

European Consortium for Political Research
First European Conference 21-23 January 2009, Belfast
Panel 4: Engendering Democracy

Empowering Women by Elizabeth Sidney

The dictionary definition of democracy is that it is a form of government in which power is invested in the people as a whole, though usually exercised on their behalf by elected representatives.

Lyman Tower Sargent, in his 1987 book *Contemporary Political ideologies*, listed six basic elements of democracy:

1. Some degree of liberty for every citizen
2. A system of representation
3. Rule of law
4. An electoral system allowing citizens regularly to retain or remove their representative
5. Citizen involvement in political decision-making
6. Some measure of equality among citizens

I would add Secular Government, so that tolerance is extended to all religions and none. But let's start with Sargent's list. If we look at the UK as a democracy, we might agree that we enjoy the first four conditions. But many of us do not feel much involved in public decision-making. In recent elections about 40% have not bothered to vote and there are gross inequalities in our society.

The most obvious inequality is in distribution of wealth. We are not discussing this today, but equality is not served when the CEO of an average FTSE 100 company may be paid 75.5 times more than his average employee (this current differential is the highest since records began in 1961). The second, equally obvious, inequality is in representation among our public decision-makers. The membership of the Houses of Parliament does not reflect the structure of the population as a whole. Most glaringly, it does not reflect gender distribution.

It is a worldwide inequality. The world average for women in Parliaments is 18.4%, taking both houses together. In Europe, excluding the Nordic countries it is 19.3%. In the UK, 20%. By the time you get to the Arab states it is 9.7%

The Nordic countries are exceptional - here women make up 41.4% on average. In Rwanda, uniquely, 55% of parliamentarians are women. Ellen Sirleaf Johnson is making radical changes in Liberia to ensure women contribute proportionally to public decision-making. But these are completely exceptional instances.

I would like briefly to consider

- Why this imbalance persists
- Whether it matters. And if it does -
- What can be done about it

Making Women Visible

It is worth remembering how recently even the democracies have come to recognise women at all. In the late C18th when the American Founding Fathers, who were amazingly democratic by contemporary European standards, were debating whether slaves should have the vote, they did not even recognise women. The first country to decide that women deserved the vote was New Zealand in 1893. Switzerland did not give women the vote on equal terms with men until 1971.

It also took democracies a while to decide we were all equal. Graduates of some UK Universities had a second vote up to the passing of the Representation of the People Act 1948, and an anomaly in Oxbridge City Councils was abolished only in 1973.

Since then, however, we have had one person, one vote, including women, the first step towards democracy. We have a regular opportunity to elect our representatives and peacefully to change governments which do not meet our needs. Worldwide, democracy is an increasingly accepted form of government. By 1997 about 62% of countries in the United Nations practiced some form of democratic government. But this has not brought the election of parliaments reflecting the structure of the population as a whole and, without this, public decisions are unlikely to reflect all our concerns and needs.

To understand this, we have to recognise that we are still struggling out of a prolonged period of patriarchy which rendered women almost invisible. Many factors have promoted this change. I will mention two which I think have been supremely important for women.

First is the disappearance in most industrialised countries of the age of heavy manual labour which gave men a great advantage. Current employment is in desk work and the services. It is largely unisex, requiring brain and social skills, not brawn. Women are still underpaid - but they are paid and are now crucial, even sole, contributors to many family incomes. This enormously effected women's self-confidence and also marital relationships.

Secondly, there is contraception for women. In UK until the 1950s any suggestion that women might decide whether and when to have children was not a subject for polite discussion. Family planning became part of the National Health Service only in 1974 - until then, women went (sometimes secretly) - to the clinics run by the private charity, the Family Planning Association. It is hard for young women today to imagine a society in which any sexual intercourse rendered you liable to pregnancy and unless formally married - becoming a social outcast.

All sorts of changes become possible once women could be financially independent and could control their own fertility. We have been gradually recognising and dismantling the laws and customs which bolstered male dominance ever since. Until the 1950s, the Church of England marriage service required women to promise to obey their husbands. Until 1990, husbands and wives incomes were amalgamated for tax purposes and financial privacy was impossible for a wife. Nobody spoke about domestic violence before the 1960s. It was a shameful secret which families kept to themselves. Now we know that some 20% of women have experienced violence in the home and we have a worldwide campaign to eliminate all violence against women.

Now Women are Gaining Equal Status

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a hugely significant advance in human thought - a wonderful inspiration, even though still far from being implemented in many countries.

Sixty years on from that Declaration the world is beginning to recognise that women should be equals. The third of the eight Millennium Goals agreed at the UN in 2000 was on the empowerment of women. Kofi Annan, when UN Secretary General, said that without this goal none of the others could be achieved.

In 2008, some important international declarations confirmed the importance of gender parity. The Third Global Congress of Women in Politics and Governance met in Manila in October. Its final Declaration called for the UN to ensure that gender impact is integrated into national plans and that women participate in planning at national and international levels.

The Civil Society Declaration, the outcome of the Civil Society Forum at Doha, affirmed in November that the structural imbalances in the global economic system are all related to persistent gender inequalities. It points out that the money required to provide all children worldwide with basic schooling and to reduce the high mortality rate of women dying in childbirth is a few percentage points of the enormous capital dished out to save financial institutions. It also calls for women and civil society organisations to be included in planning and monitoring of all national development plans.

Also in November, the Sixth African Development Forum produced a Consensus Statement and Plan of Action calling on all African nations and all men and women to promote gender equality, oppose violence against women, accept universal responsibility to protect and respect women and girls and seek a 50/50 gender balance in all spheres of political, economic and social life.

The Doha document itself was finally approved in mid December. In it, as a result of strong lobbying by WIDE, a network of women's organisations, gender equality is unequivocally acknowledged as "essential for economic growth, poverty reduction, environmentally sustainability and development effectiveness".

So there is a strong movement, worldwide, to promote equality for women and that includes equal representation in our public decision making. It raises the questions:

- Why is this so important?
- What difference would gender equality in our parliaments make?

Why is Gender Equality Important?

Some think it important because the present situation is unjust and democracies thrive on fair treatment. John Stuart Mill, in *The Subjugation of Women* (1869) further pointed out that the absence of women in public debate represented a tremendous loss of talent. On that score alone 30% of our UK males parliamentarians ought to be replaced by more able women.

Would it make a difference?

There are good reasons for believing it would. The annual reports of the UN Development Fund show a strong, persistent correlation between community progress and women's emancipation. Family size reduces and children are healthier and better educated. Women's earnings augment family and national incomes. The local environment is better cared for and marital relations improve.

Regardless of party, women's concerns and priorities are somewhat different from those of men. Our lives have taught us, even more than men:

1. That war is futile and there are no winners, only losers. The environment from a small holding to global destruction, loses out most of all. It is no surprise that the two members of the Green Party now in the European Parliament are women.
2. That protection of the next generation is paramount. We need to develop human potential through health, education and love and we need peace and a healthy environment to do so.
3. That political confrontation for its own sake is pretty silly. The UK House of Commons is sadly old fashioned with government and opposition confronting each other two swords length apart.

The German Bundestag sensibly sits in a semi-circle, reflecting shades of opinion, and speakers are called to a podium for all to see. Incidentally, women are 30% of their parliamentarians and this critical mass produces something like normal debate.

In some national parliaments, women have formed strong cross-party caucuses which have successfully lobbied for legislative change on behalf of women. The Pakistani caucus has influenced debates of health equity, family and medical have financial support for domestic violence and reproductive choice. In South Africa, where women are now 33% of legislators, a woman's caucus in 1993 got the principle that gender equality should prevail over customary law enshrined in the new Constitution. They have also required parliamentary procedures and structures modified to suit women, limiting working hours to 6:00pm, having women's toilets and childcare facilities in the parliament and introducing a mandatory requirement for women's budgets to be included in government budgets.

Women's Manifestos, representing a basic list of priorities to present to all parties prior to elections, have provided useful campaigning material in some countries.

The 2007 Irish Women's Manifesto have five cardinal demands:

1. More women in decision-making
2. Zero tolerance of violence against women
3. Sharing of childcare and housework
4. Economic gender equality
5. Equal respect and autonomy for all women

Botswana has a similar list. A manifesto both helps campaigning and provides a list for subsequent monitoring. Such issues are important to all women, regardless of party allegiance. Women do have a separate agenda. It ought to be heard and its inclusion will improve community life.

Some studies provide specific examples of how women's different perspective can effect outcomes. A Norwegian study in the 1990s found a direct causal relationship between the proportion of women councillors in a municipality and the provision of childcare facilities. A study of local councils in west Bengal and Rajasthan showed that women councillors consistently made more requests and complaints regarding water supplies than did men. The number of drinking water projects launched in west Bengal was more than 60% higher in female led councils than in male led councils.

In 2001, the World Bank report Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Right Resources showed a statistically significant relationship between more women in parliaments and reduced corruption. It must be said, however, that women are more likely to be represented in liberal democracies and the link between libertarian and "clean" government is even stronger.

Women and Liberal Democracy

Women have every reason to support liberal democracy and the rule of law. Democratic law rule of law means laws openly debated by representatives, issued to the public, available for general study, enforced by trained and well paid police and administered by an independent, trained and objective judiciary, It is within such a framework that citizens, even the most vulnerable, become free and can live and work without fear.

Since the late 19th century, various laws have gradually promoted UK women's emancipation. Before 1882, when the Married Women's Property Act was passed, women handed over all their money and belongings to their husbands on marriage. Before 1980, when schools were required to offer all children a standard curriculum, girls were assumed almost incapable of understanding maths or science. They have turned out to be rather good at these subjects. Before CEDAW (UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), adopted in 1981, subsequent UK legislation on abolition of discrimination in employment, bias was marked against women seeking to enter the professions. The tide has turned - last year 5,128 women were enrolled as students in British medical schools versus 3,929 men. Women were 63% of those enrolled with the Law Society and 73% of those accepted as student veterinary surgeons.

If the law against pay inequality (passed in 1975) were to be enforced, a continuing obstacle to sharing in the home would be abolished. We still suffer a 12.6% gap in pay and worse in pensions. The government is said to be addressing this at last in the forthcoming Equality Bill. Let us be thankful we do not live in Russia where the pay gap is 35% and despite 1400 women being murdered every year, there are no statistics on domestic violence.

Let us also be thankful that the UK is in the European Union. The Union has issued eleven Council Directives since 1975, promoting equal pay, equal access to employment and social security, protection for pregnant women, the self-employed and part timers and the rights of parents to parental leave. Recently the Union has been concerned to eliminate sexual harassment at work, to prevent trafficking and to help women victims of trafficking. The European Women's Lobby is now campaigning for a European Envoy for Women's Rights and reform of the United nations so as better to represent women's concerns.

Getting More Women into Public Decision Making

So what are the main obstacles in the way of women's political advancement? I will use the four headings identified by the UK Woman Liberal Democrats: cash, childcare, confidence and culture.

Cash

Women generally have little money and women's organisations which could support them - at least in UK - are notoriously under funded. The Women's National Commission, a quasi-official body advising the government on women's issues and representing all the major women's non-governmental bodies, survives on £434,000 a year. In the USA women's NGOs have raised funds for women candidates regardless of party - notably Emily's List, the Women's Campaign Fund and the National Women's Political Caucus.

Equal pay would be a fine thing and we are told that the forthcoming Equality Bill will promote transparency so that employees can compare wages; will require public authorities to report on equal pay; will give tribunals the power to recommend equal pay audits and will give the Equality and human Rights Commission the power to investigate exceptional gender pay gaps. Our national pay gap is bad enough at 12.6% but in the financial sector it is 41.5%.

An important clause in the new Bill will enable representatives to bring group cases to court, removing the present limitation to cases of individual discrimination. Women's organisations would like a bit more than this but it certainly looks like a long overdue advance.

Confidence

Young women today are a great deal more confident than were their mothers and grandmothers and with very good reason. But not enough of them engage in politics. Perhaps they still see it as a man's game and certainly unattractively confrontational. They are anyway busy building careers and/or rearing families. They receive, in my experience, little training in public speaking or self-presentation apart from dress. Most know little about handling the media. This is even truer of their mothers, many of whom still derive much of their self respect from family life and perhaps local community work. But these skills can be learned and suitable training programmes are now days available.

Somehow we have to develop a link between the skills of the home and the skills needed in politics (how about conviction, determination, multi-tasking, contingency planning, for starters) and persuade more women that they can add this extra political responsibility to their lives.

Childcare and increasingly, Eldercare

Overwhelmingly, responsibility for care of children, the aged and the infirm is borne by women. It is of course unpaid. The implications of this for the lives of women was spelled out in a strong statement from the European Women's Lobby and others to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, in advance of its 54th Special Session to be

held in March. The statement points out that the gender pay gap makes it difficult for many families equally to share caring and earning. It emphasises that caring is not free: it is paid for by the carer in lost earnings and career opportunities and lost pensions. In UK, an average women's occupational pension - if she has one at all - is around 40% lower than a man's. Employment conditions are only just beginning to relate to caring, for instance in the introduction of flexi hours, and public transport is mainly designed for the unencumbered healthy adult.

Few women would relinquish their family responsibilities to pursue an uncertain political future, but they should not be asked to do so. We need more good quality children's crèches and play groups and day care centres which children and the elderly would be happy to attend. Why is there no crèche in the House of Commons? The Pakistani Parliament has one. What is wrong with Parliament working a normal working day? The South African Parliament stops work at 6:00pm. Why cannot fathers in highly paid jobs get their work done in 40 hours a week? Cannot the job be divided? Nobody is irreplaceable or inimitable.

Culture

This brings us back to patriarchy. Somehow, equality must replace patriarchy in the home, as well as everywhere else. We are making a beginning by enhancing the role of fathers. Men who already find themselves dashing home to change nappies or help with prep will wonder what all the fuss is about. But many others are still uneasily between roles.

Mrs Joyce Kafanabo, Minister, Permanent Mission of Tanzania to the UN, comes from a country where a man's manhood is suspect if he takes his wife to hospital for childbirth, or collects her and the baby when it's time to go home. But in her speech to the UN in May 2008, in New York, she made a strong plea for active fatherhood.

She described the stereotype of the man as head of the family, provider and chief decision maker as the root cause of gender alienation. She pointed to studies which studies have shown that the more both parents are involved in their children's lives, the better the children develop.

Early in December (7/12/08) The Observer carried a report on UK men's lack of confidence. One market research poll questioned nearly 2000 men aged 16-65. About half felt insecure at work and 40% felt inadequate when out with friends, especially when women were present. But men who are competent, confident parents get an important extra source of self-esteem.

I suppose Iran is currently the most misogynistic regime in the world - from its severe institutionalised restrictions on women to its daily harassment of women in all aspects of their lives. Yet amazingly women's resistance there still flourishes and their latest campaign, for One Million Signatures to support fairer treatment of women, in fact has many men signatories. Like women, they risk arrest and imprisonment by signing, so it is an act of real courage. But they realise that the present regime is not only intolerably cruel but also remote from reality and ultimately absurd.

Bringing the fathers home will do much to strengthen democracy at the grass roots. But we need another cultural change. In the 1950s the UK had national service, in which every young man served two years in the armed forces. This was abolished in 1960, when the forces decided they needed fewer but better trained men. How about

national service in public decision making, a general attitude that a spell in such public service is a normal part of life for both sexes, to be carried out at some stage however busy life may be?

I now convene a small group concerned to promote the empowerment of women and in particular to get more women into UK public decision-making positions. In 2008, our meeting tackled institutionalised bias, confronting discrimination and violence against women. Women who have agreed to aim at decision-making positions join a club which plans projects to improve members' skills and promote each others' campaigns.

Removing Technical Obstacles

Finally, all of us who have spent time trying to improve women's political representation can list unnecessary obstacles which a democracy ought to remove. Here are three which would make a big difference:

1. A strict limit on campaign budgets, to free poorer candidate to stand
2. Temporary quotas to enable the under-represented to gain a foothold. Seventeen countries now have quotas for women and they have the highest representation of women in the world. (ranging from 30% to 47%, with Rwanda on an amazing 55%). Quotas can be abandoned: Denmark removed its quota once women parliamentarians ceased to be the exception.
3. A fairer electoral system. First past the post regularly discriminates against the majority of voters. The single transferable vote produces a fairer result and helps diversity in candidates, including women. The Welsh Parliament has actually achieved gender parity, using the individual vote plus a regional vote. In addition, the Welsh Labour Party used constituency twinning, requiring one constituency to select a woman candidate and its pair to select a man.

The UK Government is issuing a green paper this year, The Governance of Britain, which will include a review of different voting systems and may, hopefully, lead to sensible changes.

Several other changes would be helpful, including a modern layout for the House of Commons, but let us start with these three.

Reinvigorating Democracy

I work for better political representation of women for all the reasons I have tried to outline in this paper. But there is an additional, very serious, reason. Western democracies are already failing in political will because they do not speak with full public backing. They risk failing further, or morphing into dictatorship, if they do not tackle public apathy and disengagement. The measures needed to bring gender parity are also the measures which will re-engage the public and bring democracy back to life.