

**WOMEN'S  
EQUALITY NOW:  
THE POSITION  
IN WALES  
TODAY ON  
= DEVOLUTION**





# FOREWORD

WEN Wales was founded in 2010 to represent and support the numerous organisations and individuals working to progress the rights of women and promote equality across Wales. Since then we have gained presence on both on a local and global platform, providing a united voice on the issues important to women and girls in Wales.

We both, as all women do, have faced adversity. We've found our personal voice and built the confidence to lead the way for the future of all women in Wales in our role as Co-Chairs. Our vision for women and girls in Wales is to have a voice on issues important to them. To make this a reality, we commissioned a series of research briefings highlighting issues where women feel they are most affected by inequality.

This research provides an opportunity for a direct dialogue between women and decision makers in Wales. It effectively highlights matters of inequality which still exist in Wales today, to bring them to the forefront of debate and enable change.

We envisage the series to continue as a staple part of WEN's work to continually address the most pertinent needs of women in Wales.

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# INTRODUCTION

Wales has long celebrated its achievements in bringing gender equality into public and political life, with women playing a key role in incorporating equality into the Government of Wales Act.

It's common knowledge that we were the first devolved government to achieve a 50/50 gender balance, but we've slipped back since 2003. On the UK level many struggle to believe the fact that there have only been 13 Welsh women MPs since 1536.

Wales has an ongoing commitment to creating a gender balance in power. Dame Rosemary Butler's Women in Public Life (WIPL) portal and development scheme will soon show results, but with a number of female Ministers standing down in 2016, what happens next? At the same time we lack diversity in local government – Councillors continue to be “male, pale and stale”, and women account for just over 30% of public appointments.

Change is on the way in the wake of the Scottish referendum and a potential second coalition Government following the 2015 Parliamentary elections. Do women in Wales want increased powers and ability to make further change, for example appointing a Wales Commissioner for Women? Are the key levers for change making slow progress because they sit with Westminster? This briefing can initiate discussion with decision makers to embed equality into the mainstream, male dominated, political world.

## History

For centuries, the political culture in Wales was one that marginalised and excluded women. The style of pre-devolution Wales was “male-dominated, exclusive, ‘centralizing and anti-democratic’,” with low levels of awareness of equality matters amongst government officials as well as politicians.<sup>1</sup> There have only ever been thirteen female MPs from Wales since the ‘Act of Union’ between England and Wales in 1536.<sup>2</sup> During the 1990s, feminists and others lobbied for ways to promote equality to be incorporated into devolution legislation.<sup>3</sup> They were successful, and the Government of Wales Act (1998) and subsequent Government of Wales Act (2006) imposed a unique duty to promote equality on both Welsh Ministers and the National Assembly for Wales. Somewhat later, the Equality Act 2010 enabled the Welsh Government to bring in specific duties in respect of equality for Welsh public bodies.

The Assembly's new equality duties were associated with almost frenetic activity in the early years. To give just a few examples, new institutional arrangements were put in place such as the adoption of family-friendly hours for the Assembly's business and the creation of a Standing Committee on Equality of Opportunity in the Assembly. Arms-length bodies were created to represent the interests of various groups of people affected by inequality. Quotas for women's representation on groups established to administer EU funding were imposed, and most Welsh Government policy statements included (sometimes ambitious) commitments to equality of opportunity and outcome. But did any of the lobbying, legislation, institutional changes and policy commitments make a difference to women in Wales?



## WHAT DEVOLUTION DID DO FOR WOMEN

Devolution achieved a great deal in terms of increasing women's representation in the Assembly and changing some policies.

The 1999 elections to the Assembly broke the Welsh political mould, as women took 24 out of 60 seats. Their success was not an accident but the result of deliberate, and hotly contested, measures to increase representation such as Labour's all-women shortlists, twinned seats and 'zipped' lists, and Plaid Cymru's prioritisation of women on regional lists. <sup>4</sup> In the 2003 Assembly election Wales achieved a world-first by returning 50:50 gender representation.

By 2011 women's representation had fallen back to 1999 levels as parties ended their equality measures and instead relied on 'incumbent overhang' to retain at least some gender equality. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless women are still better represented in the Assembly than in other devolved administrations or the UK parliament. <sup>6</sup>

	Women Ams	Men Ams	Percentage Women
1999-2003	24	36	<b>40</b>
2003-2005	30	30	<b>50</b>
2005-2007	31	29	<b>52</b>
2007-2011	28	32	<b>47</b>
2001 -	25	35	<b>42</b>

Source: Brooks, S. & Ap Gareth, O. (2013) Welsh Power Report: Women in Public Life [Electoral Reform Society].



The 2016 Assembly election could well see women's representation decline even further. Already, a number of prominent women Assembly Members have indicated that they will be standing down. While in theory they could be replaced by six other women, past experience suggests their places are more likely to be filled by men – men replaced women who were standing down in five out of seven safe Labour seats.<sup>7</sup>

Women AMs' representation in the Cabinet has been more mixed. After reaching a high point in 2000-2003 of 50:50 representation, the number of female cabinet members has declined and since 2011 stands at only three women compared with six men.

The focus on equality and the greater representation of women have changed policy and debate. Research on the Assembly's first two terms shows that female AMs were responsible for raising 'childcare' 61.8% of the times it was debated, for raising domestic violence 74.2% of the time, and equal pay 65.4 of the time.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these debates resulted in real shifts in policy. To name just a few, new policies have been developed where previously none existed such as on domestic abuse and forced marriage; practical help has been put in place e.g. funding available to student parents to help with child care; and collaboration with other bodies was developed such as that with Wales TUC to 'Close the Pay Gap'.<sup>9</sup> Most recently, the Wales-specific equality duties and the legislation on domestic violence demonstrate that the commitment to gender equality remains.



# WHAT DEVOLUTION DIDN'T DO FOR WOMEN

But devolution did not – and arguably could not – achieve everything.

Crucially, it did not extend the increased representation of women in public life outside the Assembly, where there has been little change in most areas in the last ten years.<sup>10</sup>

In local government, women continue to struggle to enter local politics. Only about a quarter (27%) of local authority councillors are women<sup>11</sup> – no local authority has more than four out of ten women councillors and in two local authorities (Merthyr Tydfil and Anglesey) less than one in eight elected members is female.<sup>12</sup> Only 9% of local authority leaders are women, a lower proportion than in 2004. Women also hold fewer than one in five local authority chief executive positions.<sup>13</sup>

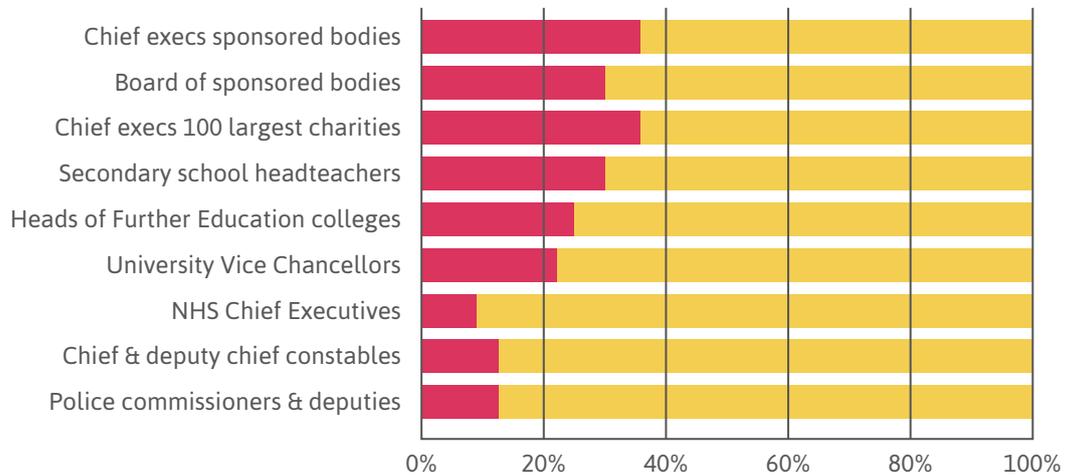
Women are also poorly represented on the boards or in senior positions of Welsh public bodies – a position described by Prof Laura McAllister as 'dire'.<sup>14</sup> Women have in addition been poorly represented on constitutional commissions, with just two out of eight places on the Silk Commission and none on the Holtham Commission.<sup>15</sup>

The impact of devolution on women's lives has been similarly limited. Women continue to experience very significant discrimination and inequalities in outcomes in Wales, as they do elsewhere in the UK. Women are less likely to have a paid job than men, particularly when their children are young, and when they do work it is typically in stereotypically 'female' occupations such as caring, cleaning and clerical work.<sup>16</sup> The gender pay gap persists with women earning about 80% of men's income.<sup>17</sup> Women are responsible for the bulk of caring within the home.<sup>18</sup> And women are still at much greater risk of domestic abuse and sexual violence than men.<sup>19</sup>

## Women in Public Life in Wales, 2014

Source: Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014) Who Runs Wales? 2014.

■ Women  
■ Men





## WHY?

There are many reasons why devolution has delivered less for women than had been hoped.

Most obviously, many of the key levers of gender equality are not devolved. The tax and benefit system, marriage and divorce laws, criminal justice, employment legislation and key aspects of health such as legislation on abortion remained at Westminster. While the Assembly could, and indeed did, develop its own position on everything from domestic violence to work-life balance, its ability to achieve fundamental change was in reality severely constrained.

Even where powers were devolved, the nature of the devolution settlement affected the Assembly's achievements. Paul Chaney has argued<sup>20</sup> that uncertainty about the Assembly's powers took up time as did "Westminster drag", particularly in the early years. Most importantly, because there were few sanctions for non-compliance with the Assembly's policies and legislation there was a real issue with implementation.<sup>21</sup> The problem was exacerbated by policies that relied on declarations of intent rather than robust targets achieved by effective action. The Assembly's recent primary law-making powers, the focus on 'delivery' and the prospect of a 'tidier' devolution settlement ought to address at least some of these issues.

With devolved power limited to 19 specific areas, the Assembly and Welsh Government deliver where possible, with public bodies supporting their achievements. While the Assembly has greatly increased representation of women, the same was not true of most other public bodies. As we have seen, most continue to be male-dominated with equality issues being relatively marginalised, despite their equality duties.

Changing entrenched gender divisions and inequalities is no small task. The deep social, economic and cultural forces that drive stereotyping, discrimination and abuse will not disappear quickly or easily, nor simply at the behest of a Welsh Government policy.

### And so?

Devolution has without doubt improved the lives of women in Wales. That it has not done so to the extent that many hoped says less about devolution in itself, and more about the enormity of the task and the limited powers of the Assembly and Welsh Government. It will take many more years of determined effort to get the changes women desire, with greater representation of women, a relentless commitment to gender equality and a stronger devolution settlement being key to change.



# WHAT NEXT?



**Female representation in local government remains low despite continued effort – do we need to take positive action (such as quotas, zipping and all-women shortlists)?**



**Are we taking steps to ensure the work of female Ministers continues after they step down?**



**Do we need further devolved powers to embed gender equality into the mainstream? If so, what powers?**

<sup>1</sup> Chaney, P. (2003) Women and constitutional change in Wales [A paper presented to the Changing Constitutions, Building Institutions & (Re-) Defining Gender Relations workshop, European Consortium for Political Research, Joint Sessions of Workshops, 28th March – 2nd April, 2003].

<sup>2</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014) Who Runs Wales? 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Chaney, P. (2002) Women and the Post-Devolution Equality Agenda in Wales [A paper presented to the Gender Research Forum, Women and Equality Unit, Cabinet Office 11th February 2002].

<sup>4</sup> McMillan, J. & Fox, R. (2010) Has devolution delivered for women? [Hansard Society].

<sup>5</sup> McMillan, J. & Fox, R. (2010) Has devolution delivered for women? [Hansard Society].

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, S. & Ap Gareth, O. (2013) Welsh Power Report: Women in Public Life [Electoral Reform Society].

<sup>7</sup> McAllister, A. (2014) Presentation to the 44th British Isles and Mediterranean Region Conference “Equality of Access to Democracy”, Cardiff 27-29 May 2014, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Wales Branch.

<sup>8</sup> Chaney, P., MacKay, F. and McAllister, L., (2007) Women, politics and constitutional change: the first years of the National Assembly for Wales.

Cardiff: University of Wales Press (quoted in McMillan, J. & Fox, R. (2010) Has devolution delivered for women? [Hansard Society].

<sup>9</sup> Chaney, P. (2009) Equal Opportunities and Human Rights: The First Decade of Devolution in Wales [A report commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission].

<sup>10</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014) Who Runs Wales? 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, S. & Ap Gareth, O. (2013) Welsh Power Report: Women in Public Life [Electoral Reform Society].

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014) Who Runs Wales? 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Brooks, S. & Ap Gareth, O. (2013) Welsh Power Report: Women in Public Life [Electoral Reform Society].

<sup>16</sup> Davies, R, Parken, A. & Pocher, E. (2014) Working Patterns in Wales: Gender, Occupation and Pay [Women Adding Value to the Economy].

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Women’s Equality Network (2015) Women and Unpaid Care in Wales.

<sup>19</sup> Women’s Equality Network (2015) Women, economic violence and poverty in Wales.

<sup>20</sup> Chaney, P. (2009) Equal Opportunities and Human Rights: The First Decade of Devolution in Wales [A report commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission].

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*