INTRODUCTION

It is recognized that the balanced participation of women and men in the decision making process should be a key element in achieving equality in a truly democratic society. Only when the gender balance of our national legislature reflects more accurately than at present the composition of society is there likely to be real integration of equality issues into government policy making.

The Research

In the Winter of 2000, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) commissioned a literature review of available documentation and policy initiatives in a comparative study of women’s representation in national legislative bodies. The aims of the study were to:

• Compare and contrast the level of women’s parliamentary representation in the UK with other European and industrial countries;
• Identify the strategies that have been used to achieve higher levels of female representation and to sustain these levels of representation;
• Identify the impact that women politicians have had on policy formulation and, in particular, examine evidence which suggests that an improved gender balance in the national legislature leads to a corresponding shift in the national policy agenda.

The report offers a comparative evaluation of women’s representation in six countries: Australia, Finland, France, Germany, Spain and Sweden. It surveys the current patterns of female representation and considers the key factors that determine these levels of participation. It then assesses current patterns of female representation in the UK Parliament at Westminster, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the European Parliament, and explores the political factors that appear significant in determining these levels of representation.

KEY FINDINGS

In the June 2001 general election, the proportion of women in the House of Commons fell for the first time in twenty years. The EOC believes that all the political parties need to take action to increase the representation of women in parliament and this study provides strong evidence that the decisive factor in raising women’s representation in national legislatures has been the use of positive action strategies by political parties.

A comparison of the Labour Party’s record in selecting women candidates during the period when single sex shortlists were in force with the situation during the 1997-2001 parliament when only a shortlisting quota applied, is further evidence of the impact of positive action.

RESEARCH FINDINGS
In light of the poor record of UK political parties in selecting women parliamentary candidates, the EOC welcomes the publication of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Bill which will allow political parties to make positive moves to increase the representation of women in public life. Such changes to domestic law should permit parties to initiate their own positive action strategies without fear of a successful legal challenge.

The evidence also suggests that where women are present in ‘critical mass’ levels in national parliaments (generally agreed to be around 30 per cent), the policy agenda shifts. This development has already occurred in the devolved parliaments within the UK.

**FINDINGS**

**Comparative evaluation**

**The under-representation of women**

The research found that women are under-represented in all the countries under consideration, but that there is significant variation in the extent of this under-representation. The world average of women in national parliaments is 13.8 per cent. In the countries considered in this report levels of female representation range from 42.7 per cent in Sweden to 10.9 per cent in France. Much of this variation can be accounted for in terms of the differing political systems and party strategies in operation.

**Factors determining the level of women’s representation**

Political factors were the most significant determinants of women’s representation in the post-industrialized countries under consideration. In relation to socio-economic factors, the rate of women’s participation in the labour market was not a powerful indicator of the level of female political representation. Cultural factors such as egalitarian ideologies and religious belief continue to be significant worldwide. Aware of cultural barriers, parties have adopted a variety of strategies to offset the impact such obstacles have on the selection of women for public office.

**Electoral systems**

Of particular importance is the electoral system. The use of proportional representation (PR), multi-member constituencies and party lists were found to be more conducive to higher levels of female representation than majoritarian electoral systems. This pattern is in keeping with previous research, which shows that women are twice as likely to be elected under PR as under majoritarian systems.

**Quotas**

A second significant political factor is the use of quotas for women. Quotas can be set at different levels and can be implemented either by law or by internal party rules. Some are informal undertakings which become standardized as norms, others are formal rules set in party constitutions. They can also be applied to internal party posts (party quotas) or to different stages of candidate selection (candidate quotas). This study found that the use of quotas at the final stage of selection has a positive impact on the level of female representation.

Of the countries considered, only France has implemented quotas by law. These were introduced for local, regional and European elections and were used for the first time in March 2001. It is too soon to assess its long-term impact, but the number of women representatives in the cities increased from 22 per cent to 47.5 per cent following the first elections to be held under the new ‘parity’ law.
Certain political parties have implemented quotas by internal party rules. Parties of the left or centre have introduced quotas earlier and more often than have parties of the right. In Germany, the Green Party introduced party quotas in 1980, the Social Democrats in 1988 and the Christian Democratic Party in 1996. In Sweden, the Left Party introduced party quotas in 1990 and the Social Democratic Party in 1993: the Moderate Party has still to introduce them.

There are two major implications which emerge from this. Firstly, the introduction of quotas by parties of the left appears to generate some pressure amongst parties of the right to introduce quotas themselves at a later stage. Secondly, there is a correlation between the implementation of party quotas and the level of female representation in that party.

Quotas have also been introduced earlier and more often for internal party posts than they have for candidate selection, for example: by PSOE in Spain, the Social Democratic Party in Germany and the Labour Party in Australia. There is a positive correlation between the implementation of candidate quotas and the level of female representation in that party. Candidate quotas are adopted more frequently under PR systems but they have a positive impact on female representation regardless of the electoral system, and a greater impact than party quotas.

**United Kingdom**

**Westminster**

At the time of the June 2001 general election, women comprised 18.2 per cent of the MPs in the House of Commons. Following the election women now comprise 17.9 per cent. 37 per cent of Members of the Scottish Parliament, 42 per cent of the National Assembly for Wales and 24 per cent of British members of the European Parliament are female.

Between April 1992 and May 1997 the number of women MPs in the House of Commons doubled from 60 to 120, the largest number elected at any general election in the United Kingdom. Over 80 per cent of these were elected as Labour MPs.

Of the 65 new female Labour MPs who were elected to the House of Commons in 1997, 35 were selected for their seats as a result of the party’s policy of all women shortlists. Out of a total of 418 Labour MPs, 101 women were returned (24.2 per cent). At the 2001 general election, 95 out of 412 (23.1 per cent) were returned.

In contrast to Labour, the number of Conservative women MPs has risen very slowly over the last 20 years. In 1997, only 13 Conservative women MPs were returned, out of a total of 165 (7.8 per cent). At the 2001 general election 14 out of 166 (8.4 per cent) were returned.

In May 1997, out of 46 Liberal Democrat MPs returned, only 3 were women, a proportion of 6.5 per cent. At the 2001 general election 5 were returned, out of 52 (9.6 per cent).

There was a striking variation between the parties at the 1997 general election in terms of the proportion of women candidates who were successful in being elected. Labour nominated 158 women, 101 of whom won (63.9 per cent); the Conservatives 67 women of whom 13 were successful (19.4 per cent); the Liberal Democrats 142 women of whom 3 were successful (2 per cent).

These figures indicate two distinct barriers to entry into parliament for women: nomination and election. Nomination was a key barrier in the case of the Conservative Party: just 10 per cent of their candidates were female. Election was a
key barrier in the case of the Liberal Democrats: although over 20 per cent of their candidates were women only 2 per cent were elected, compared with 9 per cent of male candidates. This indicates that women were disproportionately nominated for unwinnable seats. The situation with regard to the Labour Party is discussed below under 'Party and candidate quotas'.

The Scottish Parliament
The first election to the Scottish Parliament in May 1999 returned 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs): 73 for constituencies and 56 from the regional lists (a system of PR). 48 women MSPs were elected, 37.2 per cent of the total number. 30 were elected for constituencies (41.1 per cent) and 18 from the regional lists (32.1 per cent). Women comprised:

• 28 out of 56 members of the Labour group;
• 15 out of 35 members of the Scottish Nationalist group;
• 3 out of 18 Conservatives;
• 2 out of 17 Liberal Democrats.

The National Assembly for Wales
The first elections to the National Assembly for Wales in May 1999 returned 24 female Assembly Members (AMs) out of 60. As with the Scottish Parliament candidates were elected to constituencies and by regional lists. Women comprised 47.5 per cent of those elected to constituency seats and 25.0 per cent of those elected by the regional list. Women comprised:

• 15 out of 28 members of the Labour group;
• 6 out of 17 members of Plaid Cymru;
• none of the 9 Conservatives;
• and 3 out of 6 Liberal Democrats.

The European Parliament
The percentage of British women members of the European Parliament (MEPs) rose from 18 per cent at the European elections in 1994 to 24.1 per cent at the 1999 elections. Women comprised:

• 10 out of 29 members of the Labour group;
• 3 of the 36 Conservatives;
• 5 of the 10 Liberal Democrats;
• 1 of 2 members of Plaid Cymru;
• both Green Party members;
• neither of the 2 members from the Scottish National Party and none of the 3 from Northern Irish parties (SDLP, DUP, UUP).

For the 1999 elections a new electoral system of proportional representation, based on regional lists, was introduced. This switch to PR did not increase women’s representation in all parties. Among Conservative MEPs for example, the proportion of women fell from 11.0 per cent in 1994 to 8.3 per cent in 1999.

Factors determining the level of women’s representation
Whilst cultural and socio-economic factors clearly continue to act as barriers to women’s increased representation, political factors are of particular significance.

Electoral systems
The introduction of systems involving PR for elections to the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and European Parliament obliged participating parties to adopt a list system. It might have been anticipated that the deployment of lists would have boosted the representation of women as it has done in many European countries, but the impact of PR proved to be disappointing.
The explanation for this is that some of the parties winning seats in the Scottish, Welsh and European elections did not place women sufficiently highly on their lists. One method of achieving this is zipping. This can be applied within a party list system whereby women and men are placed alternatively on the party list of candidates.

In Scotland, no party zipped its lists by alternating between male and female candidates although in Wales, Plaid Cymru and the Labour Party zipped their ranking for the lists. In the European elections, only the English Liberal Democrats followed a strategy of zipping. PR will only advance the representation of women if the parties winning seats from lists place women in electable positions. This was not the case in Scotland and Wales.

The disappointing impact of PR in the devolved assembly elections is not the consequence of the rankings given to female candidates alone. It is also a result of the way that the distribution of political support in Scotland and Wales combined with the voting system, in which Additional Members top up constituency results.

The Labour Party adopted twinning for the constituency seats, a system that can be applied within a constituency majoritarian system. Neighbouring seats are twinned taking into account their ‘winnability’. The members of the two constituencies select candidates together and each individual votes for one man and one woman. The man and woman with the most votes are selected and an arrangement is reached as to who should have which seat.

The Labour Party did well in the constituency element of the election accordingly winning few seats as part of the regional allocation. Had Labour not used twinning for the majoritarian aspect of the electoral system, far fewer women would have been elected to the two bodies. Thus, the high proportion of women elected to the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament was not due to PR, but to Labour’s policy of twinning.

Party organization
Political parties in the United Kingdom have employed three kinds of strategy to increase the level of female representation: rhetorical (a commitment to some form of change); affirmative action (measures to help selection such as training); and positive action (such as the use of zipping, quotas and twinning).

The Conservative Party has relied upon rhetorical strategies; the Liberal Democrats have employed rhetorical strategies, some affirmative action and a limited use of positive action; and the Labour Party has employed all three strategies: for more than a decade it has advocated measures to increase the representation of women.

Party and candidate quotas
In the United Kingdom, only the Labour Party has used candidate quotas requiring that a certain percentage of parliamentary candidates must be women. Other parties (notably the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru) have adopted quotas at an earlier stage in the selection process, most commonly shortlisting.

Between 1993 and 1996, Labour adopted candidate quotas in the form of ‘all women shortlists’. This strategy planned that only women would be shortlisted for: half of the seats where a sitting Labour MP was retiring; and half of those seats which the party had targeted as the most likely to win from other parties. The policy was a controversial one and generated some opposition at a grassroots level.
It was dropped in January 1996, following legal challenges brought by two aggrieved male aspirants at an Industrial Tribunal (IT) held in Leeds. The Tribunal accepted the argument that the selection procedure facilitates access to employment and is therefore subject to the UK Sex Discrimination Act, which prevents discrimination on the grounds of sex.

Following this, Labour returned to the kind of measure it had used between 1987 and 1992. For the 1997-2001 round of parliamentary selections, the party insisted on equal numbers of men and women on parliamentary shortlists (and at least two of each). This policy resulted in very few female MPs being selected and only 10.3 per cent of those selected for vacancies in Labour held seats in 2001 were women. This level is below that of 1997 (when the all women shortlists policy was in place): it also falls below the level achieved in 1992 and 1987.

The low number of women selected by Labour was neither a reflection of a failure by women to put themselves forward nor an indication that there had not been potential female aspirants on shortlists. It stemmed from the decision of the party membership not to vote for those women who had been shortlisted.

The low proportion of women selected to fight Labour held seats in 2001 indicated that the notion that all women shortlists would decisively reform the party’s culture in one parliament had been hopelessly optimistic. It is now clear that policies of positive action need to be in place longer if the level of female representation is to be increased on a sustained basis.

Following the January 1996 IT ruling, parties have been concerned about the legality of pursuing any forms of positive action for the selection of parliamentary candidates. For the 2001 general election, the Labour Party included a manifesto commitment that the legal framework governing the selection of parliamentary candidates would be amended and the Queen’s Speech of June 2001 announced that such legislation would be prepared. The aim of legal change should be to permit political parties to take whatever form of positive action that they believe is necessary without fear of legal challenge.

**Career pathways**

An analysis of the career profiles of women MSPs and AMs suggests that they have followed fairly traditional pathways into politics. Many of the women entering the Scottish Parliament had orthodox political backgrounds in terms of having trade union links, worked in local government or been elected as a councillor. The National Assembly for Wales is similar with an added emphasis on experience within Quangos.

**Policy formulation**

Many of those who argue in favour of women’s increased representation suggest that there is a distinctive woman’s policy agenda that could lead to new policy outcomes and also possibly a new style of policy making. The election of 101 Labour women on 1 May 1997, 65 of them for the first time, created very high expectations regarding women’s influence of policy formulation.

However, even though Labour’s policy contributed to an overall increase in the proportion of women in the 1997-2001 parliament to 18.2 per cent, this was still below what is understood to be a ‘critical mass’. Critical mass theory argues that once the proportion of women in the legislature rises to around 30 per cent there will be a change in the policy agenda to reflect more accurately the interests of both women and men.
Research indicates that across most policy issues it is party rather than gender that proves the strongest predictor of attitudes; but that women consistently place themselves slightly to the left of men within their party; and that women, in each major party, are significantly more egalitarian than men on the issue of gender roles in the labour force and home. This suggests that the policy agenda of women MPs is most distinct from that of male MPs on gender-related issues.

There has been much debate as to whether the new intake of women MPs has had a discernible impact on the policy outcomes of government. The new women MPs came to be viewed by some commentators as disappointingly passive and loyal to the government: an image that was epitomised by the fact that all but one of the 1997 intake women voted to support the decision to abolish the benefit premium for lone parents.

Despite harsh press judgments, it is clear that in some areas women MPs have shaped policy output. Amongst the female MPs themselves, there is widespread support for the claim that their presence enables the articulation of women’s concerns at the centre of political debates. Women MPs particularly emphasized the positive impact of women representatives on select committees.

There is more evidence that the relatively high number of women in the new Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales has shaped their policy agendas. In both these bodies women parliamentarians have championed issues such as childcare, the social economy and equal pay. Their impact on policy formation is perceived to be more positive than has been the case in Westminster. This supports the ‘critical mass’ theory, which suggests that once women gain around 30 per cent of the seats, they can more easily influence the terms of debate.

There is also evidence to suggest that female Labour MPs have adopted, and been encouraged to pursue, a strategy of private intervention and behind-the-scenes pressure, rather than to make public challenges. This may be a positive choice on their part to adopt consensual strategies of change, or it may be a pragmatic response to media hostility.

The Women’s Unit
The Women’s Unit, which was first established in the Department of Social Security in 1997 and moved to the Cabinet Office in 1998, has been the focus of much discussion in recent years.

It is clear from an analysis of similar bodies in other countries that there are key criteria that determine their effectiveness. Women’s Units require stability in personnel in order that they can network effectively across government. The place where units are situated within government has also been a key determinant of their success. For example, the Office of the Status of Women in Australia had its strongest influence when it reported to the Prime Minister.

Units also need to be well resourced if they are to carry out their task of mainstreaming the gender perspective across all areas of policymaking. In addition, they require a clear statement of aims in order to guide their work across government.

Policy conclusions
The balanced participation of women and men in the decision making process should be a key element in achieving equality in a truly democratic society. The policies that could be adopted to pursue this aim should:
Women in Parliament: A Comparative Analysis

- Ensure that women are not discriminated against at the shortlisting and nomination stages of candidate selection;
- Ensure that women are not discriminated against in the electoral system of candidate election;
- Ensure that women are not marginalized in the decision-making process.

This policy agenda requires that three strategies be adopted by political parties:

- Rhetorical support (a commitment to change);
- Affirmative action (measures to help selection such as training);
- Positive action (including the use of quotas, zipping or twinning).

The pursuit of strategies of positive action will require that the government introduces legislation to allow political parties to ensure that more women are chosen to stand for election to the House of Commons. This will require changes to the legal framework governing the selection of parliamentary candidates.

Once the law is changed, parties should be encouraged to adopt forms of positive action in order to increase the number of female candidates that they select. Measures that could be adopted include: zipping in elections where proportional representation is the electoral system; twinning, which has been used successfully in the 1999 Welsh and Scottish elections; and quotas, which successfully raised the percentage of Labour women elected to the House of Commons in 1997.

In addition, to ensure that women are not marginalized in the decision-making process, there should be a direct link between the government’s policy agenda (substantive representation) and the level of women’s representation in parliament (descriptive representation). To enable this, the government should:

- Support some form of machinery for women. This could be either a Women’s Unit or an Equality Unit.

This support should comprise three factors:

- Adequate resources (funding, staffing and information);
- Effective integration (well-established and meaningful links with ministries across government);
- Ideological alignment (a commitment to mainstreaming underpinning the administration’s programme).

Women in Parliament: A Comparative Analysis by Judith Squires and Mark Wickham-Jones was published in the EOC Research Discussion Series in August 2001. It can be downloaded from the EOC website and hard copy is available from the EOC.

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