

## Where are the women?

Policy Briefing by the Fawcett Society, August 2011

The latest findings of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Sex and Power report reflect the slow progress of women to positions of power and influence.

Sex and Power's findings show that in sectors where women's representation in top posts has increased (compared to 2007/8<sup>1</sup>), the increases have been small in most areas and in many cases attributable to just one or two women joining senior posts. Moreover, there have been drops in women's participation in 10 sectors including<sup>2</sup>:

- Members of Cabinet;
- National Assembly for Wales;
- Local authority council leaders;
- Public appointments;
- Health service Chief Executives.

Currently, only 4 out of 23 Government ministers in Cabinet are women, signalling a 10 year low<sup>3</sup>. Of 119 Government ministers, including the Cabinet, whips, Lords in waiting and 12 unpaid positions, 19 (16%) are women<sup>4</sup>. The EHRC estimates that it will take another 14 general elections- up to 70 years- to achieve an equal number of women MPs<sup>5</sup>. The lack of women at the top table of politics sends a clear signal to other walks of life: it is acceptable to cut women out from positions of power.

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<sup>1</sup> Sex and Power, Equality and Human Rights Commission, August 2011.

[http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/sex%2bpower/sex\\_and\\_power\\_2011\\_gb.doc](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/sex%2bpower/sex_and_power_2011_gb.doc)

<sup>2</sup> Sex and Power, Equality and Human Rights Commission, August 2011.

[http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/sex%2bpower/sex\\_and\\_power\\_2011\\_gb.doc](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/sex%2bpower/sex_and_power_2011_gb.doc)

<sup>3</sup> Women in Parliament and Government, Keith, K. and McGuinness, F. Social & General Statistics Section, House of Commons Library, September 2010. <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/briefings/snsg-01250.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> No. 10 Downing Street press notice, 19 May 2010, as quoted Women in Parliament and Government, Keith, K. and McGuinness, F. Social & General Statistics Section, House of Commons Library, September 2010.

<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/briefings/snsg-01250.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Sex and Power, Equality and Human Rights Commission, August 2011.

[http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/sex%2bpower/sex\\_and\\_power\\_2011\\_gb.doc](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/sex%2bpower/sex_and_power_2011_gb.doc)

### Fawcett's recommendations

1. Fawcett recommends that Government must lead the response, first and foremost by ensuring that Prime Minister David Cameron honours his commitment<sup>6</sup> to ensure that by the end of his first Parliament, a third of all ministerial places are held by women. Fawcett's research shows that current economic policy is disproportionately affecting women through cuts to jobs and benefits and resulting in women filling the gaps where services and benefits no longer reach. Political decisions of national importance and consequence are still being made with too few women in the room.
2. Fawcett believes that radical action is needed to be taken by political parties. The potential effects of boundary changes<sup>7</sup> coupled with the expected low numbers of retiring MPs at the next General Election (2015) means that women's representation is unlikely to increase in 2015. In fact, ensuring that women's representation does not decrease in 2015 will be considered success. Nearly a century on from women winning the vote, the rate of progress is simply not happening at an acceptable pace. In order to redress the current gender imbalance in political life, Fawcett recommends that political parties adopt party specific equality guarantees<sup>8</sup> to increase the number of women within their parties.
3. Sex and Power concludes that where women do find positions of power and influence, it is more likely to be in the public and voluntary sectors. For example, women make up 48% of Chief Executives in the Voluntary sector. Fawcett is concerned that Government cuts to permanently

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<sup>6</sup> This commitment was initially made in 2008 by Rt Hon David Cameron and was then reaffirmed in 2009 according to Conservative Home (<http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/2008/03/is-david-camero.html>). Rt Hon Theresa May re-confirmed the Prime Minister's commitment during Women and Equalities Session in Parliament on 27 January 2011. Transcript accessed: <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2011-01-27a.443.6&s=at+the+balance+in+the+previous+Cabinet+under+the+Labour+Government.+The+Prime+Minister+has+made+it+absolutely+clear+that+he+has+a+commitment+to+ensure+that+a+third+of+cabinet+are+women+speaker%3A10426#g444.3>

<sup>7</sup> The process of boundary change, together with the reduction of seats, has the potential to affect the number of women in parliament. For example, if established MPs lose their seats through the reduction of MPs (from 650 to 600) it could increase pressure on the selection of candidates for winnable seats. This is likely to reduce the opportunity to increase the number of new female MPs, and indeed could squeeze out newer or lesser known back-benchers as established (predominantly male) names take precedence.

<sup>8</sup> Research has identified three main strategies available to political parties for increasing women's representation: equality rhetoric, equality promotion and equality guarantees. Equality rhetoric is the public acknowledgement of the need to increase women's representation. Equality promotion relates to training or financial assistance in order to redress women's underrepresentation. Equality guarantees identify the need for direct intervention in the selection process to increase the selection and election of more women representatives. This three-tiered equality framework is useful in examining the extent to which party strategies can take advantage of different electoral systems to effectively select women candidates (Evans, E & Harrison, L. 2011).

shrink the size of the public sector will jeopardise women's employment opportunities in the short and longer term. The private sector has historically failed to adapt to women's maternity and care needs nearly as well as the public sector (i.e. by providing good quality flexible and part-time work opportunities). This is illustrated by the (full time) pay gaps figures: 11.6% in public sector, 20.8% in private sector<sup>9</sup>. Fawcett recommends that the private sector could learn from the public sector's success in ensuring that women reach the top positions of power. Fawcett supports Government's current proposals<sup>10</sup> to reform the parental leave system and extend the right to flexible working to all employees as a way of tackling indirect and direct discrimination that women routinely face in the workplace and of smashing the glass ceiling that prevents women from reaching the top positions of power in public life.

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<sup>9</sup> Office of National Statistics, Annual survey of hours and earning, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Modern Workplaces Consultation, Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011.