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Do women represent women?

Female politicians are more likely to promote 'women's issues' than their male counterparts, but we shouldn't expect them to be the sole champions of gender equality

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Do women represent women? It's a reasonable question. One of the arguments for why we need more women in politics is to improve the representation of female citizens, so there is already an expectation that women will be the best representatives of other women. Does this bear out in practice? And if it sometimes doesn't, why not, and does it matter?

When asking if women represent women, we have to understand what this actually means. Women don't all care about the same things, and they certainly don't all feel the same way about the same issues. But in a world where women face so many injustices, from sexual harassment to tampon tax, from glass ceilings to pension poverty, it is not too hard to identify common causes. And the onus is then on female politicians to defend women on those issues.

Walking the talk

Existing research indicates very clearly that female politicians do indeed look out for other women. In the UK, women MPs have led the way on issues ranging from parental leave to pay and working conditions. In France, women are much more likely than men to draw attention to women's rights. In Argentina, women have introduced distinctive perspectives into parliamentary debates on issues such as women's sexual and reproductive health, while in Australia women have crossed party lines to defend a woman's right to choose whether to keep their baby or have an abortion.

The reverse is also true: men are often poor advocates of women's rights. That's not always the case, of course. Some male leaders, such as José Luis

Rodriguez Zapatero of Spain, or Justin Trudeau of Canada, have promoted gender parity in their cabinets and identified as feminists. But there is also ample evidence that when women aren't part of the decision-making process, their needs are overlooked, misunderstood, and sometimes even actively suppressed.

Donald Trump's male-dominated administration has introduced a number of laws that erode women's resources and freedoms. These include the reinstatement of the 'global gag' rule, removing US funding for any aid agency that has any links with abortion, and an executive order revoking measures to protect workplace and pay equality. British Prime Minister David Cameron and his male cronies oversaw austerity cuts that disproportionately affected women. Oppressive laws restricting women's freedoms in Saudi Arabia were made in the total absence of female representatives.

So it would seem that women are the better bet for representing other women. But when scrutinising women's track records on this area, there are three important caveats to bear in mind.

Not all women are feminists

The first caveat is that we should not conflate being a woman with being a feminist. Not all women are feminists, and not all feminists are women. For example, some women firmly believe that women should be able to stay at home to raise their children, and that abortion should be illegal. Similarly, some men have been very effective and passionate advocates of gender equality. Women across the political spectrum do tend to be more feminist than men with otherwise comparable views, but we cannot assume that someone will be a champion of women's rights just because she is a woman.

The second caveat is that we shouldn't place all the burden of representing women on the shoulders of women representatives. Doing so presents two dangers. Firstly, we risk forcing women to focus on so-called 'women's issues' when their true interests might lie elsewhere. Men do not face any such restriction, and it is not fair to place that burden on women.

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Secondly, we should not exonerate men from taking responsibility for gender equality. There is mounting evidence that a more gender equal society is beneficial for men as well as women. And the majority of female citizens are represented by a male politician, so those men

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The third, and perhaps most important, caveat is that women aren't always able to act for women even if they really want to. Most female politicians belong to parties and parliaments that are heavily dominated by men. Put simply, women are outnumbered and outvoted. They may also be held back by political cultures that diminish their viewpoints and silence their voices.

In some parliaments, women are used as tokens but are denied any influence or power. Even in established democracies, the recent #MeToo revelations about sexual harassment show how men exert dominance over women. Being in a minority isn't easy and it can make it much harder to get things done.

When women are outnumbered, it is easier to ignore or drown out their contributions. The organisation of politics along party lines further reduces the opportunities for women to work together and collaborate. Women, like men, are expected to toe the party line. Even parties with relatively high levels of feminisation are often dominated by men at the top of the hierarchy.

Party before policy?

When male leaders impose policies that are disadvantageous to women, it can be very difficult for women to make a visible difference. One prominent example was when female British Labour MPs were vilified for supporting their party's decision to cut lone-parent benefit – a cut with a hugely disproportionate impact on women.

What the critics of these women did not see were their efforts to influence the decision behind the scenes. Female MPs afterwards explained that they lobbied hard against the policy. But when the final vote came, they didn't have the numbers to overturn the bill.

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If women vote against their party on a policy that will be enacted regardless, all they are doing is throwing away their political capital and any hope of rising through the ranks. This does little to serve their cause. In cases such as these, quiet lobbying is less visible but potentially much more fruitful than a backbench rebellion. But the victories achieved through back channels are invisible, while the need to vote along party

> lines is very public. So we blame women for accepting what they cannot change, while ignoring their efforts to change what they cannot accept.

Similar restrictions apply to women leaders. So few women rise to the summit of politics that those who do are subject to intense scrutiny. They have to fight many battles at once, and gender equality might not be their priority.

Margaret Thatcher, for example, had to fight to prove herself in a very male-dominated world and was not interested in expending her political capital on causes that did not reflect her own world views. Angela Merkel has been more proactive in appointing female advisers and ministers, but she is still better known for her focus on economic policy and international affairs – like most other world leaders. Women should not be held to higher standards nor be expected to do more than their male counterparts.

So we need to be reasonable in our expectations of female politicians. On balance, they are more effective advocates of women when given the chance. But they operate under a number of constraints, and also face a burden of expectation that is not applied to men. Championing women's rights isn't always possible, and when it does happen it may go unnoticed. When women struggle to make a difference, the answer is not to give up on women representatives, but to elect more of them so that they can have a truly equal voice in politics.



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