

**The descriptive political representation of women in Scottish Local Government:
barriers to candidature**

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Karen Johnston (Glasgow Caledonian University) and Donna Elliott (Glasgow University)

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Abstract

It is well-documented the political and structural barriers to female descriptive representation in politics and legislatures (see Lovenduski, 2005). Women remain under-represented at every level of government in the UK (Home Office, 2011). This paper adds to the body of research by exploring the political representation of women at local government level. In particular the locus of Scottish local government adds to the debate where single transferable voting, introduced in 2007 as a form of proportional representation, was supposed to increase the number of female councillors yet women remain under-represented (Kenny and Mackay, 2012). The research involved a survey of councillors in three local authorities, which represented the median in terms of the percentage of female councillors in Scotland, as well as secretaries of political parties and female political activists. The research findings suggest that the main reason for the lack of descriptive representation of women in Scottish local government is the incompatibilities of their councillor role with that of caring and family roles. Thus, the paper will argue that domestic role incompatibilities are a function of party political institutional barriers and suggests ways to address the under-representation of women in political life.

Introduction

Although there has been a steady increase in the level of female Scottish councillors, women's representation remains less than 25% of all councillor positions (Kenny and Mackay, 2012). In Scottish local government the vast majority (93.75%) of council leaders are male (COSLA, 2013). The under-representation of women in local councils is despite the fact that Scotland introduced a system of proportional representation with single transferable voting (PR-STV) which was supposed to, since 2007, rejuvenate local politics and provide new opportunities for women to be selected and elected (Kenny and MacKay, 2012). The 2012 Scottish local authority elections saw 297 (24.3%) women elected as councillors; the largest number since current councils were established in 1995 (Denver, Bochel and Steven, 2012:3). However, as Giddy (2000:20) states that parity of representation should be a 'goal for all local authorities', at the present rate, this goal seems to be rather distant.

Moreover, the low number of women councillors has a 'knock-on effect' throughout levels of political representation (Russell, Lovenduski and Stephenson, 2002:23) in that the low numbers of women councillors stifle the 'vertical ladder of recruitment' from local government to Westminster (Lambe et al, 2004:2). As observed 28.68% of MSPs are, or have been, local councillors (Scottish Government, 2014). Arguably, the paucity of female representation in local government has a detrimental effect on their political career trajectories in other legislative assemblies.

The research therefore focussed on an under-researched area of female representation in local government (for the exceptions see Briggs, 2000:63; Kenny and Mackay, 2012; Denver, Bochel and Steven, 2012). It involved quantitative and qualitative research on the descriptive representation of women in Scottish local government, female political activism, and the barriers to increased female representation at councillor level. The research therefore

provides an analysis of women's participation in politics using data gathered from multiple-sources: secondary data, existing local councillors; local branch secretaries of political parties, and female party members. The research not only explores female descriptive representation, but attempts to understand the paucity of women into politically representative roles despite their increased political activism and civic engagement at local level. According to Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell (2004:23) there is relationship between levels of women's political activism and the proportion of female political representation. Thus, the research explores women's political activity at the Scottish local level in order to understand the low female political representation at local government level.

Furthermore, political parties are the primary source of recruitment to elected office, and as such Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell (2004:13) claim that the failure of women to be equally active within political parties means that they may not 'acquire the civic skills, social networks, and political experiences' that lead to elected office. Similarly, Borisjuk, Rallings and Thrasher (2007:197) argue that 'without knowing what goes on inside local parties...it is difficult to design policies that could overcome women's under-representation'. Thus, by conducting research with local political party branches, local councillors, and female members of local parties, this research aims to investigate whether female party members candidature is affected by an activism and knowledge gap.

Barriers to Female Political Representation

There have been a number of studies on the under-representation of women in political life (see for example Lovenduski, 2005; Kittilson, 2006; Krook, 2010; McBride and Mazur, 2010) with explanations for the paucity of female political representation. Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell (2004:33) have provided four main categorical barriers to women's political activism, and therefore their likelihood to stand for election, which include structural, cultural, agency, and institutional barriers. Structural barriers concern the lack of resources which facilitate civic participation such as time, education and income (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004). Cultural barriers include motivational attitudes that attract people into public affairs such as their sense of political efficacy, confidence, and citizenship duty (ibid). Agency barriers refer to the role of mobilising organisations such as churches and unions, and also the role of the media and informal social networks (ibid). Institutional barriers related to the structure, setting, the practical rules of 'the game', and the context of electoral choices set by the parties, candidates, and the electoral procedures (ibid).

Rao's (2005) study of over 1000 councillor found that 57% of the female councillors viewed time conflict between 'home and political affairs' as 'fairly stressful'. The pressure of time constraints makes it difficult for women councillors to maintain a favourable work-life balance (Rao, 2005:323). Given the traditional caring and domestic roles assumed by women, reconciling work with domestic roles becomes a barrier to increase female representation in institutions (Hakim, 2004; Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport, 2006). Thus, as Hills (1983:50) argues, there is unlikely to be significant increase in women's representation 'until the general concept of women's role changes'.

Financial resources, particularly income, are seen as another barrier to female representation. According to Linsley, Marie and Martin (2006:5) financial reasons are a 'major barrier' when women consider entering a political career. Many women considered it a financial strain and opportunity cost in terms of pursuing relatively higher forms of paid employment (ibid). Similarly, Giddy (2000:8) cites the 'small allowances' councillors receive as one of the

disincentives to women giving up paid employment opportunities to seek an elected role. Although the Scottish Government has since 2007 introduced salaries for elected members, the basic salary of £16,234 (Scottish Government, 2013), it is arguable whether this is a sufficient financial incentive to encourage diverse range of potential candidates.

Although educational attainment is cited as a barrier to female political candidature, this explanation may not necessarily hold true as Maloney (2008:17) found that 55.4% of female councillors, compared to 44.6% of male councillors, held a degree or equivalent qualifications. Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell (2004:9) argue that there are cultural barriers as 'women have a weaker sense of political efficacy than men'. Fox and Lawless (2004:270) also found that of the males and females who were qualified for political office, 26% of men as opposed to 14% of women thought of themselves as 'very qualified' to run for office. Arguably, this perceptual issue is explained by politics often seen as a male domain (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, 1995). According to Linsley, Marie and Martin (2006:9) '...the image that politics is an exclusive realm for men and discourages women from seeing themselves as politicians'. Media perpetuates this perception. For example a study by Loughborough University showed that in the run-up to the 2005 UK general election 86.3% of all media content and images were of male political actors (Campbell and Lovenduski, 2005:847). Medial portrayal and the under-representation of women in political life reinforce gender stereotyping of politics as a masculine domain.

The institutional barriers which women face relate mostly to intra-party prejudicial treatment including gender discrimination (Lovenduski, 2005); political parties favouring male candidates; placing women candidates in unwinnable seats (Lovenduski, 1997:709); preferences for a candidate who 'fits the public's stereotype of a politician' (Evans, 2005:593); to a biased belief that voters 'do not like' female candidates (Borisjuk, Rallings and Thrasher, 2007:194). However, an analysis of data from local elections between 1973 and 2003 concludes that the electorate do not appear to have 'expressed any preference towards councillors on the basis of their sex' (Borisjuk, Rallings and Thrasher, 2007:194). Political parties are one of the 'main conduits of political participation' (Norris, Lovenduski, and Campbell, 2004:18) which serve multiple functions within the democratic process, such as 'simplifying and structuring electoral choices; training and recruiting and selecting candidates; and articulating and aggregating disparate interests' (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:18). Thus, the extent to which each individual party helps or hinders the progress of potential women candidates within their own organisation is of crucial importance toward the goal of gender equality in representation.

Of importance is the selection of women party members to become candidates for election. Childs, Lovenduski and Campbell (2005:26) argue that it is not the supply of female candidates within parties that is the issue with regard to selection; rather it is the selection of female candidates to winnable seats. Without determined measures which will force political parties to allocate female candidates to winnable seats, it is argued that legislatures will continue to be dominated by males, not because they are 'better than women, but because selection processes make it difficult for women to secure nominations' (Childs, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2005:13). The then Labour government attempted to address this issue through the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidate) Act (2002). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive discussion of the Act but see Campbell and Lovenduski (2005) for an analysis.

A further barrier to female representation is what is termed an 'activism gap by gender' (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:7). According to Verba, Nie and Kim (1979), based

on a study covering seven countries, 'in all societies, for which we have data, sex is related to political activism; men are more active than women'. Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell (2004:33) argue that the activism gap also varies somewhat depending on the type of activity examined, and they distinguish between four main dimensions of political participation: voting; campaign-oriented; cause-oriented; and civic-oriented. In electoral turnout, women traditionally were lower but this trend has diminished since 1979 and there is evidence to suggest the numbers are reversed (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:7). Men are however more active than women in campaign-oriented activities, party membership, party donations and working for a party (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:8). Yet women were found to be equally or more engaged in cause-oriented activities such as signing a petition or boycotting a product (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:21). Furthermore, women were also found to be just as likely as men to participate in legal or illegal demonstrations (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:8).

In terms of civic-oriented activity Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell (2004:61) found that women 'lag behind' men in belonging to voluntary associations such as hobby groups, sports clubs and professional associations. Membership of such voluntary associations is said to represent an important aspect of social capital (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:62). However, studies neglect to include civic activities and engagement such as parent groups, parent-teachers associations, school boards and charitable organisations which are more likely to involve women. This may partly be explained by social construction of gender roles (Brickell, 2006). For example Constantini (1990:747) suggests that the gender imbalance in activity levels may be due, in part, to the 'acceptance of traditional understandings of gender roles vis-à-vis politics'. Constantini (1990:747) adds that the duties associated with the role prescribed to women; those associated with 'homemaking', and 'motherhood' means that women may not have the 'time or energy to pursue political activities'. This may explain why married men were 'significantly more likely' than married women to participate in political activities (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:8). The social constructionism of gender roles could explain the lack of efficacy women show in politics, leading Rao (2005:324) to conclude that women may have less self-assurance, and are 'therefore less likely to offer themselves for public office'. Rao found that 58% of female councillors were 'reluctant to put themselves forward', and 'do not wish to compete' with their male colleagues for leadership roles (Rao, 2005:324). This unwillingness to compete with male peers may be symptomatic of the socialisation of girls to assume stereotypical feminine roles and discouraged from asserting themselves (see Brickell, 2006).

The next section of the paper therefore seeks to explore the barriers to female political life and representation as councillors in Scottish local government.

Research Method

The research involved a mixed method approach of quantitative and qualitative data from primary and secondary sources. Secondary data was collected from the Scottish Government, Convention for Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Improvement Service, and Electoral Commission. Data was collected from elected councillors; statistics from local branch secretaries of political parties; and information gathered from women who are active in political parties.

The first phase of the research involved a survey of female representation in Scottish local authorities (N=32). The second phase of the research was to conduct an in-depth analysis of local authorities in median range based on the survey of female representation. Three local

authorities in the median range were selected to avoid bias in terms of extreme outliers of representation. In other words, by conducting research with the selected local authorities with a median female representation as a sample (highlighted in the Figure 1 below) the effect of outliers such as Inverclyde (5%) and East Dunbartonshire (33.8%) were avoided (see Denver, Bochel and Steven, 2012:3).

Figure 1: Female Representation in Scottish Local Authorities

Local Authority	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
% Female Councillors	5	8.7	9.5	9.6	13.6	16.6	17	17.6	18.3	20	20.7	20.2	21.2	22.2	22.7	24.4	25	25.8	26.6	26.6	26.9	27.2	27.5	27.5	27.7	27.9	28.2	29.1	30	30.4	32.8	33.8

The in-depth analysis involved an online survey, sent to male and female councillors, in the three sampled areas. The aim was to identify commonalities and variances in barriers to female vis-à-vis male representation since most research tends to survey women only (for example Childs, 2004; Rao, 2005; Evans, 2008). The survey included Likert scale questions and open questions with all councillors contacted through their official local authority email address. In total 94 councillors were sampled, 49 of which responded with a response rate of 52.1%.

The next phase of the research involved an online survey which was sent to the local branch secretaries of the main political parties in Scotland (Scottish Conservatives; Scottish Green Party; Scottish Labour Party; Scottish Liberal Democrats; and the Scottish National Party). In total four branch secretaries responded to the survey. The aim was to shed some light on the number of women who are active in party politics at local level. This allowed observations to be made on the extent to which the number of politically active women was reflected in the number of women who are elected to Scottish local government. The cross-party nature of this phase of the research avoided bias and provided insights on the political activism of women in each party.

The final phase of the research involved interviews with women in local authorities who were active within political parties, but who had never stood for or been elected to office. This is a unique feature of the research as these women remain under-researched. Arguably, by interviewing politically active women who have never been elected provided some insights. This phase of the research involved purposive sampling with branch secretaries proposing interviewees. This sampling was unavoidable as there was no other means to obtain participants for interviews who were active in the political party but never stood for or been elected to office. Potential bias was avoided with cross-party participation on a voluntary and confidential basis. The interview stage involved a qualitative semi-structured questionnaire. Of the four main political parties, three politically active women were interviewed. This is a unique feature of the research in that women, politically active, but never stood or been elected were interviewed. Furthermore, the mixed-method and phased approach of councillor surveys, cross-party survey and interviews with active female party members allowed for a rich collection and triangulation of data.

Findings

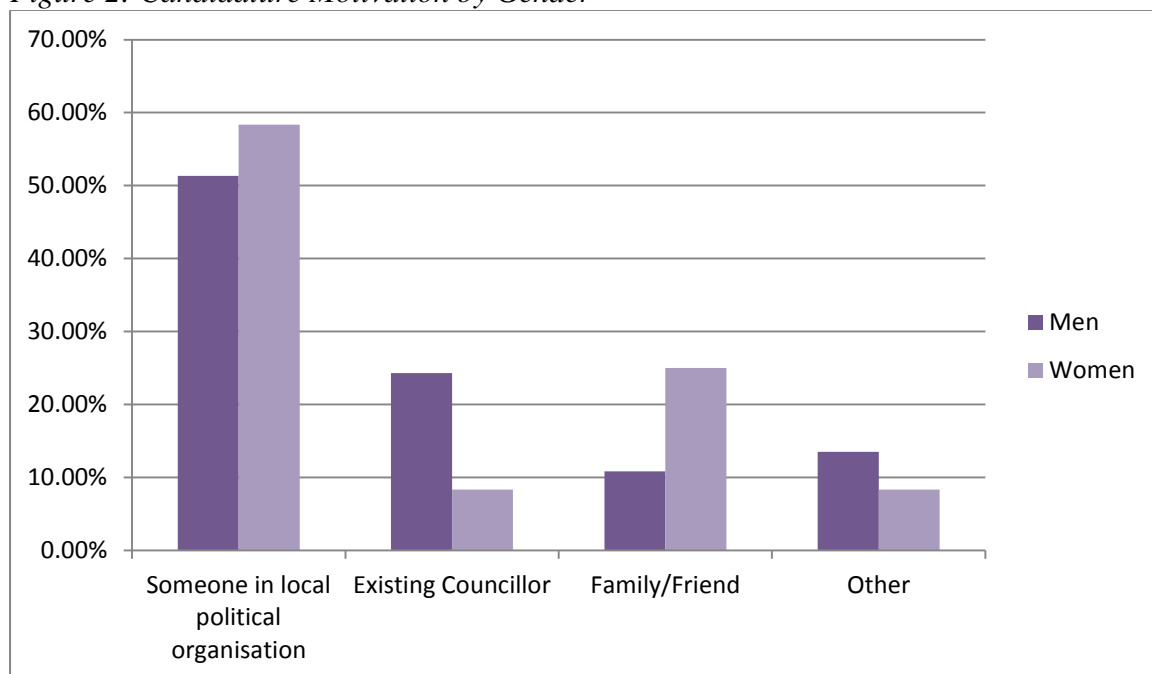
Councillor Survey

Of the 49 councillors who responded, 37 were male (75.51%), and 12 were female (24.48%). Thus, reflecting overall population percentage of female councillors (24.22%) in Scotland (COSLA, 2014). The gender breakdown of respondents from each local authority sampled was: Local Authority A, 12 male councillors (80%) and 3 female councillors (20%); Local Authority B, 14 male councillors (82.35%) and 3 female councillors (17.65%); Local Authority C, 11 male councillors (64.7%) and 6 female councillors (35.3%). The party political disaggregation is as follows: 20 Scottish National Party (40.81%); 14 Scottish Labour Party (28.57%); 7 Scottish Conservative Party (14.28%); 5 Scottish Liberal Democrats (10.2%); 1 Scottish Green Party (2.04%); 1 independent (2.04%); and 1 councillor (2.04%) who opted not to disclose their party affiliation.

The main concerns when deciding to run for elected office included: maintaining a work-life balance (39.62%); work commitments (39.62%); childcare (3.77%); other care commitments (3.77%). A disaggregation by gender reveals that female councillors concerns were: maintaining a work-life balance (46.15%); work commitments (23.07%); childcare (15.38%); other caring responsibilities (7.69%); other response (7.69%). Male councillor responses were: work commitments (50%); maintaining a work-life balance (47.22%); other caring responsibilities (5.55%); child care (0%).

Most councillors decided to stand for election after being encouraged by the local political party (53.06%). To lesser extent potential candidates were encouraged by an existing councillor (20.4%); family/friend (14.28%); and by 'others' (12.24%). A disaggregation of the data by gender reveals an interesting pattern where women, relative to men, were encouraged to stand for election by the local political party and family members (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Candidature Motivation by Gender



In terms of employment almost a quarter of the councillors sampled are in full-time employment. A disaggregation of the data by gender reveals that men are far more likely to be in full-time employment whilst acting as a local councillor than women (27.02%

compared to 16.66%). Female councillors are shown to be more likely to be retired than their male council colleagues (41.66% compared with 21.62%).

Councillors were asked whether they supported current equality measures as a means of diversifying elected legislatures at national and local levels. The responses, by gender are tabled below.

Table 1: Views on Equality Measures

Legislature	Women in Favour	Women Against	Men in Favour	Men Against	Overall in Favour	Overall Against
At National level	58.33%	33.33%	54.05%	37.83%	55.10%	36.73%
At Local level	50.00%	25.00%	43.24%	40.54%	44.90%	36.73%
Total	54.16%	29.16%	48.60%	39.18%	50.00%	36.73%

The responses to the question on barriers to female representation in politics were as follows: 55.4% commitments to ‘children and/or family’; 10.7% politics as being ‘male dominated’; 8.9% thought that ‘confidence’ was an issue; 7.5% insufficient salaries; 5.4% balancing work with council commitments; 1.8% thought women had less interest in politics; 1.8% community commitments could place demands on women; 1.8% time commitment of being a councillor was demanding; 1.8 felt that the lack of equality mechanisms was partly to blame; and 3.6% saw no barriers to women entering locally elected politics.

Political Party Branches

Research by Bochel, Denver and Stevens (2012) showed that there has been a slight increase in female candidates and elected councillors from 2007 to 2012 local elections (see Table 2). The Labour substantially increased female candidates from 2007 to 2012 while other parties had slight increases, but overall female representation in candidature and elected office remains below 25% (Bochel, Denver and Stevens, 2012).

Table 2: Percentage of women candidates and councillors (2007-12)

<i>Party</i>	<i>Candidates</i>		<i>Elected Councillors</i>	
	2007	2012	2007	2012
Conservative	25.3	26.0	25.9	24.3
Labour	20.3	27.2	17.5	25.9
Liberal Democrats	31.4	27.5	30.1	36.6
SNP	22.0	23.8	22.3	24.3
Independents	15.1	13.3	16.6	16.9
Greens	39.0	41.8	50.0	28.5
Others	20.1	19.5	28.6	0.0
Total	22.8	23.4	21.8	24.3

Source: Bochel, Denver and Stevens (2012)

The research therefore involved a survey of political party local branch to explore the female membership and activism within the local party branch given findings of the Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell (2004) research. The survey was sent to branch secretaries who

revealed that 38% of branch members are women. Over the past 12 months, 41.3% of members who have attended branch meetings have been women. The number of women reported by branch secretaries as having been active campaigners in the previous 12 months was on average 45%. On average, the number of women occupying committee positions across the local branches was 32%. Most local political party branch meetings were held in late evenings (e.g. 7pm) in a local pub. In political party A there were 9 committee positions with 3 women holding the position of Convenor, Secretary and Women's Officer; political party B there were 5 committee positions with one woman holding a committee position as chair; political party C had 8 committee positions with 5 women holding the position of secretary, treasurer, organiser and women's officer; and in political party D there were 4 committee positions with one woman holding a committee position of chair.

Interviews

The women interviewed are all members of political parties, with length of membership ranging from 1 – 42 years. All have been active members since joining their respective parties, and have all held committee positions at branch level or higher. Two of the women interviewed have considered running for council although neither of them have, as yet, put themselves forward for selection. One women interviewee had stood in a council election a number of years ago and was unsuccessful in her attempt. She later admitted that it was a relief not to win as she had 'thought for an awful minute I was going to win' since the campaign and expectant councillor role demands was perceived to be demanding.

When asked what concerns prevented them from running for office, all of the women cited family responsibilities as a major contributory factor. One of the women ruled out standing for election at higher levels of government, but thought that it may be possible to combine being a local councillor with family life. Another interviewee mentioned that if she became a councillor, time with family members would be affected, further stating that she would consider it 'hypocritical to campaign for kid's parks, etc.' when her own children would be 'missing out on quality time' with her. Two interviewees voiced their concerns about the practicality of combining work, family and the duties of elected office. One interviewee stated that she had taken career breaks when each of her three children were young and did not feel she could do it again in order to become an elected official. Furthermore, as another interviewee observed that in later years it may be necessary to have a career break to look after elderly parents. The demands on an elected politician were mentioned by all of the interviewees as being an obstacle to standing for election. As one interviewee noted that as a politician, 'you don't get the weekend off' with another interviewee noting that as a local politician it is expected that you would be 'attending functions or holding surgeries' out-with normal business hours and at weekends. The unknown nature of what being a councillor may entail was highlighted by an interviewee who commented that as there was 'no job spec' for being a councillor, and therefore people may not be aware if they were able to meet the demands of the job or not.

Two interviewees stated that they were unfamiliar with the selection process of their respective political parties. As one interviewee stated, 'people should know about the procedure; it is not as difficult as you may think'. The other interviewee stated that she was aware of her party's selection procedure and thought it was 'pretty good', adding that 'if someone wanted to stand, they would be given the opportunity for selection.' All interviewees were encouraged to stand for election by their own political party branch and all were encouraged by both male and female party members. One interviewee stated that she

‘always tried to encourage women’, although she felt that ‘sometimes women put barriers up for themselves’.

All the interviewees stated that the wider political party was doing enough to encourage women to stand in local council elections with the interviewees highlighting programmes and training events for women held by their respective political parties.

Discussion

The main concern for all councillors appears to be maintaining a work-life balance. This was more of concern for female councillors when they decided to stand as candidates in local elections as opposed to their male counterparts who were more concerned with work commitments. This finding is consistent with Rao (2005) who argued that women come under greater pressure with regards to the conflict between ‘home and political affairs’ (Rao, 2005:324). The main concern for female councillors was that they were the primary carer which placed a demand on their domestic and political roles. None of the male councillors cited child care issues as an area of concern prior to becoming a candidate, whereas 15.38% of women listed this as a consideration. Arguably the sexual division of labour (Briggs, 2000:278) creates barriers to female political careers and aspirations.

Female councillors were twice more likely to be retirees than their male counterparts. This could be explained by the extant research where women may find it easier to balance the demands of their careers and political life with domestic roles in later years (see Rao, 2005; Hakim, 2004; Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport, 2006). More male than female councillors were in full-time employment as well as being a councillor, which may indicate the sexual division of labour with male councillors perhaps having more support in balancing work and domestic commitments in order to hold full-time employment as well as fulfil councillor and political party roles.

The majority of councillors were encouraged to stand for local elections through their local political party. However, this was more so the case for women (58.33%). The finding substantiates Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell (2004:18) argument that political parties are one of the main conduits of political participation. In contrast, the number of male (24.32%) compared to female (8.33%) councillors who were advised to run for office by an existing councillor highlights that social capital may exist between male political party members. There has been much research on the “old boys’ network” (see Carroll and Fox, 2013) which operate within politics and may explain why incumbent male councillors would approach a known male party member. There does appear to be gender gap in terms of women’s social capital with women participating more informally rather than engaging in formal politics and maximising the capital for candidature and political office (Lowndes, 2003). Women also appear to receive more support and encouragement from family and friends when deciding to stand for local elections. This support, together with local branch political party, may be more important for women than men particularly if family commitments are perceived to be a potential barrier.

Despite widespread acceptance that the under-representation of women is an issue which needs to be addressed, the use of equality measures in elections remains controversial for all respondents. Responses indicate that over half of female respondents were in favour of the use of equality measures (54.16%), while just under half of male respondents are in favour (48.6%). This cross-party research finds that there is, overall, a strong level of support for the

use of equality measures (50%) from elected politicians. The finding is consistent with extant research in this area with elected female politicians in favour of the use of equality measures (Evans, 2008:603).

The main barrier to increased elected female politicians appeared to be commitments to caring for children and family with many female councillors perceiving councillor roles and duties to be incompatible with family life and caring roles. Politics was considered to be a male dominated environment and was seen as a barrier to female political careers.

To a lesser extent confidence of women (7.14%) was seen as a barrier to elected office. Thus, self-confidence was not viewed as a major barrier and perhaps women have no 'weaker sense of political efficacy than men' (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:9). Also, financial resources, that is the relatively low rate of salary, was not deemed to be a major prohibiting factor to female candidature. Furthermore, all of the responses suggesting salary as a possible cause came from male councillors and does not support Linsley, Marie and Martin's (2006:5) view that financial considerations are the 'greatest barrier of all' for women entering politics.

The responses from local political party branches reveal that men are more likely to be party members than women (Lovenduski, 1996:7). Whilst the majority of party members were found to be male, there is still a considerable shortfall between the proportion of women party members (38%), and the proportion of women councillors in Scotland (24.22%) (COSLA, 2014). Furthermore, the number of active branch members, those that regularly attend meetings, was shown to be positively disproportionate to the number of female members (41.25% to 38%). In other words the number of attendees at meetings who are women is disproportionately higher than the number of women members. Thus, there are a higher proportion of women who actively participate in branch meetings. In addition female members (45%) were active campaigners in the 12 months. This finding to some extent supports the view a 'modest but significant activism gap' (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:21), but the research suggests that women are politically active within their local political parties.

The number of female members on branch committees equates to 38.5% of available positions and corresponds with the membership level of women. This suggests that women in committee positions are commensurate with the overall female membership. However, many party meetings were routinely held in pubs during the evening which is not necessarily conducive to family and caring roles. Family commitments may find midweek evenings prohibitive to becoming politically active within a party setting and may explain the reluctance of women to participate in party politics.

Interviewees revealed that a major dissuading factor in standing for local elections was that political and council duties in addition to work and family commitments would be demanding. The perceived amount of work councillors undertake, and the notion that much of it would involve evening meetings and weekend commitment was seen as a barrier. The interviewees were apprehensive about standing for political office given the perception that council duties would impinge on time with their family, particularly their children. As one interviewee stated, 'as a mother you can't do it, because you miss school plays, prize-giving, church services, sports days. You just can't do it'. Societal sexual division of labour and the social construction of gender roles is a major barrier to women pursuing a political career given the perception that they may not have 'time or energy to pursue political activities' (Constantini, 1990:747).

Interviewees were however in agreement that their respective political party did not pose any barrier to their political career aspirations. One interviewee stated that if ‘someone wanted to stand, they would be given the opportunity’. All interviewees stated that they received support from their local party office. The evidence suggests that if there is indeed ‘sex discrimination operating in the selection procedures of all the main parties’ (Campbell and Lovenduski, 2005:839) then female party members are seemingly unaware of it, or are unwilling to discuss it in relation to their own party. Given that small sample of interviewees, inferences are limited and there may be political loyalties underlying responses to questions of selection process. However, the number of female candidates standing for local government office has declined in successive local authority elections in Scotland since 2003 (Mackay and McAllister, 2013:11). This would suggest that there is an issue in the selection process, training, nurturing talent and succession planning of women as elected representatives. Indeed one interviewee had noted that although there is training programmes at national level these were often ‘not filtering down’ to the local level. Thus, if women are to be encouraged to participate in politics, it is argued that political parties need to take measures to ‘modernise the culture and practices of their organisations’ (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell, 2004:2). It was interesting to note that an interviewee considered that many practices of political parties in a local context had an ‘impact on the ability of women to participate’, adding that the standard meeting place in ‘the back of a pub’ was ‘not conducive, not only for women, but for disabled and certain ethnic groups’. The time and place of meetings being ‘rigid traditions’ was therefore heavily criticised as having a negative impact on women’s involvement with local party politics.

The research of female political activism and representation at Scottish local level showed that financial barriers, political efficacy and activism were not necessarily the main barriers to women. Rather the research showed that political party institutional culture was an impediment to women actively participating in political life. It is therefore suggested that political parties in efforts to increase female activism, candidature and representation as elected politicians; parties should modernise the institutional culture. Parties need to mainstream gender equality by considering the impact of party political activities on women. For example, what would be the impact on female party members if a meeting were held midweek, late evenings in a pub? The institutional culture of masculinity within political parties could be addressed through a suggested strategy of gender equality mainstream training of both male and female political party branch committees (see Miller, 2009). Political parties will have to consider how events, training, selection of candidates, meetings and events are accessible, and conducive to an equality and work-life balance agenda. There is also a need to increase the transparency and communication of the political party selection process. Furthermore, the perception of the councillor role being demanding and difficult to reconcile a work-life balance needs to be addressed by political parties such as mentorship by existing councillors of potential candidates. Although, the Scottish Improvement Service does have a councillor induction programme this could be extended to potential candidates. The institutional culture and political workplace of local government will also need to be examined with committee meetings and council business cognisant of work-life balance (see McKay, 2011) and implement the gender equality duty of the Equality Act (2010).

Conclusion

The research explored the under-representation of women in Scottish local councils. The paucity of female descriptive representation in local government represents a concern given

the introduction of PR-STV in Scotland which was supposed to create opportunities for increases representation of women in local councils (Kenny and MacKay, 2012).

A main concern and barrier, as identified by participants, to increased female political representation at local government was balancing the perceived demands of the role as councillor with that of family and caring commitments. Time poverty was therefore a dissuasive factor in candidature and standing for local elections. The demands of political office (e.g. surgeries, committee meetings, activities during unsocial hours, councillor roles, etc.) combined with domestic life was perceived to be difficult to reconcile. Indeed those incumbent female councillors were mostly retirees with more of an ability to have a work-life balance.

Self-confidence as an often cited barrier to female candidature was not found to hold true for this study. It may be more true that the cultural institutional barriers of political parties may inhibit female candidature. For example, traditional meeting times and places of political parties are not suited to the lifestyle of many women. This may also account for the 'activism gap'. The lack of activism within political parties may inhibit their social capital and opportunity to be identified as potential candidates. As Lovenduski (1996:3) suggests political parties are 'dominated' by masculinity. The traditional culture and practices of political parties may therefore be perceived by women as alienating and even hostile. As the evidence suggests, political parties are important in identifying and supporting potential candidates for elections. Although equality measure such as AWS is seen as a means of redressing the gender imbalance in political institutions it nevertheless remains a contentious issue. It is suggested that political parties as institutions address the cult of masculinity, nurture emergent female political talent and actively support women from local to sub-national and national levels.

Although the research is limited to Scottish local politics, it is suggested that larger scale research into the political activity and representation of women at local level be conducted throughout the UK with potential comparisons across the polities. This research nevertheless offers some insights into the candidature of local female political activists. Some research findings substantiated extant research such as the work-life balance being a major consideration and the culture of masculinity within political parties. There were also other interesting findings such as the political efficacy and financial considerations being less of a barrier to candidature. Political parties will however need to address declining rates of female candidates as well as political activism of a broader member base not only for its own sustainability but for the principles of representative democracy as well.

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