

firstthoughts



on attracting women into local politics

a woman's place is in the chamber

by Pam Giddy

Director of Charter88

exploring new directions and ideas

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about the author

Pam Giddy, director, Charter88

Pam Giddy was born on 5 April 1967 in Coventry. Her parents came from the Punjab, north India, before moving to the UK in the 1960's.

After graduating in 1989 with a law degree from the London School of Economics, she joined Charter88, the newly formed constitutional reform movement. There, she launched the Violations of Rights series of publications, which set out to show how the lack of specific rights had an impact on us all.

She left to join Cosmopolitan magazine in 1993 as Careers and News editor.

For four and a half years, she then worked as a producer on BBC Newsnight, looking after its political coverage and then launching a series of films exploring issues of social exclusion in Salford, Manchester.

In March 1999, she rejoined Charter88 as its first female director.

With thanks to Elly Tomlins for her research

A Woman's Place is in the Chamber

by Pam Giddy

Introduction:

Before joining Charter88 my last job for BBC's 'Newsnight' programme was helping to make a series of films about a declining estate in the North West. The idea was to track how government initiatives were implemented on the ground and through the lives of real families to assess the success or otherwise of the numerous initiatives coming out of the then New Government.

It was here that I was struck by two things. First the lead women were taking in attempting to regenerate their area. And secondly the effect a largely male led council was having on their efforts. Women were leading the call for change. Women were embracing new opportunities and trying to make them work; women were calling on the rest of the community not to give up. And it was towards women many of the government's initiatives were targeted. But the local authorities seemed incapable of embracing this energy. They were slow and cumbersome and caught up in procedures and although they spoke the language of community involvement and initiative their actions belied a distrust of it.

The energy released by these women seemed to challenge the way the local state wanted to work – the challenge was a change in their way of doing things and they were unsure of how to deal with it. I was left wondering whether the presence of more women leading the council might have meant things were handled differently.

Devolution of power away from Whitehall and Westminster to new institutions like the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, to specific bodies like schools and hospitals and, to a lesser extent, to democratic institutions, must draw into sharper focus the democratic credentials of these bodies. Local authorities may not have the might of money and power they once did but they do have - through a whole raft of government initiatives - the opportunity to deliver on the ground in a more creative and

inclusive manner. And this means more than anything harnessing the energy of the women in their areas. Meeting their needs and using their talents. The education action zones, the health action zones, sure start, these may be initiatives from central Government, linked directly to government departments but their implementation, their tone and their success rests to a large extent on the efforts and creativity of local government. It rests to a large extent on the ability of local authorities to draw in and utilise the talent of local women.

Local government, far from attempting to establish a culture and mode of operating of its own, has historically mimicked that of Westminster. Westminster politics sets the tone and it is copied by local politics. Both therefore are content to be dominated by men and accept the myth of women's political apathy. The culture of local town halls will not change until we have a significant increase in the numbers of women wielding legitimate democratic power in the localities. If the town hall refuses to open its doors to more women and arrange itself differently it will be further loss of the faith of local people and its future will be in question.

Current state of play

The former cabinet minister Harriet Harman MP recently published an analysis of how many women councillors we have in England Scotland and Wales.

(The Democratic Deficit 2000)

She found:

- There are 442 local authorities in England Scotland and Wales and over 21 000 local councillors.
- Women make up 50% of the population but only 27% of councillors are women - 73% are men.
- The councils with lowest percentage of women are Bolsover, Durham, Forest Heath and Isle of Anglesy with only 8% women

- Islington has the highest percentage of women councillors at 50% closely followed by Cotswold, Pendle and North Wiltshire.
- In total only 26% of our councillors are women.

The problem of low numbers of women isn't the only problem we face. The average age of our female councillors is 54.8 years (for men it is 55 years); male councillors are more likely to have children or other dependants; 12.8% of female councillors state they were 'looking after the home' while only 0.6% of male councillors make the same claim. Women more likely to come from public sector or voluntary sector and men from the private sector.

(First National consensus : Survey of local authority councillors in England and Wales 1997 IDEA)

The very nature of the job also seems to disincentive people and particularly women from coming forward. The role of the councillor involves small allowances, no training, unsocial hours and large responsibilities. Councillors are besieged with requests and complaints from the electorate but few are willing to vote. Many councillors choose to give up their jobs and live on expenses, to allow them to give enough time to the demands of the role. Dictates of the job therefore determine the profile of its practitioners. It suits the retired or people with independent means. It is difficult to undertake the role with an inflexible job or large or very young family. (Why bother? A study of the frustrations, the failings and the future of our elected local councillors. John Toroda and Naseem Khan)

Do more women make a difference?

It may be taken as a given that to have more women in elected office would be a good thing. But do we argue for greater parity of representation simply out of fairness or because women play a significantly different role to that of men when elected ?

Some studies have shown that greater numbers of women elected to local government do make a substantive difference to the way in which the local body operates. However women need to be there in significant numbers to really make a difference.

‘The presence of women only leads to changes in the government of the city if the critical limit of 30% is reached. Below this level women have a tendency, in order to be accepted and recognised as partners, to act as men and even go so far as discouraging other women from joining them. Beyond 30% it appears solidarity is created and these women are in a position to put forward their own political agenda on questions which were previously ignored. (report by Council for European Municipalities and Regions ‘Men and women in European municipalities’ p143)

Experience across Europe, where women’s representation is significantly better than in the UK, seems to hold up this theory.

In the city of Rennes, in France, on achieving a 30% level of women elected representatives, women were able to change the thinking of the city council in regard to the city’s working hours. They also modified in an unprecedented manner the relationship between the elected representatives and the council employees and the relationship and standing of the elected representatives and the local citizens. The city has now achieved an administration which takes better account of the expectations of more citizens.

The experience of women in the Nordic countries where we see some of the best proportions of elected women representatives at all levels of government in Europe, suggests that meeting hours are the first issue addressed by women in order to reconcile their public life with their private life. They also challenge the length and productivity of meetings - discouraging meetings from running on indefinitely but getting them to conclude on schedule.

An effective democracy requires that the voices of women should be represented in the policy making process. We cannot assume that a few female members will be able to articulate the voices of all women. But as the numbers of female seats increase real change can be achieved in the way in which a local authority operates.

And in fact not having women in council chambers in significant numbers will actually have a detrimental effect on both policies pursued by the council and the council's approach to specific policy issues. Researchers have found the lack of elected women allowing a masculine culture to perpetuate can also have a distinct effect on policy making. Joni Lovenduski argues that 'The dominance of men in decision making positions has a gendered effect on policy making and implementation seemingly neutral policies are often gender blind ignoring gender differences and thus tend to favour men either by actually disadvantaging women by ensuring initiatives to redress inequalities are poorly funded, with little prestige or by making issues on equal opportunities marginal to the policy agenda.'

And this effect is not just found in the council chamber. It will occur in whatever legislative body in which women's presence is absent or low. Lucy Peake in her unpublished study of the effect of the increased number of women MPs, found that although voting patterns between men and women failed to show any difference, women MPs have made a substantive impact on the political agenda in the House of Commons. Women have brought issues to the parliamentary agenda which are rarely aired by men, especially

through private members bills and parliamentary debates. New perspective is also brought to parliamentary debates. In this way women MPs are seen to have an influence on the way that issues are perceived even if they have no impact on the legislative outcome.

Community involvement

Local Government is the government closest to the people. Community activity is often a catalyst in encouraging women to take an interest in and eventually become a part of their local councils.

The stories of women involved in local politics are not unusual but seem to share a familiar theme. The motivation to get involved often grew from one specific campaign or issue which led them to, usually for the first time, to have the need to interact with the local authority. Positive or indeed negative experiences kept their interest. Empirical evidence suggests this to be especially true for younger women and working women.

One woman we spoke to told us how she got involved in a local campaign around a local playgroup. She ended up as employee of the council - a 2nd tier policy officer looking at women's issues. Her sense was that women generally become active over a specific issue on which they manage to deliver to some degree. They then meet obstacles emanating from the culture of the local authority. She has found her local authority very unresponsive - she has seen a high turnover of women councillors especially among those who have been committed to moving on with a specific agenda for women. The council she works for is now opting for a cabinet style structure. Five chief officers are in place but no women have been appointed. She has seen the closure of a women's centre in the city and of a women's aid centre. Community development work is now much less about grassroots agenda and more about linking strategies around the council's agenda. She feels this will impact negatively on women coming forward to stand for the council.

Another woman councillor from a different council and political party echoed these concerns. She came to stand for the local council after being involved in getting play equipment for a local park. Now on the council she says that if councils are supportive of local women's positive actions they will eventually get more women standing - which will improve their democratic credibility

It is perhaps therefore no accident that some of the local authorities with the higher proportions of elected women councillors also have sophisticated and well supported networks of community groups - groups focusing on and run largely by women which have been strongly supported by a women's unit or council-based advisory group.

Joni Lovenduski argues that a strong Ngo culture can effect the numbers of women on the local council but also the policies pursued by that council. Her research has shown, however, that where different local authorities establish initiatives focusing on women, such initiatives tend to last only as long as there are interested women on the local council. Once the women leave the initiatives tend to fall as well. On average she calculates they last about 4 years. So women are not only needed in significant numbers to make a difference they also need to be on the council for a significant period if they are to have a chance of changing the council's culture, policy and approach. On the evidence she has seen, she argues that women councillors can make a distinct and real difference to policies and to the council's approach to the local community.

Active women's units or advisory groups tend to have a positive effect on the numbers of women prepared to come forward both to take an active part in the community and to stand as a councillor.

Commentators in Canada and the USA have noted the importance of such women advocacy groups in setting local agendas. Strong community based groups lead to better policies and services being delivered for local women. But again these policies and initiatives often only have life for so long as there are active interested women officials in the local authority.

In a recent study, researchers used the issue of domestic violence to assess how three different local authorities approached a policy issue of concern primarily to women. They found that local community activity supported by the council led to the most progressive and effective policies. The support of local politicians was crucial. The importance of local authority women's committee was also recognised as crucial 'women centred policy change rests on the ability of feminists to control and construct an influential policy network.' Researchers found that whilst all three authorities they studied lacked a co-ordinated coherent policy on domestic violence, in two of the authorities well placed women, both officials and councillors, created a base from which to push for a woman centred policy. The most successful had high level political support.

So women in local government can have a direct and real impact on policy.

The standing of the town hall

The standing of local government, maybe unsurprisingly, seems to be a major factor in discouraging women and especially young women from standing. Local government is not seen as a viable step towards a life in national politics

In interviews women reacted negatively to the idea of standing for local government. They generally regarded local government as a waste of time: full of meetings with few positive outcomes, little opportunity to build a profile and make a difference. Common comments about how they viewed the local council included concerns that 'local councillors were simply trying to further their own careers using the local council as a springboard' or 'were in it for themselves' or 'were relics left over from a bygone age'. The lack of faith held generally towards local government was a strong reason quoted for disinterest in standing. A perceived lack of professionalism was another.

Role of the Parties

The issue of the political representation of women has changed substantially since women first secured the franchise. When women fought for the right to vote in the nineteenth century they also fought for the right to stand in elections because they understood that changing the condition of the woman would only be achieved once women themselves became members of elected legislatures.

In the 1960's and 70's the second wave of feminists were cynical about political institutions and electoral politics, preferring the political authority they found in new social movement organisations. By the early 1980's however there was a reconsideration of the importance of mainstream politics and women in greater numbers became active members of political parties. During the 1980's support for getting more women into politics grew - there was a subsequent shift in agendas of both parties and their women members. Women claimed a voice in decision-making and pressed for changes in the political agenda. In response to pressure from women activist members and voters, gender became an explicit issue for many political parties.

And not just in the UK. The demand for women's representation has had most dramatic success in Scandinavia. Norwegian feminists argued early in advocating the integration of women into existing party structures as a strategy for empowerment. The growth of women's representation in Norway, at all levels has been remarkable. Growing from less than 10% in the 1960's, to 25% of local and national assemblies by 1970s and 35% in the 1980's. They have now achieved near parity.

Nearing the end of the scale is Britain. Demands for women's equality came later - gathering force in the 1980's.

The political parties must bear significant responsibility for low levels of women politicians. Parties have developed strategies to promote women internally, within the party machine, but have devoted less

effort to promoting women externally into elected assemblies and public appointments.

Positive discrimination, to ensure more women are given the chance to stand as a party's official candidate, is often opposed on ideological grounds - by women as well as by men. The more important the office or position in question the more opposition the policy meets. Parties appear especially reluctant to introduce positive discrimination in the selection of candidates.

Local parties can feel that the imposition of positive discrimination undermines their local autonomy. In Canada for example imposing gender requirements on individual constituency organisations has been regarded as national parties are limiting local organisation.

However if such positive discrimination policies are taken up by parties it can lead to significant changes to the representation of women. In Germany in the 1980's all parties except one set targets of women legislators . Some offered temporary quotas - the idea being that the barrier is broken once women have sufficient experience in political position and quotas will no longer be necessary. The policy led to a significant improvement in the numbers of women elected and has largely kept numbers high.

In the UK none of the parties has taken up the challenge of the need to change although all have expressed anxiety over the few number of women who are prepared to come forward.

One senior Liberal Democrat, dismissing the idea of his party taking positive action, told me 'women just don't come forward'. A female senior party member disagreed vehemently: 'there are plenty of women in local parties willing to stand, both locally and nationally. The problem is the culture within the party, which supports men and discourages women. They don't even know they are doing it most of the time.' The party has been reluctant to change internal recruitment policies to encourage more women to stand, choosing instead to rely on local parties listening to supportive rhetoric from the centre.

The Labour party seized the challenge to improve the numbers of women for Westminster by introducing all women short lists in the lead up to the last general election but it has not turned its attention to local government. The policy helped ensure that numbers of Labour women MPs shot to its highest ever from 60 to 101 due to a large part to the party's policy of imposing all women shortlists in 50 per cent of marginal and vacant seats.

However the Labour party was forced to drop the policy after a court ruling that it was illegal to defy anti-discrimination laws. By then most of the shortlists had been drawn up and many women made it to the Commons in marginal seats off the back of Labour's landslide. After the election Labour changed its policy to ensure that short lists had equal numbers of women and men but unlike all women shortlists, this does not guarantee that women are selected. Many of the women selected in 1997 risk losing their seats and many point out that the safe seats are likely to be filled by men. At the moment only one in three of the 700 member list of approved candidates drawn up by the party are women.

In local councils talk of all women lists is rare even though women are more likely to use local services and have a need for a more women-friendly face in their town halls.

Lessons from Wales and Scotland

On 6th May 1999, the people of Wales and of Scotland voted to elect members to their new Assembly and Parliament. Following the elections more women were elected than ever before in elections in the UK. A number of reasons can be found to explain this positive result.

There was a commitment from the outset to do things differently in both their make up and in their working practices. This meant addressing the need to ensure a greater presence of women members and providing the organisation so not to discourage women from coming forward. So, for example, recesses were

designed during school holidays and there were commitments to maintaining family friendly or civilised working hours.

Prior to the elections the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party in Scotland signed a voluntary agreement to ensure equal numbers of men and women were elected.

For the Welsh and Scottish elections, the Labour party opted for a mechanism of twinning to try and help women's representation. The party aimed to ensure that equal numbers of men and women were selected to stand in the constituency seats. This was seen as a recognition that, in old Labour strongholds, getting women selected without help was going to be impossible. One woman Welsh Assembly member told me that without this policy she would never have been selected to represent the constituency she now does: 'Women just don't stand a chance were I come from'.

None of the other major parties had positive policies to help women's representation in either the Assembly or the Parliament elections and proportionally they all fared less well than Labour.

Electoral Reform

Arguments around introducing some form of proportional representation for local government have traditionally focused around issues of fairness and wasted votes. It is argued PR could be part of the solution to the two problems which, more than any other, has hampered the standing of local government: that is its image of sleaze, linked to local one party states.

One of the major turn-offs, particularly for young women coming forward to stand for their local council, appears to be the reputation local authorities have. Far too many are seen as male fiefdoms with one party rule firmly established - and perhaps one party male rule might be a more accurate description.

In 1997/98 one in five local authorities in Great Britain were in a situation in which one party held at least 80% of the seats. In 22 of

these councils there was an opposition numbering only two or three. The lack of opposition leads to a decline in the quality of decision making as arguments do not have to be won or proposals justified. Ruling elites can quickly lose touch with local people as they have no need to engage effectively with the local communities. In many areas people feel their vote worthless.

But PR could also help to improve the numbers of women who are elected to local councils.

The use of PR in the elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly helped win a revolution in women's representation in the UK. Wales now has the second highest proportion of women members in the world and Scotland is third - 40% of Welsh members and 38% of Scottish members are women. This compares favourably with Westminster which, despite the unprecedented intake of female members in 1997, has only half their percentage of women MPs (19%).

Percentage of women in national legislatures around the world.

1. Sweden 42%
2. Wales 40%
3. Scotland 37%
4. Denmark 37%
5. Finland 37%
6. Norway 36%
7. Netherlands 36%
8. Germany 31%
9. South Africa 29%
10. New Zealand 29%.....
- 25 UK 18%

The National Assembly for Wales now has 25 women out of 60, Scotland 48 women out of 129. All the legislative bodies who come in the top ten use a form of PR.

Reorganising Local Government. An opportunity for change?

The proposals put forward by the Government for the modernisation of local government could be an opportunity for change - but only if local councils from the outset of their reorganisation, see improving the representation of women as central to their aims. Changes to the management structure and improvements to the way local authorities operate could provide a basis on which to move forward.

- The improvement of allowances as outlined in the Local Government Bill will obviously help. However this will not necessarily encourage younger women with careers, for whom money is not the central issue.
- Cutting the numbers of committee meetings which seem to dominate council activity could be seen as a positive move forward. The Government rightly recognises that most councillors are hardworking and dedicated but also that they are over burdened by committee meetings. It has been estimated that on average a councillor spends 97 hours a month in meetings. Cutting these hours will obviously help. Lack of time is cited as the most common causes for people giving up the role of councillor. However there is no mention of changing the times of meetings - so women with young families or dependants are not necessarily helped. Local councils should consider Saturday morning meetings and the use of the new media to allow more council business to be done over the web.
- The Government's White Paper stresses that it wants councillors to be drawn from a wider section of the community - including specifically more women, more members of the ethnic minorities and more disabled members. However the Bill makes no specific recommendations for achieving this and so it is once again left to individual councils, or political parties to work out how best to achieve this.

- Enhancing the role of the councillor as outlined by the government could be seen as the chance for local councils to write a new job description for their elected representatives. If local councillors are able to concentrate on broad strategies and on providing a link between the community and the council, women with experience of their community might view this as a worthwhile vocation,. However the danger is that if real power is seen as centred in the hands of a small cabal of people (on past evidence these are likely to be a small cabal of men) with councillors on the side lines as cheer leaders, potential councillors may ask how worthwhile the job is.

Some proposals for action:

1. Parity of representation should be a goal for all local authorities

No local authority should regard itself as having a true democratic mandate until it enjoys a level of representation which sees men and women sitting in equal numbers in the council chamber.

Each local authority should do an audit of its working practices to establish how its way of working might discourage potential women councillors from coming forward. Improvements in working practices based on the audit should be widely publicised locally.

2. Positive action

History and experience has shown that positive action by political parties can lead to an improvement in women's representation. Harriet Harman MP has suggested that the Labour party establish targets for each council to increase the representation of women and monitor progress towards equality. All political parties should take up this challenge. Moreover changes in legislation to allow all women shortlists to be used for local council elections should also be explored as a way forward.

3. Twinning

The twinning of constituencies in Wales helped achieve a greater representation of women in Wales. Local parties should explore whether twinning wards for local elections could work.

4. Mentoring

Local authorities should establish mentoring schemes or partnerships with other local authorities so that they can share experience and develop new ideas together around improving women's representation.

5. Shadowing

All local authorities should establish shadowing schemes so that interested women can get an insight into the role of a councillor by shadowing an existing councillor. Other support mechanisms for newly elected councillors should also be explored, including establishing individual training budgets for new councillors so that each potential councillor knows that they can demand training in areas specific to their needs.

6. Women's Unit must take a lead.

We have a women's unit within the Cabinet office focusing on policy issues of particular concern to women. It has not however to date looked at women's representation. It should see this as one of its primary functions.

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