

Critical Mass, Deliberation and the Substantive Representation of Women: Evidence from the UK's Devolution Programme

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This article provides empirical evidence to support recent assertions that the substantive representation of women depends not only on the numbers of women elected representatives in national legislatures, but also who they are. In this case study of one of the UK's devolved legislatures, analysis was undertaken of the transcripts of 327 plenary debates held during the first term of the National Assembly for Wales, where women constituted 42 percent of elected members (1999–2003). The gender dynamics of political debate around key equality topics reveal that the link between descriptive and substantive representation of women is complex. When a 'critical mass' of women is achieved the substantive representation of women is affirmed as 'probabilistic' rather than 'deterministic' for it is shaped by the institutional context, the gender dynamics of debate and, importantly, the actions of individual 'equality champions'. While women representatives exhibited a greater propensity to advance gender equality in debate than their male colleagues, the present findings also show the disproportionate influence of 'equality champions': women who are able to draw upon earlier feminist activism and act as 'strategic insiders' who make a difference to women's issues in a parliamentary context.

Recent work on the link between the descriptive and substantive representation of women concludes that women's presence is necessary because, compared to men, women elected representatives can be trusted to a greater extent to promote 'women's interests' (Gargarella, 1998). In addition, they have different political priorities and policy concerns to male parliamentarians (Phillips, 2000). What matters is not only the overall proportion of women parliamentarians – or achieving a 'critical mass' – but also, *who* the women are (Cowell-Meyers, 2003). Here, the term 'descriptive representation' refers to the situation whereby elected representatives are typical of the broader class of people that they represent, such that women represent women, disabled people represent disabled people and so on (for a discussion, see Mansbridge, 1999). Allied to this, Mackay *et al.*, (2003, p. 85) describe how 'substantive representation' refers to 'the opportunities for the concerns and interests of women to be heard and taken into account in the policy-making process'.

This article presents original analysis of the gender dynamics of political debate in order to explore contemporary theoretical assertions about the relationship between the descriptive and substantive representation of women. The present

case study centres on the National Assembly for Wales, one of the UK's devolved legislatures. Attention is focused on the plenary debates of the National Assembly where, during the legislature's first term, women constituted 42 percent of elected representatives. If, as recent work suggests, the personal characteristics and experiences of individual women elected representatives are central to the feminising of politics, it also follows that the party mechanisms whereby women are selected and elected become more than means to achieve an increase in the numbers of women in politics – they determine whose voices are heard for they are a key influence on which women participate in legislative life. Therefore, in order to present a thoroughgoing and contextualised analysis of gender dynamics and parliamentary discourse, this discussion first highlights the key influence of broader institutional contexts that include different party ideologies, structures and selection procedures – as well as the institutional design and procedures of the legislature under study.

The four principal research questions addressed in this article explore the gender dynamics of debate in a rare example (in the UK) of a parliamentary context where a critical mass of women representatives has been achieved. They are: (1) What is the nature of group interactions between women and men in parliamentary debate? (2) Do women have a greater propensity than men to promote gender – and other modes of – equality? (3) Do women have different political priorities and policy concerns to male parliamentarians? And, (4) What part is played by feminist activists who take on the role of 'equality champions' in political debate? Accordingly, this article is structured to begin with an overview of critical mass and the politics of presence, the theoretical literature relevant to the principal research questions. Attention is then turned to institutional contexts, the key framings that apply to the current study. Following a brief outline of the present research methodology, original findings are then analysed in order to further contemporary understanding of the gender dynamics of parliamentary debate and the importance of individual women's personal characteristics and experiences to the substantive representation of women.

Critical Mass and the Politics of Presence

Among the burgeoning theoretical literature on women's political representation (for a full discussion see Childs, 2004), the 'politics of presence' argument makes the case for women's equal representation on the grounds that women's experiences and needs cannot be adequately addressed by male-dominated politics. According to a principal proponent, Anne Phillips (Phillips, 1995; 1999), women's presence is necessary in order that new, previously marginalised, perspectives are mainstreamed in political decision-making. She asserts that:

If gender matters, it is still because men and women occupy very different positions within social and economic relations; and what matters about this is that it generates different interests and policy concerns. Numbers alone are important, but

the longer term significance lies in the opportunity for mobilising a wider range of voices, articulating concerns that would otherwise be discounted, and thereby developing more just social policies (Phillips, 2000, p. 4).

Phillips' argument is partly based upon the claim that, probabilistically, women's presence as elected politicians will affect the deliberation of elected representatives. While, on the face of it, this may seem axiomatic, as she acknowledges, it raises at least two key questions: how many women are necessary to effect this qualitative shift from male-oriented politics? And, does it matter who the women are?

On the issue of numbers, 'critical mass' features as one of the most prominent arguments for gender equality in political representation. A metaphorical term based on nuclear physics – and derived from earlier research in respect of economic sociology and race relations (Kanter, 1977), the concept suggests that the nature of group interactions depends upon size. As Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski (2001, p. 3) explain,

when a group remains a distinct minority within a larger society, its members will seek to adapt to their surroundings, conforming to the predominant rules of the game ... but once the group reaches a certain size, critical mass theory suggests that there will be a qualitative change in the nature of group interactions, as the minority starts to assert itself and thereby transform the institutional culture, norms and values.

In this article we are neither concerned with the vexed question of the precise threshold when critical mass can be said to have been achieved (see for example Studlar and McAllister, 2002) nor the arguments relating to the use of quotas that determine the proportion of women representatives (for a full discussion, see Beckwith, 2002). Rather, this case study engages with gender and political theory by examining group interactions in a parliamentary context in which, when compared to the criteria set out in the existing literature (Dahlerup, 1988; St Germain, 1989; Thomas, 1991; 1994), women's critical mass has undoubtedly been attained, for, as noted, women constitute 42 percent of parliamentarians.¹

The virtual gender parity among representatives achieved in the case of the Welsh Assembly allows us to examine two important aspects relating to gender equality: the gender dynamics of political debate, and whether, in terms of the substantive representation of women in debate, it matters who makes up such a 'critical mass'. The existing literature is clear on the importance of these issues and the utility of using deliberativeness as a means of addressing them. For example, Jane Mansbridge (1999, p. 628) notes that 'disadvantaged groups gain advantages from descriptive representation ... experiential knowledge of descriptive representatives enhances their substantive representation of the group's interests by improving the quality of the deliberation'. Thus, according to this perspective, a 'critical mass' is desirable because it not only affects the nature of group interactions but it also

increases the diversity of viewpoints associated with group representation. Thus, Mansbridge (1999, p. 636) explains, 'because the content and range of any deliberation is often unpredictable, a variety of representatives is usually needed to represent the heterogeneous, varied inflections and internal oppositions that together constitute the complex and internally contested perspectives, opinions, and interest characteristic of any group'. This latter point is important for it implies that it is not numbers alone that shape the substantive representation of women; rather it also depends upon the diversity – and thus, the personal values and experiences – of those present. This is consistent with recent work (see for example Cowell-Meyers, 2003) that has emphasised the need to look beyond sheer numbers, and instead question whether the benefits of descriptive representation are seen to operate regardless of who the women representatives are. As Suzanne Dovi (2003) puts it, 'will just any woman do'? In the present discussion, political debate has been chosen to explore these questions for, as Mansbridge (1999) suggests, when compared to an emphasis on policy priorities, policy outcomes and sponsoring bills (see for example Thomas, 1991; 1994; Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003), the fluid and often spontaneous nature of debate makes it more revealing of the link between the descriptive and substantive representation of women. Before examining the research findings, we first turn to the institutional contexts applying to the present case study. The latter are key framings that operate to shape the substantive representation of women in parliamentary contexts.

Institutional Contexts

Referring to women's political representation, Lovenduski (2005, pp. 140–1) states that 'presence theory is widely cited but little empirically tested'. In turn she asserts that the study of political institutions from a broadly feminist perspective – what she terms 'feminist institutionalism' – could 'offer realistic analysis of presence effects'. Accordingly, in order to explore the presence effects operating in the current case study, this discussion adopts a holistic view of the institutional contexts that shape the gender dynamics of political debate. It is one that encompasses both legislative practices and procedures and the candidate selections of political parties. The former, legislative practices, constitute an appropriate focus for such research because, as recent analysis has concluded:

the dramatic increases in the numbers of women in political institutions and the post-1997 diversity of electoral systems, institutional arrangements and parliamentary spaces makes the UK a rich laboratory – and an important international case study – for examining the role played by systems, parties, actors and ideas in shaping the descriptive and substantive representation of women (Mackay, 2004, p. 114).

Johanna Kantola (2004, p. 156) supports this view, stating that 'new levels of governance, from devolution in [Wales and] Scotland to the European Union

(EU) as a whole, pose new challenges in terms of discussions of the differences and similarities within and between European states, and point to new directions for feminist research on the state'. The present case study, the National Assembly for Wales, is broadly typical of the regional assemblies of many member states in the European Union and adds to a growing body of work focusing on women and politics in regional and state legislatures.² The realities of multi-level governance in the UK mean that the scope of deliberation by elected representatives in the National Assembly reflects parliamentary debates found elsewhere in an international context. The Assembly's plenary sessions include: votes, motions and amendments to the executive's legislative programme and policy initiatives; plenary resolutions; statements of opinion; minority party debates; and written and oral questions to ministers. While the Welsh regional government's powers are tightly prescribed by UK statute, it has greatest influence over public policy and spending in relation to health, education, housing and social services; in the eyes of some it can be conceived of as a 'social policy Assembly' (Chaney and Drakeford, 2004). Although its legislative powers, public spending and policy programmes focus principally on these – and a number of other – key policy areas (e.g. economic development), the subject matter of its plenary debates is wide ranging, and extends far beyond areas for which the legislature has direct responsibility. Such breadth in the topics of political debate is guaranteed both by the legislature's procedural law – or Standing Orders – and its founding statute. The latter states that 'the Assembly may consider, and make appropriate representations about, *any matter* affecting Wales'.³

Discussing the challenges of achieving full and fair representation, Jon Elster (1998, p. 16) asks, 'will deliberation produce all of its good effects if it takes place mainly within an elite that is self-selected because it knows more about public issues and is concerned about them?'. Accordingly, he advocates 'significant institutional reforms, aimed to achieve an ample – not an elitist – deliberation'. The latter point is particularly salient in the case of the National Assembly for Wales. Following sustained lobbying by gender equality activists and other groups, the new legislature was designed to address the exclusive nature of administrative devolution under the Welsh Office (the UK government department that served Wales 1964–99) and promote 'inclusiveness' (for a discussion see Chaney and Fevre, 2001). As a result, the 'institutional blueprints' – of both the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament – placed an emphasis on partnerships between government and the public, private and voluntary sectors, as well as mechanisms to foster citizen engagement and participation in the work of government (see Chaney, 2003; 2004; Mackay *et al.*, 2003).

In the case of the National Assembly for Wales, there are also institutional factors designed to deliver non-elitist deliberation. These include: an emphasis on committee work to develop public policy (compare Rawlings, 2003); limiting the institution's working hours in order to promote a work–life balance;⁴ the requirement for gender-neutral official titles; and rules on the language permitted in

political debate.⁵ Most significantly, the legislature's founding statute placed two unique duties upon the government body. The first is singular in its non-prescriptive phrasing and all-embracing scope and is an imperative that applies to all people and all functions of government and states, that 'the Assembly shall make appropriate arrangements with a view to securing that its functions are exercised with due regard to the principle that there should be equality of opportunity for all people'. The second refers to the way in which the new government body shall regulate itself as an institution. It requires that the Assembly 'shall make appropriate arrangements with a view to securing that its business is conducted with due regard to the principle that there should be equality of opportunity for all people'.⁶

Beyond such procedural aspects of the new legislature's working, in its devolution White Paper the UK government acknowledged the role of the political parties in promoting gender equality, asserting that 'the Government attaches great importance to equal opportunities for all ... It believes that greater participation by women is essential to the health of our democracy. The Government also urges all political parties offering candidates for election to the Assembly to have this in mind in their internal selection processes' (Welsh Office, 1997, p. 24). While falling short of a legal duty requiring gender parity in candidate selections, the new Assembly's proportional electoral system – the Additional Member System (AMS) – provides a systemic mechanism that allows parties significant control in the management of gender balance in candidate selections. Contrasts in the subsequent response of the four main political parties to the opportunities presented by the new electoral system lend credence to the observation by Russell *et al.*, (2002, p. 51) that 'within the institutional perspective, political parties hold a key role in the achievement of a critical mass'.

While a full account of the candidate selection procedures for the first Assembly election is beyond the present purposes (see Chaney *et al.*, 2006; Russell *et al.*, 2002), positive action measures were adopted in the candidate selection procedures of three of the four main political parties,⁷ most noticeably in the case of the Welsh Labour party which adopted the strategy of 'twinning' constituencies. This created pairs from the 40 Welsh constituencies represented in the Assembly with each putting forward a female and male candidate.⁸ As a result sixteen women and twelve men were elected for Labour. In contrast, Plaid Cymru, the second largest party, prioritised women on the lists of candidates for the regional constituency seats elected to the Assembly by proportional representation. As a result, six of its seventeen new Assembly Members (AMs) were women. Of the remaining two parties the Welsh Liberal Democrats offered training to encourage women to stand for election while the Welsh Conservatives remained opposed to any form of positive action to increase the representation of women. In the face of enduring, if uneven, levels of resistance to gender equality across all the main parties it is important to note that a

significant minority of women standing for election had a strong track record of feminist activism and working for gender equality organisations.⁹ We return to the salience of this factor to the substantive representation of women in the present case study when discussing the research findings (see below).

Political ideology is a further factor that is relevant to the current discussion because of its potential influence on the gender dynamics of political debate and the substantive representation of women. It operates in relation to both party political and legislative institutional contexts and shapes how political parties address gender – and other modes of – equality in their political programmes and day-to-day politicking. At a party level ideology is important for, as Lovenduski asserts (2005, p. 59), ‘political parties institutionalise ideas about politics that have gendered implications’. While there is continuing and powerful resistance to gender equality by influential sections within all four political parties in the present case study, across the political spectrum clear ideological differences operate between the right and left-of-centre parties. Broadly these can be characterised by the left’s advocacy of egalitarianism, social reform and interventionist measures to further notions of ‘social justice’ (see Leach, 2002); values that, for example, were invoked by gender equality activists in making the case for the increased representation of women among party candidates and representatives following constitutional reform in the UK. In contrast, the right-of-centre conservative and unionist ideological position has been characterised as one seeking ‘to protect the established social, political and economic order ... [through] a set of dispositions that includes the rejection of the ideas of abstract rights and the effectiveness of social engineering’ (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 59; see also Webb, 2000).

A full discussion of the links between political ideology and women’s representation is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to note that ideology and party allegiance are key factors relevant to the current discussion for their potential impact on women’s representation and deliberation (including cross-party organising on gender equality issues – see ‘Findings’ below). This is particularly the case given that, in the legislature under study, all women parliamentarians were representatives of centre-left parties. The latter situation reflects both Conservative party opposition to positive action to promote gender equality and the traditional hegemonic status of social democratic political values in Wales (compare Tanner *et al.*, 2000).¹⁰

Overall, as the foregoing suggests, a range of institutional factors is salient to a fuller understanding of gender dynamics and women’s substantive representation. These factors are broad in scope and range from the ideological positions and selection procedures of individual political parties to the nature of a given parliamentary context and its associated legislative practices and procedures. Such factors operate as key framings that shape the deliberative effects of the politics of presence to which we now turn.

Methodology

This article draws upon the analysis of the Official Record – or transcripts – of all 327 plenary debates of the National Assembly for Wales held during its first term (1999–2003). Reference to existing equality research (compare Beveridge, 2000; Breitenbach *et al.*, 2002; Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000) enabled a series of topics to be identified as those likely to reveal distinctive women’s perspectives and issues. These were domestic violence, childcare and equal pay for work of equal value between women and men. Using appropriate software¹¹ the Official Record files containing approximately three million words of text were analysed to determine whether – and how – women parliamentarians displayed support for these issue positions, and whether they acted decisively in debate to advocate gender equality. A database was compiled detailing all instances where key terms were referred to in parliamentary debate. Building on recent work by Sarah Childs and Julie Withey (2004), individuals’ interventions in debate were coded¹² using Beth Reingold’s notion of ‘direction’, namely, whether interventions were deemed to be feminist, anti-feminist or neutral (compare Reingold, 2000, p. 138, pp. 166–77). Earlier work by the author (see Betts *et al.*, 2001) allowed ‘non-essentialist’ grounded theory to be applied in the present research.¹³ This suggests that the impact of descriptive representation of women will not be restricted to what might traditionally be regarded as ‘women’s issues’¹⁴ but will translate into the substantive representation of women across the full breadth of political debate. Accordingly, further examination was made of the nature, frequency and gender dynamics associated with the use in political debate of the terms ‘equality’, ‘equal opportunities’ and ‘women’¹⁵ as published in the entire Official Record of the legislature’s first term.¹⁶

Deliberation and the Substantive Representation of Women

We turn now to the gender dynamics of debate around the key ‘women’s issues’ and equality terms. *Inter alia* we are concerned with understanding the propensity of women and men to initiate and participate in political debate on such matters and the manner in which they do so. Subsequent attention is focused on: the role of ministerial interventions; whether this debate is ‘mainstreamed’ in the debating patterns of the male and female parliamentary cohorts, or whether reliance is placed upon individual ‘equality champions’; and, further, the extent to which gendered cross-party co-operation – a ‘sisterhood’ – may be seen to operate in parliamentary discourse. We then turn to various qualitative aspects of the debates studied, including the ‘direction’ of speakers’ interventions, the breadth of policy areas covered and whether speakers draw upon direct personal experience to inform debate.

The Gender Dynamics of Debate

The gender-disaggregated incidence of selected key terms in political debate during the first term of the National Assembly reveals a significant difference

Table 1: The Incidence of Key Terms Featuring in Political Debate Recorded in the Official Record of the First Term of the National Assembly for Wales 1999–2003

<i>Debating term</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
	<i>All references to topic (%)</i>	<i>All references to topic (%)</i>
Childcare	64.7	35.3
Domestic violence	70.2	29.8
Equal pay	68.0	32.0
'Women's issues'	77.8	22.2
Equality	52.2	47.8
All	59.8	40.2
N	532	358

between male and female parliamentarians ($p = 0.001$).¹⁷ Women exhibit a greater propensity to engage in debate on 'women's issues' and equality topics (Table 1). The gender split is most pronounced in respect of 'women's issues' where, overall, women made approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of all interventions using the key terms analysed. Less pronounced is the gender difference (below 5 percentage points) in respect of interventions identified by usage of the terms 'equality' and 'equal opportunities'. The latter can be seen as a function of the legal and institutional context and reflects the legal imperative on each elected member to promote equality for 'all persons' and in respect of all governmental functions (compare Chaney, 2004).

In parliamentary systems interaction between governing and opposition parties is central to exploring the deliberative link between women's descriptive and substantive representation (see for example Karam, 1997). This follows because the relationship between parliamentary debate and the substantive representation is not causal; rather, it ultimately depends upon the legal, constitutional and party-political aspects of power relations in a given legislative context and thus the ability to secure outcomes. As ministers in the Welsh legislature were swift to assert, the responsibility for setting the post-devolution equality agenda is 'a matter for the executive'.¹⁸ Within an international context, the Welsh Assembly government is notable for the number of women holding ministerial office; during the period studied, women comprised a 5 : 4 majority in the Assembly government's Cabinet. As Table 2 illustrates,¹⁹ women predominated in ministerial interjections on the topics selected for analysis, typically accounting for two-thirds to three-quarters of all such interventions. While it is not possible to disaggregate fully the overall effects on deliberation of holding a given ministerial portfolio as opposed to the sex of the office holder,²⁰ this pattern does support the findings of earlier analysis undertaken of the papers and minutes of the Cabinet meetings held during the first term of the National Assembly (Chaney, 2005,

Table 2: Ministerial Interventions in Debate on Key Topics recorded in the Official Record of the First Term of the National Assembly for Wales 1999–2003

<i>Debating term</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
	<i>All ministerial interventions on topic (%)</i>	<i>All ministerial interventions on topic (%)</i>
Childcare	67.0	33.0
Domestic violence	76.5	23.5
Equal pay	77.3	22.7
'Women's issues'	77.4	22.6
Equality	60.5	39.5
All	66.2	33.8
N	198	101

p. 123). The latter are significant as they revealed how women ministers mainstreamed gender (and other strands) of equality into Cabinet policy-making and discussion in relation to: funding for a Muslim women's centre;²¹ policy initiatives to achieve equal pay for women;²² promoting gender balance in public appointments;²³ and securing gender equality in the work of the Cabinet's Economic Research Advisory Panel.²⁴

In the deliberative process, initiating debate on a given subject serves the principal function of innovation – or the introduction of new ideas into the formulation of public policy (see Fischer, 2003). Understanding of the link between the descriptive and substantive representation of women is therefore further informed by parliamentarians' role in initiating debate on gender equality issues and ensuring that such concerns remain the subject of parliamentary deliberation. As Table 3 shows, during the National Assembly's first term, women had a significantly greater propensity ($p = 0.001$) to initiate debate on the gender equality topics examined; such cases comprised approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of all instances when such terms featured in plenary debate.²⁵ However, this pattern does not extend to debate identified by speakers' reference to 'equality' or 'equal opportunities'. This shows virtual parity between the sexes with male representatives introducing debate in 49 percent of all cases, again reflecting the equalities framework applying in the legislature.

In terms of women's substantive representation, Dovi (2003) refers to the role of 'preferable descriptive representatives' or those individuals with greater awareness, skills and feminist conviction in pursuing gender equality. Such a perspective engages with contemporary questions about the relative importance of critical mass compared to *who* the women are (Cowell-Meyers, 2003). The data in Table 4 provide some insight into this issue. They show that when plenary debates are analysed by sex, debate on women's issues is more 'mainstreamed' among women

Table 3: Gender Split among Those Initiating Political Debate on Key Terms Recorded in the Official Record of the Plenary Sessions of the First Term of the National Assembly for Wales 1999–2003

<i>Debating term</i>	<i>Female Total each topic (%)</i>	<i>Male Total each topic (%)</i>
Childcare	61.8	38.2
Domestic violence	74.2	25.8
Equal pay	65.4	34.6
'Women's issues'	77.8	22.2
Equality	51.1	48.9
All	59.5	40.5
N	308	210

Table 4: Percentage of Female and Male Parliamentarian Cohorts Engaging in Debate on Key Topics Recorded in the Official Record of the Plenary Sessions of the First Term of the National Assembly for Wales 1999–2003²⁷

<i>Debating topic</i>	<i>Percentage of all elected women debating topic</i>	<i>Percentage of all elected men debating topic</i>
Childcare	80	54.4
Domestic violence	56	37.1
Equal pay	48	17.1
'Women's issues'	84	37.1
Equality	100	91.4
All	73.6	47.4
N	25	35

Assembly Members, meaning that it is based on the participation of a greater proportion of the total number of elected women representatives when compared to men.²⁶ Overall, a mean of 67 percent of women representatives engaged in debate on 'women's issues' compared to 36.4 percent of all male representatives. Variations exist in the proportion of the female cohort engaging in debate on each of the respective gender equality issues studied. Approximately one-half participated in debate on domestic violence and equal pay compared to over three-quarters in relation to childcare and other women's issues. A more modest difference (8.6 percentage points) is also evident in respect of the proportion of male and female cohorts referring to 'equality' in debate. Overall, when all references to equality and women's issues are combined, the gender difference remains pronounced with 73.6 percent of the female cohort engaging in debate compared to 47.4 percent of the male cohort.

Notwithstanding the engagement of between two-thirds to three-quarters of all women parliamentarians in debate on women's issues, the present findings reveal the importance of who the women representatives are. Data on the total debating interventions made by the three most prolific debaters on each topic (Table 5) show that a key role is also played by individual women who intervene in debate much more frequently than most other female colleagues; these 'equality champions' account for between, approximately, one-third and one-half of all women's interventions.²⁸

The role of these 'equality champions' (or key individuals who intervene repeatedly to advance feminist and gender equality concerns) provides evidence that individuals' background and experience, not least in respect of feminist activism, play a key role in links between the politics of presence and the substantive representation of women. This finding supports existing work (e.g. Weldon, 2002) that shows how, on key 'women's issues' – for example, in tackling domestic abuse – such individuals draw upon their personal experience and use their position as elected representatives in order to promote gender equality and women's rights by acting as 'strategic insiders' in a parliamentary context.²⁹ The present findings underline the importance of such strategic insiders; without them the results of the research would not have been the same. For example, given that just 48 and 56 percent of all women representatives spoke on the 'women's issues' of equal pay and domestic violence, the overall contribution of such 'equality champions' is particularly significant in relation to specific aspects of women's substantive representation. Moreover, these data reveal distinct patterns of polarisation with regard to gender and political debate; namely, *inter-gender polarisation*, in that, when compared to men, a higher proportion of female parliamentarians are likely to engage in debate on the issues studied; and *intra-gender polarisation*. The latter is evident in respect of both sexes and operates when a limited number of 'equality champions' make a disproportionately high number of interventions in debate on selected issues.

These findings highlight the salience of *both* critical mass and equality champions in underpinning the substantive representation of women. In the context of the present study, the presence of such equality champions can partly be explained by parliamentarians' former professional experience, and their current political roles. In the case of women, prior to being elected to the legislature the three most prolific debaters on each of the topics analysed all had strong records of feminist activism and all held senior professional posts with national gender equality organisations (see Figure 1). In the case of male parliamentarians, intra-gender polarisation can be explained by allocated political roles on equality topics; thus the chair of the cross-party Working Group on Equal Pay dominates debate on this issue (accounting for three-quarters of references by male parliamentarians).

Earlier work (see Betts *et al.*, 2001) revealed that, during the initial months of the new legislature studied here, there were widely-held hopes among the women elected for cross-party organising on equality issues, or as some expressed it, a

Table 5: Equality Champions? Percentage of Total Debating Interventions on Key Topics Made by the Three Most Prolific Debaters on Each Topic

Debating term	Female		Male	
	All female contributions (%)	All contributions (%)	All male contributions (%)	All contributions (%)
Childcare	40.7	26.3	44.8	15.8
Domestic violence	45.0	31.6	35.2	10.5
Equal pay	53.0	36.0	75.0	24.0
'Women's issues'	31.2	24.2	40.9	9.0
Equality	40.3	21.0	28.0	13.4
All	40.2	24.0	34.4	13.8
N	532	890	358	890

Figure 1: Feminist Activism and Substantive Representation: Outline Biographies of Selected 'Equality Champions'

■ Director of the Equal Opportunities Commission in Wales, co-founder of gender equality policy networks and campaigning groups such as: the Wales Women's National Coalition (WWNC) and Minority Ethnic Women's Network (MEWN) Cymru. A leading figure in Women Say Yes for Wales (WSYFW) part of the pro-devolution campaign.

■ A former director of *Chwarae Teg* (a national organisation to promote women's participation in the labour market), campaigner for gender equality in the voluntary sector and leading figure in promoting equality with the Parliament for Wales Campaign.

■ Senior Development Manager with the Equal Opportunities Commission in Wales and, worker and campaigner for Welsh Women's Aid (an organisation campaigning on, and supporting victims of, domestic violence). A leading figure in and WWNC and WSYFW.

Each has been a long-term campaigner for gender equality within their respective political parties.

future 'cross-party sisterhood'. This aspiration saw feminist and gender equality matters taking precedence over party-political concerns, for women parliamentarians would unite across party lines in order to promote the substantive representation of women. In the wake of intense inter-party competition during the National Assembly's first term (when the governing party failed to achieve an outright majority) (see for example Trench, 2001; Hazell, 2003), some revised their earlier views (see Chaney, 2004). Yet, the evidence of political debate reveals that the notion of a 'cross-party sisterhood' does constitute a minor yet interesting aspect of the link between descriptive and substantive representation. Thirty-three examples were identified in the Official Record of plenary debates.³⁰ However, the earlier work cited also suggests that exclusive reference to plenary debates in the legislature (with their frequently adversarial nature) is likely to underestimate the prevalence of this phenomenon, for earlier participant observation of the policy development undertaken by the cross-party committees has revealed strong patterns of inter-party cooperation on gender equality issues (Chaney and Fevre, 2002). The latter point serves to highlight the salience of different legislative functions – and the role of institutional contexts – in shaping 'gendered' deliberative practices.³¹

Qualitative Aspects of Debate

Reflecting both the legal-equalities framework of the new legislature, as well as the oft-stated determination following constitutional reform to deliver a 'new politics' founded upon inclusiveness (see for example Davies, 1999), the overwhelming majority (84.2 percent) of cases where reference was made to the key

Table 6: The Incidence of Feminist/Pro-Equality Interventions in Political Debate around Key Terms Recorded in the Official Record of the Plenary Sessions of the First Term of the National Assembly for Wales 1999–2003

<i>Debating term</i>	<i>Female All such interventions on topic (%)</i>	<i>Male All such interventions on topic (%)</i>
Childcare	67.6	32.4
Domestic violence	75.7	24.3
Equal pay	70.2	29.8
'Women's issues'	85.9	14.1
Equality	56.9	43.1
All	64	36
N	480	270

terms examined here comprised incidences when the speaker adopted a feminist or pro-equality debating position (see Table 6).

When disaggregated, there is a significant difference between the sexes ($p = 0.001$)³² with female parliamentarians being almost twice as likely to advance feminist and pro-equality interventions when compared to male colleagues (women made 64 percent of all such interventions). The greatest difference was in respect of debate on women's issues where women made 85.9 percent of feminist interventions compared to just 14.1 percent made by men. In addition, male parliamentarians were more likely to make 'neutral' interventions³³ on the topics analysed (9.1 percent of all interventions, compared to 5.4 percent for women). Rare instances (six in total) of overtly anti-equality interventions in plenary debate came from three male members of the same political party.³⁴

Analysis of the transcripts of political debate also provides evidence of women parliamentarians drawing directly on gendered, personal experience in order to advance gender equality in debate. Once again, this reinforces the salience of recent work by Kimberly Cowell-Meyers (2003) and Dovi (2003), namely, that in respect of women's representation, it not only matters how many women are present but who they are. In all, and across the breadth of key terms explored, 51 incidences were identified where women drew directly upon their own experiences in order to inform deliberation. Examples included accounts of experiencing prejudice, male chauvinism and sex discrimination. More specifically, references were made to: fighting a high-profile sex discrimination case against an employer;³⁵ setting up an organisation to tackle domestic violence;³⁶ the challenges of being a woman working in agriculture;³⁷ difficulties facing mothers in obtaining appropriate childcare facilities;³⁸ the provision of information on parenting skills to new mothers;³⁹ challenges facing women business managers;⁴⁰ and equality issues facing female schoolteachers and school governors.⁴¹

The manner in which women Assembly Members drew upon personal experience to further gender equality in debate is further illustrated by reference to the following examples of interventions made by women parliamentarians as recorded in the Official Record. Speaking in a debate on childcare one stated:

I was director of *Chwarae Têg*,⁴² which was set up to expand the role of women in the Welsh work force. Lack of childcare was a major issue that we were tackling. I am also a working parent and a working politician ... I can assure you that it was wild on occasions trying to juggle home and family responsibilities with work.⁴³

On social exclusion, 'social exclusion leads to unequal education and occupational opportunities ... I can bear witness to that. For many years I worked with unemployed young people'.⁴⁴ On business, 'from my private sector background, I know the level of equal opportunities training that is undertaken to ensure that it is at the core of recruitment practices'.⁴⁵ On education, 'my concern is that equal opportunities – I speak as someone who has served as a governor and a Chair of governors in a couple of schools – is often treated as simply an exercise in ticking boxes ... The issues are clear. There is much evidence of gender inequality in society'.⁴⁶ On homelessness, 'We have to find ways of hearing what people need. I have spent many years of my life working with people who are homeless'.⁴⁷ On domestic violence, 'I helped to establish the first Women's Aid refuge in Wales over 25 years ago. It is sad that we have to discuss in the Chamber today the need for more support and funding for women who are subjected to violence'.⁴⁸

Overall, one woman Assembly Member summarised the transformation in the qualitative nature of political debate arising from the descriptive representation of women by highlighting an incontrovertible fact: male politicians are unable to inform debate in entirely the same way as women. She stated:

without women taking part in decision-making, their views and needs are bound to be overlooked to a certain extent. It means that the life circumstances and perspective of 52 percent of the population are inevitably ignored, played down or tackled inappropriately. This does not assume that all male politicians are chauvinist pigs ... It simply recognizes that one sex, however sympathetic, cannot fully and fairly represent the interests of the other.⁴⁹

Michelle Taylor-Robinson and Roseanna Heath (2003, p. 80) precis the existing literature on women parliamentarians' legislative priorities by stating that:

women are expected to be more concerned than men with women's rights, needs that affect children and families, and also related areas of concern, such as education, health care, social welfare, and the environment ... Conversely, women are expected to be less concerned with legislative areas that focus on topics related to traditional areas of interest to men, such as business.

The present data reveal how such an assessment oversimplifies matters, for women's substantive representation and the wider promotion of equality are shown to be issues that cross-cut and inform a full range of policy areas.

Table 7: Interventions in Political Debate to Promote Equality: By Policy Area

<i>Policy area</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Agriculture	0	1
All (i.e. non-specific – the general promotion of equality in all policy areas)	98	102
Arts/culture	4	0
Asylum seekers	6	3
Carers	1	0
Children	5	4
Welsh language	10	15
Economic development	12	9
Education	31	26
Electoral process	2	1
Health	4	11
Housing	0	11
Local government/public sector	8	18
Policing	3	1
Procedural matters – government	8	7
Sport	4	7
Transport	3	5
Miscellaneous	32	42
N	231	263

In a manner that reflects the legal equality imperatives placed on political representatives of both sexes in the institutional context under study, when debating interventions on ‘equality’ are disaggregated it is evident that there is broad parity between the sexes in the range of policy areas forming the subject of such interventions (Table 7). In contrast, and as identified in the foregoing analysis, key differences exist in respect of debate on women’s issues; women can be seen to advance the substantive representation of women across a significantly broader range of policy areas than their male colleagues (Table 8).

Throughout the present analysis the role of the institutional context in shaping deliberative practices has been emphasised. Accordingly, it should be noted that legal instruments both influenced – and formed the subject of – the political debate analysed here. The latter point is evidenced by the fact that almost a fifth (18 percent) of interventions on the topic of ‘equality’ – or ‘equal opportunities’ – cited the legislature’s statutory duty to promote equality. Strikingly, in respect

Table 8: Interventions in Political Debate to Promote Interests of Women: By Policy Area

<i>Policy area</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
Agriculture	2	1
Arts And culture	0	1
Asylum seekers	1	0
Carers	1	0
Economic development	10	0
Education	3	2
Employment	4	4
Families	1	0
Health	22	6
Homelessness	2	0
Peace campaigners	1	0
Policing	3	0
Political participation	4	0
Political representation	4	0
Sport	10	4
Welfare	0	1
Women's rights	6	2
Miscellaneous	4	0
Totals (N)	78	21

of the latter finding, women were almost twice as likely to refer to the duty in order to underpin their pro-equality debating interventions when compared to male parliamentarians (62.5 percent against 37.5 percent of men). This supports an earlier research finding that showed legal equality instruments to be effective in overcoming resistance to the promotion of equality because – in addition to social justice arguments – they add a new dimension to the case for reform, namely the need for legal compliance (Chaney, 2004). Lastly, it should be noted that the debates examined here were not only concerned with policy development and public spending decisions but also the analysis of European and UK legislation affecting Wales, and with the framing and passing of new Welsh legislation (for a full discussion see Lambert, 1999; Rawlings, 2003; Sherlock, 2000). During the period studied the Welsh legislature passed a raft of laws that in whole – or part – were designed to promote gender and other modes of equality. The latter centred upon a broad range of issues including abortion,⁵⁰ domestic violence,⁵¹ childcare,⁵² education,⁵³ transport⁵⁴ and disability.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Jack Knight and James Johnson (1997, p. 309) conclude that ‘political equality is ... a complex conception, consisting of both procedural and substantive

requirements ... [it] entails a guarantee of effective participation and thus a concern for the capacity of individual participants to engage in the process of mutual persuasion'. It is only comparatively recently that the descriptive representation of women – in regional and national legislatures in Europe and North America – has reached levels where such preconditions exist. The present study of the link between the descriptive and substantive representation of women during the first term of the National Assembly for Wales supports assertions that numbers alone do not guarantee substantive outcomes. Instead, it is argued, the link between the descriptive and substantive representation of women is complex and can be conceived as involving both the actions in debate of a substantial portion of female parliamentarians constituting a 'critical mass', and the interventions of 'equality champions' who, through feminist conviction, professional experience and gender equality knowledge, act to promote substantive outcomes.

The evidence of the entire Official Record of over 300 plenary debates held during the first term of the National Assembly shows that women parliamentarians have effected a qualitative change in the nature of political debate, for 47.7 percent of all plenary debates included discussion of 'women's issues'⁵⁶ and just over half of all plenary debates included references to equality.⁵⁷ Moreover, data reveal that women parliamentarians have a greater propensity than their male colleagues to both engage in – and initiate – political debate on 'women's issues' in order to further the substantive representation of women. It has also been shown that women representatives draw directly upon gendered life experiences to inform debate and that they act to promote women's interests across a broader range of policy areas than their male counterparts. Notwithstanding this, among male parliamentarians, the presence of 'equality champions' and a propensity to engage in debate in relation to all equality 'strands' (as opposed to a discrete focus on gender equality) underlines the need to conceptualise the substantive representation of women in terms of the gender dynamics of political debate rather than an exclusive focus on women elected representatives.

Overall, the findings reported here lend support to earlier theoretical assertions that women elected representatives can be trusted to a greater extent to promote 'women's interests' and that they have different political priorities to male parliamentarians. In addition, the present study has highlighted the salience of a range of institutional factors – both in a parliamentary and party-political context – in shaping the manner and extent to which parliamentarians act to promote equality in political debate. Significantly, by revealing the role of women 'equality champions', the present findings provide evidence to support recent assertions that the substantive representation of women depends not only on the overall proportion of women parliamentarians but also on who the women are.

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Notes

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- 1 Some analysts suggest that 15–20 percent of women parliamentarians might be regarded as the necessary threshold (e.g. St Germain, 1989; Thomas, 1991; 1994), whereas others cite 30 percent (e.g. Dahlerup, 1988).
- 2 Compare Mackay *et al.* (2003); St Germain (1989); Taylor–Robinson and Heath (2003); Thomas (1991); Trimble (1998).
- 3 See National Assembly for Wales Standing Orders 6.5 i–xv 9.8 I, 6.38; Government of Wales Act 1998, Part II, s.33.
- 4 See National Assembly Standing Orders 5.2 (2002), ‘Motions under paragraph 5.1 shall be Tabled having regard to any advice offered by the Business Committee under paragraph 13.1(i). Wherever possible, motions shall be framed having regard to the family and constituency or electoral region responsibilities of Members, and their likely travel arrangements; and in any event shall seek to avoid programming business before 9.00 AM or after 5.30 PM on any working day’.
- 5 Office of the Presiding Officer of the National Assembly for Wales (1999), Protocol on Conduct in the Chamber/ Presiding Officer’s Protocol on Conduct in Chamber/Rules of Debate, Key Principles.
- 6 Government of Wales Act 1998, Sections 48 and 120.
- 7 Compare Edwards and Chapman (2000); Edwards and McAllister (2002); Russell, Mackay and McAllister (2002).
- 8 I.e. the 40 constituencies elected by first-past-the-post ballots. A further twenty Assembly constituencies return AMs elected by a version of proportional representation.
- 9 Fifteen from 117 women candidates or 13 percent.
- 10 The right-of-centre Welsh Conservative party held nine of the sixty National Assembly seats (15 percent) during the first term of the Assembly, 1999–2003.
- 11 Adobe Acrobat Reader 6.0.
- 12 This coding was undertaken by the author. In order to increase accuracy and consistency this process was repeated by a research assistant. In a small minority of instances (five cases) different codes were allocated – these were re-examined and consensus reached over the final coding designation.
- 13 Based upon an earlier research project that involved an extensive range of interviews with women politicians, candidates and gender equality activists.
- 14 ‘Women’s issues are issues that mainly affect women, either for biological reasons (for example, breast cancer screening, reproductive rights) or for social reasons (e.g. sex equality or childcare policy)’ (Lovenduski and Karam, 2002, p. 5).
- 15 The search term ‘women’ was used to identify debate on ‘women’s issues’, i.e. public policy with a gendered dimension relating to the needs and wants of women. For the purposes of the present analysis, instances falling outside of the foregoing definition were disregarded, i.e. general usages of ‘women’ unrelated to the gendered construction of public policy in political debate.
- 16 A non-discrete approach to coding was adopted in this methodology. This means that parliamentarians’ speeches and interventions containing more than one of the different key terms explored in this article severally comprise part of the sub-analysis of each – and all – respective key terms referred to by the speaker. Thus, for example, a single debating point that refers both to ‘domestic violence’ and ‘equal pay’ will be logged and simultaneously form part of the respective analysis of each term; i.e. the same speech or interventions will appear both in the statistics for ‘domestic violence’ and ‘equal pay’. This approach was undertaken to provide a holistic insight into the debate around key terms – and to avoid the creation of a hierarchy of gender equality terms explored in the present analysis. Repeated references to the same term by a single speaker in a speech or intervention were recorded only once.
- 17 $df = 4 \ X^2 = 30.966$.
- 18 Edwina Hart, AM, 17 July 2001, Statement on Diversity in Public Appointments, The Official Record.
- 19 Although not statistically significant, $df = 4 \ X^2 = 5.881$.
- 20 In other words, if the holder of ministerial portfolios covering the equality topics under study is a woman then it might appear axiomatic that women’s interventions will outweigh those of male ministers on the same topics. Nevertheless, the significance of these findings lies in revealing exactly how presence effects translate into substantive representation in respect of holding ministerial office.

- 21 Record of Cabinet meeting, 8 October 2001.
- 22 Record of Cabinet meeting, 26 June 2001.
- 23 Record of Cabinet meeting, 15 January 2001.
- 24 Record of Cabinet meeting, 25 November 2002.
- 25 $df = 4 X^2 = 22.770$.
- 26 Not statistically significant.
- 27 When First Minister Alun Michael resigned in February 2000, he was replaced by Delyth Evans, raising the number of women Assembly Members to 25 (42 percent) out of a total of 60. Calculations are based upon this latter figure.
- 28 Not statistically significant.
- 29 Strategic insiders are those women holding key offices in government and/or political parties who are able to use their office to further feminist and gender equality concerns.
- 30 These were instances in debate when speakers responded to – and referred directly to – earlier interventions by a speaker from another party stating their support for the measure under discussion.
- 31 It should be noted that major revisions in the operation of the Assembly and a move away from a ‘body-corporate’ to a parliamentary mode of working (see Rawlings, 2003 for a discussion) has reduced the consensual nature of earlier committee work.
- 32 $df = 4 X^2 = 31.042$.
- 33 I.e. reporting on or acknowledging the existence of such issues without giving or implying a value judgement about whether they should be supported.
- 34 See interventions in plenary debate by the following members of the Welsh Conservative party: 29 October 2002, Davies, D; 8 March 2000, Davies, D; 5 July 2001, Davies, D; 30 November 1999, Davies, G; 15 May 2001, Cairns, A; 2 July 2002, Morgan, J.
- 35 See Alison Halford AM, Official Record, 5 July 2001.
- 36 See Jane Hutt AM, Official Record, 18 April 2002.
- 37 See Elin Jones AM, Official Record, 14 December 1999.
- 38 See Delyth Evans AM, Official Record, 14 February 2002 and Helen Mary Jones AM, Official Record, 11 March 2003.
- 39 See Kirsty Williams AM, Official Record, 23 October 2002.
- 40 See Helen Mary Jones AM, Official Record, 11 March 2003.
- 41 See Christine Chapman AM, Official Record, 9 November 2000.
- 42 Welsh. Translation: ‘fair play’.
- 43 Jane Hutt AM, Official Record, Debate on Childcare, Tuesday 6 July 1999.
- 44 Christine Chapman AM, Official Record, Debate on social exclusion, Tuesday 29 June 1999.
- 45 Edwina Hart AM, Official Record, Debate on Economic Development, 17 July 2001.
- 46 Christine Chapman AM, Official Record, Debate on School Governing Bodies, 9 November 2000.
- 47 Val Feld AM, Official Record, Debate on social exclusion, Tuesday 29 June 1999.
- 48 Jane Hutt AM, Official Record, Debate on Domestic Violence, 18 April 2002.
- 49 J. Randerson, Debate to mark International Women’s Day, The Official Record, 8 March 2000. Cardiff: NAW.
- 50 Abortion (Amendment) (Wales) Regulations (2002), 19 November 2002.
- 51 Homeless Persons (Priority Need) Wales Order (2001), 16 April 2002.
- 52 Local Authorities (Allowances for Members of County and County Borough Councils and National Park Authorities) (Wales) Regulations (2002), 18 July 2002.
- 53 School Government (Terms of Reference) (Wales) Regulations (2000), 9 November 2000.
- 54 Mandatory Travel Concessions (Reimbursement Arrangements) (Wales) Regulations (2001) and the Travel Concessions (Extension of Entitlement) (Wales) Order (2001), 22 November 2001.
- 55 Approval of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (General Provisions and Disability Claims Procedure) Regulations (2002), 18 July 2002.
- 56 Debates out of a total 327 or 47.7 percent.
- 57 Debates out of a total 327 or 53.2 percent.

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