Women ‘leaders’ in local government in the UK

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Abstract

This paper draws upon research undertaken in the United Kingdom in 2006 which examined aspects of the ‘leadership’ roles and functions of female and male councillors. The first stage of the paper focuses primarily upon the number of women councillors and the extent to which they had achieved ‘leadership’ roles immediately prior to the local elections that took place in May 2006. This suggests that women are proportionately less likely than men to become council leaders but that they are as likely as men to hold cabinet positions/ portfolios. However, there are wide variations in the type of portfolio – women are much more likely to be responsible for areas such as social services, education and community/neighbourhood issues, while men are more likely to be responsible for areas such as corporate affairs, regeneration and economic development. The same sort of pattern emerges in the chairing of scrutiny committees. This in turn raises some interesting questions. For example, we have in the past assumed that the gender differences in the areas of responsibility was likely to have been due, at least in part to stereotyping, but given that only around one-third of local authorities give leaders the power to choose their cabinets, and other evidence from this research, this may not be the case.

Building upon this analysis, the paper then analyses evidence from qualitative interviews with 36 councillors in ‘leadership’ positions in local government in England, Scotland and Wales, exploring their attitudes and experience, including around characteristic representation, the representation of ‘women’s interests’ generally, and issues of leadership. From this the paper will seek to provide some initial evidence and analysis about aspects of the substantive representation of women in UK local government, and to raise questions about how it operates (or does not) in practice, as well as perhaps about power and status as they relate to gender and politics in local government.
Introduction

The research upon which this paper is based set out to examine the position of women in elected local government in the England, Scotland and Wales. This is pertinent for perhaps three main reasons: firstly, there has been a slow but steady increase in the proportion of councillors who are women over the last thirty years; secondly, there have been a number of changes to local government in the United Kingdom which have led to questions over the role of councillors, including around ‘leadership’; and thirdly debates over descriptive and substantive representation have encouraged questions as to what difference women councillors might make.

Developments in local government in the United Kingdom

From the late 1990s the government has placed considerable emphasis upon local leadership, arguing, for example, that ‘Whatever the causes, the Government believes that the failure to maximise the potential of locally elected representatives to act in a leadership role as advocates and champions of local communities is a major obstacle to our ambitions for civil renewal and improved public services’ (ODPM, 2005, p. 13).

Consequently local government in the United Kingdom, particularly in England and Wales, has been ‘encouraged’, as part of central government’s modernisation agenda, to adopt new forms of decision-making structures, based upon the view that these would be more efficient, and would enhance accountability and local leadership through a clearer linkage of individuals to policy making and to outcomes (in Scotland greater attention has arguably been paid to the electoral system, with the introduction of the single transferable vote system for local government elections from May 2007). These new structures have focused upon the replacement of the traditional committee system with leaders and cabinets, leaving the majority of councillors as ‘backbenchers, although in a small number of instances local authorities have shifted to directly elected mayors.

The government has continued to emphasise that it wishes to see more visible local leadership, and in late 2006 published a White Paper for England, Strong and Prosperous Communities (DCLG, 2006), Chapter 3 of which includes discussion of ‘More diverse and representative councillors’, ‘Councillors as democratic champions’ and ‘Stronger leadership’. Under the latter heading, the White Paper states that ‘The Government believes that it is important that councils move towards having more stable and more visible political leadership. Our research shows that leadership is the single most significant driver of change and improvement in local authorities’ (p. 55), and contains a promise to legislate so that in
future there will be three models of executive arrangement: a directly elected mayor with a four year term; a directly elected executive with a four year term; or an indirectly elected leader with a four year term. In each of these models the government states that ‘all executive powers will be vested in the mayor or leader’ (p. 55), making that role even more important.

The government has also recognised that ‘Elected representatives are a long way from being broadly representative of the communities that they serve’ (ODPM, 2005, p. 22) in terms of gender, age and ‘race’, and that ‘Being representative means being able to attract more women and more people from a range of diverse backgrounds (p. 23), implying at the least an acceptance of some of the arguments for greater equality of representation and descriptive representation. However, the government has also stated that ‘There is no evidence to suggest… that the election of women or ethnic minority councillors necessarily means equalities are improved or introduced into employment and/or services within local government… It should also be noted that it is not necessarily the case that a councillor who is from a particular group will identify with and understand the needs and circumstances of that group’ (ODPM, 2003, p. 75), again touching upon debates around descriptive and substantive representation. In the 2006 White Paper the government develops an argument more closely related to utility, and in particular legitimacy, suggesting that ‘If democratic representatives are to command the confidence of their communities then they need to reflect the diversity of their local communities. Groups that are under-represented are more likely to believe that their perspectives are overlooked and disengage from the democratic process’ (DCLG, 2006, p. 50).

It is worth noting that involvement in local government is important (in the UK at least) as it is a significant training ground and pathway into national politics. Wilson and Game (2002) point out that following the 1997 general election 56 per cent of MPs (62 per cent of the 1997 intake) had experience as councillors, while in the first Scottish Parliament 40 per cent of MSPs had local government experience (Bennett et al, 2002) and in the first National Assembly for Wales 38 per cent of AMs had been councillors (Laffin et al, 2002).

It has sometimes been argued that local government has been more accessible to women than national politics, for example, being inevitably more local, making it easier to integrate the potential demands of work, family and political life; having more seats and less competition for them; and being more open for women generally, as reflected in the promotion of equal opportunities for women staff and having women’s issues more firmly on the agenda (Hollis, 1989). In the past we have undertaken research on gender differences within the elected memberships of local authorities, but given the increasing emphasis upon the role of local
government and the role and characteristics of councillors, the current research aims to provide an up-to-date analysis of the impact of the ‘modernisation’ of political decision making structures upon female and male councillors and their leadership roles. In relation to the descriptive dimension, this paper therefore provides a comparison with the situation ‘pre-modernisation’, comparing the numbers and proportions of female and male councillors in senior positions with those under the previous committee-based system. In addition, it provides an analysis of qualitative interviews with 36 councillors, women and men, in ‘leadership’ positions in local government in England, Scotland and Wales, exploring their attitudes and experience, including around characteristic representation, the representation of ‘women’s interests’ generally and issues of leadership.

Methods
There were effectively two stages to this work. The first involved the collection and analysis of secondary data from local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales on the models of decision-making adopted, the numbers of male and female councillors, the proportions of female and male councillors in senior positions, and, where relevant, the portfolios for which they were responsible. This was gathered primarily through the examination of authorities’ web pages, supplemented by examination of The Municipal Yearbook, and, where necessary, by telephone or email contact with councils. This provided a comprehensive picture of the position as at May 2006.

The second phase of the research involved in-depth, largely qualitative interviews, either conducted face-to-face or by telephone, with 36 individuals in leadership positions from a variety of forms or authority (county and district councils, London boroughs, English unitary and Scottish and Welsh councils), from the three main political parties and independents, and from councils with one party majorities, coalitions and minority administrations.

It is perhaps worth noting at this stage, that this analysis concentrates on England, Scotland and Wales (Northern Ireland is excluded), but that in general reference is only made to each of these countries where there is a significant degree of difference across them.

The representation of women: evidence from local government
Local government councillors in the United Kingdom remain far from descriptively representative – well under one-third are female, only four per cent are non-white, and more than half are aged over 60. They are also more likely to be educated to degree level than the rest of the population, and are more likely to come from managerial or professional-type
occupations, although many are not in employment, including as a result of retirement and/or because they have become full-time councillors.

Almost regardless of the debates around descriptive and substantive representation of women, there do remain important issues, including in relation to justice and participation, and the limited numbers of women (and for that matter other groups, such as black people and disabled people) who have traditionally been candidates for and elected to local government in the United Kingdom. As noted above, since 1997 this is something that the Labour government has paid some attention to as part of its ‘modernisation’ agenda, including through discussion of ‘representativeness’, although, as we have noted elsewhere (Bochel and Bochel, 2004) and as the local government White Paper (DCLG, 2006) recognises, there are other associated issues such as trust in and legitimacy of the political system, and the danger of continued marginalisation of some groups.

One thing that is clear from any examination of the figures is that there has been a slow but steady increase in the proportions of elected positions held by women in the United Kingdom, both within the Westminster Parliament and at the local level. In parliament there was a very slow increase from four per cent of MPs in 1945 to nine per cent in 1992 and then a jump to 18 per cent in 1997, largely as a result of the Labour Party’s decision to adopt all-women shortlists as part of the selection process. The current figure is just under twenty per cent; in addition one of the early actions from the new leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron, was to signal a desire to increase the number of women contesting winnable seats for his party, although whether this initiative will prove successful remains unclear. Within local government, since the reorganisation of 1973/4 there has also been a slow but clear trend of increasing numbers of women standing as candidates and being elected to councils. The variety of forms of local government make it difficult to aggregate the figures, but at the county council level in England there has been an increase in the percentage of women councillors from 15 per cent in 1973 to 26 per cent in 2000, with 24 per cent of councillors elected in 2005 being women (Local Government Chronicle Election Centre, 2007), while in Scotland there has been an increase from 10 per cent in Scottish regions and 13 per cent in Scottish districts in 1974 to 23 per cent in Scottish councils in 2003 (Bochel and Denver, 1974; Bochel and Denver, 2003).

Given the relatively low levels of women in local government in the United Kingdom it is perhaps unsurprising that much of the academic literature has focused on barriers to participation and recruitment, including individual circumstances, structural factors and political culture (see Bochel and Bochel, 2000), and that there has been relatively little
analysis of women’s progression to more senior positions within local authorities. In the 1990s Young and Rao (1994) and Rao (2005a) suggested that women were proportionately as likely as men to hold senior positions, whilst Bochel and Bochel (2000) found a similar picture for England and Wales but also that in Scotland women were still less likely than men to have progressed to senior positions in elected local government.

With the ‘modernisation’ of local government and the shift towards the new forms of decision making structures we were able to undertake an analysis of 198 councils in England and Wales that had moved towards the new structures by June 2001. This suggested that at that time women were still much less likely than men to be leaders or deputy leaders of councils (27 per cent of councillors in those authorities were women, 10 per cent of leaders were women, and 17 per cent of deputy leaders were women), whilst women were somewhat less likely than men to hold cabinet or executive portfolios (22 per cent of portfolio holders were women) (Bochel and Bochel, 2004). In Scotland, where there has not been a requirement to shift to new decision making structures, women constituted 24 per cent of councillors but only 3 of the 32 councils were led by women and women held only 20 per cent of ‘senior’ positions.

Our current research has expanded upon this preliminary study to cover every local authority in England, Scotland and Wales. Of those in England and Wales, where the new arrangements had been introduced, the great majority (83 per cent) had adopted the leader and cabinet model, 3 per cent (11 authorities) had a directly elected Mayor and 1 council had a directly elected Mayor and a City Manager. Thirteen per cent (54) of councils (all small authorities) had chosen the ‘alternative arrangements’ option’.

The number of women councillors on authorities varied from 1 to 39 (a mean of 13), but perhaps more importantly, the percentage of councillors who were women ranged from 3 per cent to 49 per cent, with a mean of 27 per cent, very much in line with other estimates for the country as a whole. In terms of the political parties, 31 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors were women, 27 per cent of Labour councillors, 25 per cent of Conservatives and 23 per cent of Independents. Looking briefly at the question of whether there is any relationship between the levels of remuneration (as measured by the basic allowance paid to councillors) paid by different authorities and the proportion of women councillors, our analysis suggests that there is not.

Across the United Kingdom only 15 per cent of leaders were women (19 per cent in Scotland, 15 per cent in England and 13 per cent in Wales) and, where such a post exists, 15 per cent of
deputy leaders were women (16 per cent in Wales, 15 per cent in England and 10 per cent in Scotland). Only eleven councils had a woman as both leader and deputy leader, compared with 237 that had male leaders and deputy leaders. However, while these figures remain low, they do represent an increase on the 10 per cent of authorities that we identified as having female leaders in the early stages of modernisation in 2001. There is no statistical relationship between the percentage of councillors who are women and the likelihood of an authority having a woman as leader. However, party does appear to have some influence here, with Labour, Conservative and Independent controlled councils being less likely (11, 15 and 17 per cent respectively) than Liberal Democrat controlled councils (26 per cent) to have women leaders. London Boroughs were by far the least likely type of authority to have women leaders, with only 2 from 32 authorities (6 per cent). Having noted above that there is no apparent relationship between the level of basic allowances and the proportion of women councillors it is perhaps worth noting that the same is true for the level of allowance for council leaders (which varies from £583 to £71,856 per year) and the sex of those leaders.

Touching upon both debates around political leadership and descriptive and substantive representation, the increasing emphasis on leadership at local and regional level in recent years means that any ‘under-representation’ of women (or of any other ‘minority’ groups) may be exacerbated by the greater centralisation of power on one individual (such as an elected mayor) or a small group of individuals (in the case of leader and cabinet/executive models), as well as by the apparently growing difference between ‘frontbench’ and ‘backbench’ or non-executive councillors (for example, Elcock, 1998; Rao, 2005b), as if most of the senior post-holders are male the representation of women would effectively be decreased in terms of decision making positions and power within local authorities.

**Women representing women, or not?**

Having previously examined the numbers of women reaching ‘senior’ positions in councils in the very early stages of modernisation (Bochel and Bochel, 2004), it is now possible not only to consider the current position, but also to make some comparison with the relatively recent past. Starting with a consideration of cabinets in England and Wales, these varied in size from 3 to 15 (with a mean of 8.4), while the number of women cabinet members varied from 0 to 9 (with a mean of 2.1, or slightly lower than proportionate in relation to the numbers of male and female councillors). The proportion of women on cabinets was slightly higher than we found in 2001. Twenty-eight councils (8 per cent) had no women on the cabinet, while no authorities had no men as cabinet members. There is a relatively weak relationship between the sex of the council leader and the proportion of the cabinet who are women (Pearson’s $r = .302$, significant at the .01 level), with women leaders being more likely to have more women
in their cabinet. However, given that only about one-third of councils give the leader the power to choose their cabinet (Stoker et al, 2003), it is not clear whether this suggests that women leaders are more likely to choose women for their cabinets or whether there is some other explanation. There is a stronger relationship between the percentage of councillors who are women and the proportion of the cabinet who are women (Pearson’s $r = .420$, significant at the 0.01 level), and while this may in part simply be an artefact of having more women available (although in itself this is obviously important), it might also reflect other pressures that arise from having greater ‘presence’.

However, it is interesting here to go beyond merely the numbers of men and women on cabinets to look at the type of portfolios that female and male cabinet members hold and perhaps to start to stray into the area of substantive as well as descriptive representation. While this inevitably requires a significant compression of a wide range of descriptions, and in some instances the responsibilities of cabinet members spread across more than one area, Table 1 provides a useful illustration of the positions in 2001 and 2006.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Cabinet Members’ Portfolios, 2001 and 2006, percentages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Services/Inclusion/Welfare</td>
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<tr>
<td>Culture/Leisure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
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<td>Environment/Sustainability</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corporate Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regeneration/Economic Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community/Neighbourhood Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Safety*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer Services**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*The Community Safety percentages for 2001 are skewed by the fact that there was only one council that had such a portfolio at that time.
**Not collected for 2001 as the numbers were very small.

The table suggests that women councillors are proportionately more likely to hold portfolios relating to ‘caring’ areas, such as social services and social inclusion, housing, health and community and neighbourhood services, while they are less likely to have responsibility for spheres such as corporate affairs, regeneration and economic development and transport. Indeed, in these latter instances these differences can be seen even more clearly in some of the
fields that we have included within these overall headings, with 42 out of 46 portfolio holders for regeneration, 36 out of 41 portfolio holders for finance, and 26 out of 29 portfolio holders for transport being men. In Scotland, where many authorities have retained the committee system for decision making, a similar pattern emerges, with, for example, 35 per cent of chairs of social work committees being female.

In addition to the creation of cabinets/executives another feature of Labour’s attempts to modernise local government in England and Wales was the introduction of scrutiny committees, intended to hold the executive to account and to evaluate policy, including potentially prospectively as well as retrospectively. The number of scrutiny committees varies widely, from one (including most district councils, many of which are quite small) to ten, with the mean being 3.8. Our results show that three-quarters of scrutiny committees were chaired by men, and one-quarter by women. As with cabinet portfolios, authorities also vary widely in the policy areas for which they establish scrutiny committees, but the same general pattern emerges as for portfolio holders, with women being more likely to chair scrutiny committees relating to ‘caring’ topics.

Table 2: Scrutiny Committee Chairs (examples), 2006, percentages

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children (92 committees)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/Leisure (57 committees)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment/Sustainability (142 committees)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health (130 committees)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview/Scrutiny* (221 committees)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regeneration (107 committees)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources (77 committees)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes those authorities with only one committee.

Clearly women are proportionately more likely to chair scrutiny committees relating to areas such as children, health and community/leisure services, are much less likely to chair those relating to resources, and are also somewhat less likely to chair committees relating to the environment/sustainability or general overview/scrutiny committees.

However, while there are clearly some major differences in the extent to which responsibilities for different areas of council work are held by men and women, what is not clear from these figures is the extent to which these are, or are not, the choices of the individuals concerned, or are, the result of other influences, such as bias or stereotyping (see for example, Mateo Diaz, 2005). The limited evidence that we were able to gather from
previous studies in the 1990s, when there was even greater under-representation of women in senior positions in local government, suggested that women were generally happy with, and sometimes actively sought, the positions which they held, but nevertheless we had retained some suspicion that this gender clustering of areas of responsibility reflected perceptions of areas of ‘women’s interests’. Among the questions that might be considered here, therefore, are what are the reasons for these gender differences in roles, and what, if any, is the impact of these upon councils’ policy and practice?

In relation to this latter point, what is of relevance and interest here therefore, is whether women are representing women’s interests in these roles, and whether they are actively seeking to do so. It is of interest that these portfolios at least partly reflect the priority areas that Campbell (2004) identified amongst women at the 2001 general election. The fact that only around half of authorities give leaders the power to allocate portfolios (Gains et al, 2004) does not help to clarify this situation, nor does there appear to be any significant difference in the distribution of portfolios by sex across the different political parties.

In the analysis of the more qualitative aspects of this research there are therefore a number of questions that we might start to explore, although the extent to which we are able to do this is inevitably limited by the data available. These include: the extent to which men and women councillors may seek to represent the interests of women; how they might do this through their leadership roles; and whether there are any perceptions of gender differences in approaches to leadership, emphases upon particular policy areas, or in networking. There is clearly the potential for considerable overlap across these questions, but the remainder of the paper seeks to draw out evidence from this research.

*The representation of women’s interests?*

In the interviews that were undertaken for this research, we sought to explore a variety of areas relevant to the modernisation of local government in the United Kingdom, including a number of topics which relate to some of these questions. Returning to the issue of descriptive representation, among those people to whom we have spoken, women were considerably more likely to support the idea of characteristic representation, such as with respect to gender and race, with around three quarters taking this position (regardless of party), than men, of whom about half supported such a viewpoint. This would appear to reflect similar findings at the level of the Westminster Parliament (for example Lovenduski and Norris, 2003) and parliamentary candidates (Norris, 1996). Among councillors there was, however, widespread awareness of the barriers to this, both practical for individuals and in terms of the difficulties of getting measures adopted. Typical viewpoints were ‘I totally support this… favour all-
women shortlists’ (Female, Independent), ‘Yes, councils should be representative, but getting people to stand is difficult’ (Female, Liberal Democrat), ‘We are not into tokenism. It is a bit of a sideshow’ (Male, Labour), ‘I would like to see it happen, but I would reject any measures that would make it happen’ (Male, Conservative). Several pointed out that this should extend beyond gender and ‘race’ so that councils should be generally more representative of their community.

Again, reflecting findings such as those of Childs (2004a, 2004b) that women MPs felt that they had a different style from men, and perhaps suggestions from some academic work that the significant presence of women can impact upon political style and decision-making (for example, Karvonen and Selle, 1995), women respondents were also far more likely to suggest (unprompted) that women operate differently from men (again, regardless of party), for example, putting forward views such as that women are more likely to seek consensus, take less directive approaches, be more open and transparent and to compromise than are men (‘Women see more grey issues; more willing to compromise (Female, Labour); ‘Women are more touchy feely, work more on consensus’ (Female. Liberal Democrat), ‘Women are more open, transparent’ (Female, Conservative)), although a small number of men agreed with this view (‘Women make better, more patient negotiators… a more consensual approach’ (Male, Conservative)). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given these views, women were far more likely than men to identify skills such as communications and networking as important for councillors.

However, interestingly, and clearly relating to discussions of substantive representation and the extent to which women representatives seek or expect to represent women, relatively few respondents, female or male, agreed that women bring different perspectives to issues or emphasise different policies or policy areas from men, with most suggesting that ‘Overall there isn’t much difference’ (Female, Liberal Democrat), that ‘Men’s and women’s issues are coming together – men are sharing roles’ (Female, Conservative), or that it depends on the individual, although again a small number felt that different experiences might have an impact (‘Men won’t have experience of the same issues [such as] childbirth, so on some issues they are likely to have a different perspective’ (Male, Conservative), while one person cited the example, from their authority, of relatively recently elected councillors from different ethnic groups, arguing that they had brought forward issues that might not otherwise have reached the council floor. So, whilst women councillors may be likely to hold positions that have often been associated with areas of interest or importance to women, they do not claim to be acting in the interests of women.
The view of respondents that there is little or no difference in the perspectives and policy priorities of female and male councillors, serves to further confusion possible interpretations around the differences in cabinet portfolios (and indeed scrutiny committees chaired) identified earlier, particularly when combined with the wide range of constraints that act upon leaders (the variety of mechanisms that exist include, in some instances, ruling parties, and in others, entire councils, voting for cabinets (sometimes extending to electing or approving specific individuals for each portfolio)), a situation which is made even more unclear by the growing number of authorities where no one party has an overall majority, whilst many of those to whom we spoke also recognised that there is a process of discussion and negotiation in choosing cabinet members and allocation of portfolios. However, the majority of respondents, from all parties and across different types of councils, felt that there was no hierarchy of portfolios, and where such a thing was identified, it was often seen as being because a particular post was held by a deputy leader, or for specific local reasons, such as that roads or education were currently a high profile issue in the area. The fact that women are more likely to hold responsibilities in some policy areas does not therefore appear to reflect any difference in status or power across cabinets. This is arguably different from the situation prior to 'modernisation', where the chairs of some committees, frequently those most likely to be chaired by men (Bochel and Bochel, 2000) were generally seen as having greater power and influence than others.

The information gleaned from the interviews is again somewhat contradictory in relation to the view that women operate differently. Although, as noted earlier, women were likely to say that they do adopt different approaches from men, when asked specifically about their leadership styles, the majority of respondents, female and male, suggested that they ‘seek to be inclusive’ (Labour, male), ‘less confrontational and more consensual’ (female, Conservative) and ‘informal and participative’ (male, Conservative), although some still emphasised that they are ‘willing to have conflict and make tough decisions’ (female, Conservative). After ‘inclusiveness’, the most commonly used phrases were ‘consensual’, ‘transparent’ (many argued that they wished to have more transparent decision making, frequently citing their predecessors as not having had this) and ‘willing to make tough decisions’. Perhaps unsurprisingly they identified skills such as strategic thinking, networking, communication, ‘managerial’ and IT skills as important for council leaders. Overall there was little difference between men and women, with both being far more likely to say that they were inclusive than any other response, and with women being just as likely as men to say that they were willing to make tough decisions (although it was only women who identified transparency as one of their traits).
There were also two other findings that might potentially relate to debates about women and substantive representation, and in particular to the extent that women (seek to) represent women. Firstly, women were no more likely than men to report that they had experience with community issues and community groups before entering politics. And secondly, women were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to report that they had other political commitments, although these were frequently directly related to their local government role, rather than to involvement in other groups or organisations that might have been expected to act as mechanisms for links with other women. However, it may be unwise to read too much into these results.

Conclusions

In terms of the descriptive representation of women, the results presented in the first section of analysis in this paper provide a comprehensive picture of the position in 2006. On the face of it, the reforms that the Labour government have introduced since 1997, particularly in England and Wales, appear to have made relatively little difference, with the gradual increase in the number of women councillors continuing, and a continued closing of the gender gap in relation to senior posts, such as portfolio holders in cabinets, although the numbers of women reaching the position of leader or deputy leader of councils remains lower than would be expected in relation to the numbers of women who are elected to local authorities.

Despite their under-representation amongst council leaders, it does not appear likely that women are losing out more than previously as a result of the increased concentration of power among the small groups that form the cabinets, compared with the larger committees under the previous structures. This is because the relative under-representation of women in leadership roles does not appear to be reflected in the make-up of cabinets which, on average, now roughly reflect the proportions of female and male councillors, again a change from the position in 2000/2001. What is perhaps more interesting are the differences in portfolio responsibilities considered earlier, and the possible reasons for these. The way in which these portfolios are allocated may be an appropriate area for further examination. Similarly, the apparent relationship between women leaders and the proportion of women in cabinets is also worthy of exploration – do women leaders choose to have more women in their cabinets, or are there other influences at work?

The greater proportionality of numbers of men and women in cabinets in relation to male and female councillors has also been reflected in the chairing of scrutiny committees, although the gender differences in areas of responsibility remain, and the reasons for this are again unclear.
A significant question may again be the extent to which female and male councillors exercise choice over which scrutiny committees they chair.

With regard to women representing women, the evidence from this research is mixed. Women in leadership positions in local government do appear to be more likely than their male counterparts to support descriptive representation (although they are not necessarily more enthusiastic about particular mechanisms to achieve this), and are more likely to argue that in politics women operate differently from men. There is also clear evidence that they are more likely to hold leadership positions in areas which might traditionally have been seen as relating to ‘women’s interests’; but it is here that the evidence becomes more confused, since, as noted above, the extent to which individuals are exercising choice over these roles is unclear. When asked about their leadership methods, both men and women councillors tended to use similar language, with from their point of view, any perceived contrast typically being with their predecessors, rather than with the other sex. In addition, few respondents, male or female, agreed with the proposition that women are more likely to hold different perspectives on policy areas, and there was relatively little suggestion that women are more likely to voice women’s concerns or prioritise particular interests or policy areas. One possible interpretation of these results might therefore be that women councillors are more likely to favour descriptive representation but that they do not expect (or possibly wish for) particular policy responses or greater or different substantive representation to result from this? However, it may be that the answer to whether there is any fostering of the substantive representation of women may depend upon the interpretation of findings such as the distribution of portfolios and areas of responsibility between men women, an area which remains very unclear, and the policy outcomes that arise from these. Linked to this, if the argument is accepted that local government is more accessible to women and that it is often concerned with services that impact directly on women’s lives, then it may be that there is indeed the representation of women’s interests by women.

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