WOMEN IN POLITICS 12.02.2018 | Emma Rees

Rebels with a cause

Momentum's Emma Rees on how Jeremy Corbyn is inspiring a new generation of British women to engage in politics

Read this interview in German

With women making up 45 per cent of its MPs and over half its shadow cabinet, the UK Labour Party is leading the way when it comes to gender representation in politics. But as Emma Rees, co-founder of the grassroots Labour movement Momentum, points out, it's not enough to have women in high places. Lawmakers, male and female, need to come up with policies that benefit women, and political structures that shut out women and minorities need to change.

Do you think Momentum and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's campaign in general have encouraged more women to get involved in politics?

I think they have in a number of ways, including in parliament itself. For the first time ever, there are now more women in the shadow cabinet than men, and that's powerful. It shows that women need to be represented at the highest level of decision making. That sends an important signal.

Also, all the polls show Corbyn is more popular with women than men. That's down to a number of factors, but particularly because Jeremy's platform addresses policies like austerity that have a disproportionate impact on women.

Is it easier for women to participate in political 'movements' such as Momentum than in traditional party politics?

It's an uphill struggle. There are still a number of barriers that limit women's participation. But yes, perhaps there is a degree to which it's easier for women to participate in movements, because they tend to be

less formally organised so it's easier to bring your children.

That's something we've found with Momentum. When we organise events, we try to make sure there's a creche area for children. We also organise events at various times of day, not just in the evenings, so that different people can make it work around childcare or working responsibilities they might have. And when we've had big meetings and conferences, we always provide a free childcare service.

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That's not to say of course that men don't look after children and have those responsibilities, but still, disproportionately, women do. So, it's often women that benefit from these adjustments.

Accessibility is so important – not just for women, but for disabled people and others who for whatever reason are shut out of the political process.

We've always had the mindset that this whole Momentum project is only going to work if lots and lots of new people are involved and participating, and feel like they can contribute. They don't have to be some political scientist or have been to university, or have read every newspaper.

Why did you decide to get involved with Momentum in the first place?

In the run-up to the 2015 general election, when Ed Miliband was leader of the party, I felt very frustrated.We'd had five years of coalition government, of the Tories (Conservatives) and the Liberal Democrats implementing this austerity agenda. There had been a big drop in living standards; there were wage freezes and lots of cuts to public services that were making people's lives difficult in really tangible ways.

But despite all these problems, the Labour Party didn't seem able to galvanise people behind an alternative. Rather than challenging the Tory narrative, they were saying: 'Oh, well, of course we'll make cuts as well, but we'll just make sure that we cut carefully'.

They just accepted the terms of the debate that the Conservatives had set.

I was a primary school teacher at the time in an area of high social deprivation. We had children coming to school who hadn't had breakfast. We had children with extreme mental health problems,

sometimes due to neglect or abuse at home, sometimes because they didn't have access to the right support services.

That was a very politicising experience for me. There was a real sense that the Labour Party had lost its way, and that it hadn't done enough to help people.

So how did you get involved?

I knew of Jeremy Corbyn from anti-war demonstrations. He's always been very outspoken. So when I heard on the radio that he was trying to get on the ballot paper to become leader of the Labour Party, I decided to get more involved.

It was the school summer holidays, I had some time, so I volunteered on his campaign. When people started to realise he could actually win, there was suddenly this real explosion of energy. So many people getting involved, and there was such a sense of hope - it became contagious.

There were young people like me (I was 27 at the time), and also older people who'd abandoned the Labour Party when Tony Blair was in power, around the time of the Iraq war, and were now coming back to the party.

So Momentum really grew out of that.

This year the UK will be celebrating 100 years of women having the vote. How do women fare in politics today?

Undoubtedly a lot of progress has been made over the last 100 years. But there's a lot more to be done. We're still in a situation in the UK where the greatest impacts of austerity disproportionately affect women. And that intersects with class and race and disability as well.

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We have a female prime minister of course. But I think what Theresa May shows is that it's not just enough to have a woman at the top, even though I obviously think that there should be more women at every level of decision making.

You also need a political programme that will rebalance power and wealth, and build a more equal society. And equality is the end goal.

You said earlier that austerity disproportionately affects women. Are you surprised that Theresa May hasn't pushed through more women-friendly policies?

I wouldn't expect Theresa May to promote certain policies just because she's a woman. I would hold a male Conservative leader equally responsible for his party's policy platform.

The reality is that the Conservative Party have always represented the interests of the richest people in society. That's their history and their tradition.

Today they would say otherwise. But if you analyse the impact of their policies which are very pro-market, you'll see they concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the few. And that intersects with gender as well. So it's more a problem with Conservative political ideology in general.

Do you think in a completely equal society, people would choose to elect 50 per cent women to parliament?

Our goal is to create a society where everybody as an individual is able to make genuine choices about what they want to do with their life and their time. But we're not there yet.

We give our kids certain types of toys and expect them to behave in certain ways, based on whether they're male or female. All that stuff has a huge impact on them.

When I was a teacher I became acutely aware of all the nonsense we still, as a society, pass on to children – fairy tales and children's books that totally play into gender stereotypes. We tell our kids that 'boys do this' and 'little girls do that'. We give them certain types of toys and expect them to behave in certain ways, based on whether they're male or female. All that stuff has a huge impact on them.

As adults, we then go on to think that we make free choices. But of course they're coloured by our earlier experiences.

Essentially, I think the role of political parties and the role of government is to try and improve the lot of everyone on a structural level. We need to remove the barriers people face that limit their participation in politics and society and limit their free choices.



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Emma Rees is the national organiser for Momentum, a grassroots campaigning network in the UK which evolved out of Jeremy Corbyn's 2015 campaign for the Labour Party leadership.