MPs who asked questions about women abroad is even, just like the total set of relevant questions in our data collection. Generally, our results thus indicate that MPs are not just more concerned about women’s issues more generally, but, they are increasingly interested in the problems of women abroad.

This generalisation can however not be upheld with a case by case analysis of the different search terms. The data obtained from our search for ‘gender equality’ for example, showed an even split in questions on women abroad and in Britain in the 2012 – 2013 session. The 1997-1998 session had only one question asked on this topic, and this question was concerned with the equality of gender in Britain. Despite the fact that gender equality has become much more talked about in parliamentary questions (and
increase from 1 to 27 questions) it is difficult to gauge if gender equality is now more or less of an issue for women in Britain as the data for the 1997 – 1998 session is too scarce.

Another search term, namely ‘domestic violence’ in the 2012-2013 session resulted in 91.7% of questions relating to domestic violence in Britain. This is in line with the results from the 1997-1998 session, when all of the questions were concerned with domestic violence in Britain. The issue of domestic violence is thus much more widely questioned than 20 years ago (seven questions between 1997 and 1998 versus 96 questions in 2012-2013) but it appears that it remains an issue that is predominantly discussed in relation to British society.

Who's asking?
Despite some general common trends, there are thus some major differences amongst issues that were previously defined as ‘women’s issues’. Our preliminary analysis supports the claim that all of these are now discussed much more widely in the House of Commons. Our analysis also provides evidence to suggest that male MPs are now much more likely to raise concern for these issues via parliamentary questions than they were 15 years ago. It can thus be argued that a lot of these issues have shifted towards a more mainstreamed discussion. On the other hand, our analysis suggests that the discussions on some issues are no longer just concerned with gender specific problems and inequalities that can be found in British society. Questions on women’s rights for example are mainly concerned with women abroad. On the other hand, questions that deal with issues such as domestic violence are still predominantly concerned with the situation at home.

Here it needs to be noted that even though 50% (111) of the questions were asked by (63 different) men, male MPs still constitute 78% of all MPs. Thus, proportionally speaking, men are still asking less questions that result in a discussion of gender issues than women. It also needs to be noted that even though 110 questions were asked by women, only 35 women asked these questions, therefore, half of the number of male questioners. This suggests that some women take it upon themselves to be the proponents of issues which predominantly deal with ‘women’s issues’ and perspectives.
To contrast this: 1.68 questions per male MP versus 3.24 questions per female MP¹. This fits with an explanation put forward by Bratton (2005) who argued that an increase in the number of women MPs may influence male MPs behavior resulting more attention on ‘women’s issues’ and perspectives from both men and women.

The lower number of women asking questions does not demonstrate collective action but supports the idea that the presence of women who are keen to pursue and promote ‘women’s issues’ is perhaps more important than merely the presence of a larger number of women (see Kanter 1977 and Childs and Krook 2009). There are a number of reasons women representatives may choose not to promote women’s interests. One suggested reason is the potential to be pigeonholed (Bird 2004; Bochel and Briggs 2000; Childs 2000). Others have claimed that women focusing on gender-specific problems may appear to represent a narrow set of interests (Stoper 1977). Previous work analysing parliamentary questions and intelligence has shown that despite a significant number of questions on a topic, they may only be asked by a small number of interested members, proactive on a particular issue (Bochel, Defty and Kirkpatrick forthcoming). This may be the case with women who asked questions but it does not appear to be the case with questions asked by men. Our results suggest that questions asked by male MPs were more evenly spread amongst the men who asked them.

Childs and Withney’s research showed that Labour women MPs were behaving differently to men with regards to the signing of EDMs showing they were acting for women in the 1997-1998 session. Our analysis of questions asked in the 1997-1998 session also clearly shows that women were at least more likely than men to act for women asking the majority of questions on the selected issues. Although, in the 2012-2013 session less women asked questions on these topics than men, as a proportion of MPs they were far more proactive.

¹ Of those MPs who asked questions that led to a relevant result.
Conclusions

After over 15 years of a more significant number of women MPs in the House of Commons, this paper sought to test whether the increase in female MPs has really led to an increased discussion of gender-specific issues. It has examined the levels of questioning by MPs on a selection of issues commonly associated with ‘women’s issues’ and perspectives. Our preliminary analysis supports the claim that the majority of these are discussed much more widely in the House of Commons with a larger number of women MPs. Our analysis also provides evidence to suggest that, even though still less likely than female MPs, male MPs are now much more likely to raise concern for these issues via parliamentary questions than they were 15 years ago. It can thus be argued that a lot of these issues have shifted towards a more mainstreamed discussion. On the other hand, it appears as if the discussions on some issues are no longer just concerned with gender specific problems and inequalities that can be found in British society. Questions on women’s rights for example are mainly concerned with women abroad. However, some questions that deal with issues such as domestic violence are still predominantly concerned with the situation at home. This suggests that ‘women’s issues’ seems to be space and time bound and that they change over time and are depended on the geo-political situation of these women. On the other hand, it raises the question on the role of external stimuli when it comes to the ‘popularity’ of certain gender specific discussion points. Future research could assess how such external stimuli impacts upon the public consciousness regarding these issues in Britain and abroad and how this impacts upon political discussion and decision making. Research of other mechanisms may help to confirm how much long-running interest in these issues there is, or whether interest in these issues is rather short-term prompted by external events.
References


