

Sexism and Local Government – briefing paper

May 2014

Introduction

Over the last year, sexism in Westminster has been hitting the headlines. From the Rennard case¹ to the lack of women in the Prime Minister's Cabinet², it appears the media are starting to take an interest. Not so for local government.

On 22nd May we will all have the chance to vote in the European elections and many of us will vote in local council elections too. Women's representation is still depressingly low in local government – currently only 32% of councillors are women³ - but we rarely see this hit the front pages of national newspapers.

Yet local authorities wield an enormous amount of power. Local government budgets make up a quarter of all public spending (over £100 billion) and deep cuts to local government spending are having a hugely disproportionate impact on women. Lack of female councillors will only exacerbate this situation.

Moreover it appears that the sexism and sexual harassment, which is being increasingly scrutinised in Westminster, is equally as prevalent in the corridors of our local town halls.

Sexism: Councillor on Councillor

Women standing for local election face numerous barriers. From the lack of flexible working and awkward meeting times to selection procedures that favour men (whether by design or unconscious bias), it is enough to deter many women from running.

Those that do get elected find that life is no easier on the inside. This year has seen three reports of women councillors resigning because of sexist behaviour in their

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/10638399/Lord-Rennard-sex-allegations-scandal-Nick-Clegg-wants-us-to-forget-about-it-but-no-one-will.html>

² <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/09/lack-women-cabinet-parliament-maria-miller-resignation>

³ <http://fawcettsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Sex-and-Power-2013-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>

councils - a figure which, because of the difficulties in ousting and being ostracised from one's own party, we can only assume is the tip of the iceberg.

Deal Town Clerk Lin Dykes quit accusing her colleagues of sexism. She reported that she was told that male councillors would be "more comfortable" if she were man and accused other colleagues of bullying.⁴ The same is true for Basingstoke Councillor Laura James who also reported bullying and said her fellow councillors had "a problem with women".⁵

Like MPs, female councillors are also targeted for their looks. Either too sexy - as with the case of Brentwood Councillor John Kerslake who allegedly referred to his colleague's "elegantly formed posterior" during a public meeting.⁶ Or too ugly - as with Councillor Keith Parker who is alleged to have referred to his colleague as an "ugly sister" during a public meeting.⁷

When councils are dominated by one type of person (white, male and middle-aged) sexism can become institutionalized as in the case of Llanelli council which had a male-only dinner. Women were said to have been excluded for fears that they would be offended by the "blue humour".⁸

Sexism: Councillors on the public

Sexism and harassment at a council level is not only directed at female colleagues, but also at the public.

Councillor Pete Chapman called staff at his local Costa coffee shop "bone idle bitches...[who] need a good beating" on Facebook⁹ and, last month, a councillor was lambasted by the press for tweeting a photo of women in their underwear referring to All Women Shortlists in the text. This story hit the national press, though few of these incidents do.

It is inevitable that sexist views held by councillors will impact on the policies they advocate. For example, Brentwood Councillor Chris Hossack who is reported to have declared that women in the town center have "too much on show" and that this was a

⁴ <http://www.dover-express.co.uk/Deal-council-clerk-quit-amid-bullying-claims/story-19974622-detail/story.html>

⁵ Councillor accused of bullying, Basingstoke Gazette, (October 2013)

http://www.basingstokegazette.co.uk/news/10771906.Councillor_accused_of_bullying/

⁶ 'Misogynistic'. New sexism row over councillor's 'elegantly formed' posterior remark, Brentwood Gazette,

<http://www.brentwoodgazette.co.uk/Misogynistic-New-sexism-row-councillor-s/story-19660195-detail/story.html>

⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/politicians-behaving-badly-culture-of-secrecy-and-sexism-the-result-of-changes-to-the-way-complaints-about-councillors-are-dealt-with-9039179.html>

⁸ <http://www.llanellistar.co.uk/Female-councillors-excluded-dinner-blue-humour/story-19809094-detail/story.html>

⁹ <http://politicalscrapbook.net/2013/03/tory-councillor-costa-staff-are-bitches-who-need-a-good-beating/>

“risk”.¹⁰ He reportedly went on to say that he wouldn’t be surprised if there were attacks on women because of this.

Sexism: Councillor misconduct

The internet has provided new ways for the practices of councillors to be tracked. For example Councillor Keith Jones¹¹, who was suspended from his party for allegedly showing an “unhealthy interest in young girls” including following underage girls on Instagram and ‘liking’ pictures of them posing in their bedrooms. Another Councillor from Dudley resigned after allegedly accessing pornography websites on his council computer for a second time.¹²

Why does this happen?

These incidents have to be considered in light of the male dominance in local authorities. Sexism in local government is both a cause and effect of the lack of women councillors. The number of women councillors remains static at around the 32% mark and it is unlikely that this will change much at the forthcoming elections. Only 12.3% of council leaders are women, which is a reduction since 2004.

Female councillors face numerous barriers to election. Those women, who do decide to stand, must first get the backing of their party, spending weeks networking with various party officials through the selection process. There is no mandatory collection of demographic data for candidates either before or after selection. This makes it is very hard to see the patterns of candidates who are successful. Yet party selection committees look very much like the broader demographic of political parties: male, white, middle-aged and middle-class. Low voter turnouts mean parties will often stick to ‘safe’ candidates - or at least those who are well-known, which means new candidates struggle to get through.

Councillors are rarely paid enough to live on so those who are not retired or independently wealthy must also have a job. Yet council meetings usually take place at awkward times making it difficult for those with a job and/or caring responsibilities to attend. This was the case for Councillor Michelle Sheratt who said she was deselected as she could not afford childcare to attend council meetings.¹³

¹⁰ Girls in Brentwood 'have got too much on show', councillor says, Brentwood gazette (August 2013) <http://www.brentwoodgazette.co.uk/Girls-Brentwood-got-councillor-says/story-19651409-detail/story.html#ixzz2zihNM1cO>

¹¹ <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/senior-labour-councillor-suspended-because-5969233>

¹² <http://www.expressandstar.com/news/2013/09/24/ex-dudley-mayor-in-porn-shame-is-now-stepping-down/>

¹³ <http://www.crewechronicle.co.uk/news/crewe-south-cheshire-news/cheshire-east-councillor-crewe-quits-7044227>

Councillors are also self-employed and therefore lack access to flexible working, job sharing and maternity leave. Councillor's expenses still do not cover childcare costs and few councils have crèches so women with children face huge hurdles to fulfilling these roles.

It is perhaps no surprise then, that there are so few women councillors.

What can we do?

Before being closed in 2012 by the coalition government, the Standards Board was an independent body able to investigate claims of misconduct in councils. Though it was allegedly wracked with problems, it was at least a means of redress outside of party politics.

However the Standards Board lacked the ability to fire politicians - one of the key sticking points in how to deal with sexism in elected bodies. Councillors and MPs are elected by the people and therefore can only be removed by the people. Unless an elected official resigns there is currently no way for the electorate to have their say before an election. After the expenses scandal, this issue of 'recalling' politicians was examined by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats¹⁴ but failed to make it to legislation.

There are now few routes of redress for councillors who experience sex discrimination. With the abolition of the Standards Board the main option is now to be investigated by other councillors which, as we have seen from the expenses scandal, does not necessarily lead to justice.

The Fawcett society will be writing to all the party leaders calling for an autonomous body like to be formed which would examine reports of misconduct independently, away from party politics.

As part of our #Vote4Equality campaign we will also be asking our members and supports to write to their local council leaders to ask them what they will do to end sexism and sexual harassment in local government.¹⁵

¹⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2559109/Cameron-ditches-pledge-allow-voters-expel-MPs-lost-confidence.html>

¹⁵ <http://fawcettsociety.org.uk/activity/vote4equality>