



**Gendered Experiences, Institutions, Leadership
and Representation: A Feminist Institutional
Analysis of Welsh Local Government**

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(PhD) in Social Policy.

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Abstract

This thesis adopted a feminist institutionalist lens to explore women's political representation in Welsh local government. It examined the gendered experiences of women local councillors and how these were affected by contexts, cultures, and norms. Combining feminist institutionalist analysis with political representation theory the thesis assessed whether previously-identified issues shaping women's substantive representation at the national level played out similarly in local governance. This thesis' original contribution was made through attending to a lacuna in current academic literature, presenting a theoretically informed study of the gendered experiences of local councillors in Wales, the gendered contexts and (in)equality issues in Welsh local-level political institutions, and the impact of formal and informal institutional contexts on women's political representation and participation.

The qualitative study involved a multiple case-study design with four local councils. Nineteen semi-structured, 'elite' interviews were conducted with female councillors from a range of political parties, council roles, and durations in office. The key research findings are divided into four sections – 1) gendered (s)elections, 2) institutions, 3) representation, and 4) leadership. Interviewees were motivated to stand for election by community concerns, often encouraged by political peers, and had mixed views on positive action techniques. Welsh local councils have written and unwritten gendered rules which created considerable barriers to women facing the 'triple duty' of political, personal, and professional responsibilities. Informal norms inside and outside of local councils contributed to an environment with continued sexism and gendered discrimination. Women's interests were reflected through women-specific policies championed by women critical actors, but women's substantive representation was not guaranteed by achieving critical mass, and was limited by political partisanship, reticence towards cross-party working, and by austerity. Women faced a 'labyrinth to leadership', but once at the top were crucial for substantive representation, encouraging other women into seniority, and initiating the re-gendering of their institutions.

Preface: Statement of Papers Authored Related to Thesis:

It is highlighted here that data and evidence from this thesis has been used in a published journal article. The article in question: *“I was able to take part in the chamber as if I was there” – women local councillors, remote meeting attendance, and Covid-19: a positive from the pandemic?*” was published in the Journal for Cultural Research in January 2022 as part of a ‘Gender and the Pandemic’ special issue. The article is cited throughout this thesis and provides a more detailed discussion of the perceived benefits of remote meeting attendance for women local councillors in Wales as a means to reduce the “triple duty” of balancing political office with personal and professional commitments or responsibilities. It can be accessed (Open Access) here:

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Table of Contents

Abstract	I
Preface: Statement of Papers Authored Related to Thesis:	II
Table of Contents	III
List of Abbreviations	VII
List of Tables and Figures	VIII
Acknowledgments	XI
Chapter One: Introduction	1
1.1: Motivations for the Study and Research Context	2
1.1.1: The International Policy Context	2
1.1.2: Arguments for Women’s Political Participation and Representation.....	4
1.1.3: Why (Welsh) local government?.....	6
1.2: Structure and Outline of This Thesis	16
Chapter Two: Literature Review	19
2.1: A Note on Gender	20
2.2: Representation – From ‘looking like’ to ‘acting for’	22
2.2.1: Defining ‘representation’	22
2.2.2: Descriptive and Substantive Representation – Definitions and Debates.....	24
2.3: Feminist Institutionalism	36
2.3.1: Origins and Influences	37
2.3.2: Investigating Informal Institutional Norms.....	41
2.3.3: (How) Do Institutions Change?.....	46
2.4: The Labyrinth to Leadership? – Women Political Leaders	52
2.4.1: From Concrete Wall, to Glass Ceiling, to a Labyrinth?.....	52
2.4.2: Gendered Political Leadership Traits	55
2.4.3: Committee Position Makes a Difference	56
2.5: Conclusion, Theoretical Mapping, and Research Questions	60

2.5.1: Theoretical Mapping – Agency and Structure as an Analytical Framework for Understanding Women’s Political Representation.....	62
2.5.2: Research Questions as Related to the Conceptual Framework	66
Chapter Three: Epistemology, Methodology, and Research Reflections	70
3.1: Introduction.....	70
3.2: Epistemological Influences: Feminist Interpretivism, Standpoint Theory, and Feminist Institutionalism	70
3.2.1: Methodology in Feminist Political Science	74
3.3: Research Design	75
3.3.1: Case Studies	75
3.3.2: The Four Local Councils.....	77
3.3.3: The Sample.....	79
3.3.4: Semi-Structured, Locally Elite Interviews	84
3.3.5: Ethical Concerns: To Anonymise or Not to Anonymise?.....	86
3.3.6: The Shift Online.....	88
3.3.7: Transcription and Data Analysis.....	90
3.4: Reflections on the Interviewing Process.....	93
3.5: Conclusion	100
Chapter Four: Gendered (S)elections, Expectations, and Political Socialisation	102
4.1: Introduction.....	102
4.2: Deciding to Stand for Election – Gendered Motivations.....	103
4.3: Political Parties, Gatekeepers, and Gendered Selection Processes.....	109
4.4: “Learning the Ropes” – Expectations, Initial Experiences, and Political Socialisation	121
4.5: Conclusion	127
Chapter Five: Gendered Institutions I – Formal Organisational Practices.....	128
5.1: Introduction.....	128
5.2: “The Triple Duty” – Balancing the Political, Professional, and Personal	130

5.2.1: Political and Professional (and poorly paid)	131
5.2.2: Political and the Personal	134
5.3: Alleviating the Triple Duty	146
5.4: Conclusion	157
Chapter Six: Gendered Institutions II – Informal Norms and Cultures	159
6.1: Introduction.....	159
6.2: Still an Old Boys’ Club? – Macho Culture and Sexism on the Inside.....	160
6.3: “More visible and vulnerable to attack” – Sexism, Abuse, and Violence from the Outside	165
6.4: Doing Politics Differently?	171
6.5: Conclusion	179
Chapter Seven: Gendered Leadership.....	180
7.1: Introduction.....	180
7.2: Getting to the Top – Navigating the Labyrinth to Leadership.....	182
7.2.1: Institutional Obstacles in the Labyrinth to Leadership	186
7.2.2: The Importance of Gatekeepers	188
7.3: Does Seniority Make a Difference?.....	195
7.4: Conclusion	203
Chapter Eight: Gendered Representation.....	204
8.1: Introduction.....	204
8.2: Does Critical Mass Matter?	206
8.3: Barriers to Women’s Substantive Representation	217
8.4: Conclusion:	226
Chapter Nine: Conclusion, Recommendations, and Original Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions of the Thesis to the Field	228
9.1: Introduction.....	228
9.2: Attending to the Research Questions.....	230
9.3: Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research.....	256

9.4: Recommendations for Policy and Institutional Change	259
9.5: Reflections on this Thesis’ Original Theoretical Contributions and Utility of the Analytical Framework	263
9.5.1: The Original Contribution of the Thesis	263
9.5.2: Value of the Conceptual Framework for Illuminating the Case Study	266
9.5.3: Utility, Value, and Challenges of the Analytical Framework and its Implications for Wider Scholarship and Future Research	273
Addendum	278
Addendum 1: Reflections on the May 2022 Local Council Elections in Wales:	278
Appendices.....	279
Appendix A: Interview Schedule.....	279
Appendix B: Ethical Approval Letter	284
Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet.....	285
Appendix D: Consent Form.....	288
Appendix E: Scanned copy of colour coded key created during thematic analysis:	289
Bibliography	290

List of Abbreviations

BDPfA – Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

EHRC – Equality and Human Rights Commission

ERSC – Electoral Reform Society Cymru

IPU – Inter-Parliamentary Union

IRPW – Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales

LGA – Local Government Association

MDG – Millennium Development Goals

MP – Member of Parliament

MS – Member of the Senedd

MSP – Member of the Scottish Parliament

NAfW – National Assembly for Wales (now re-named Senedd Cymru)

SDG – Sustainable Development Goals

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

WLGA – Welsh Local Government Association

List of Tables and Figures

<u>Graphs</u>	<u>Page:</u>
1.1: Percentage of women politicians present in UK political legislatures	7
1.2: The Range of Women's Descriptive Representation Across Councils in Wales (anonymised - data created manually by researcher via individual council websites)	12
1.3: Percentage of all female councillors elected by political party	13
1.4: Percentage of Senior Positions held by women in Welsh councils	14
5.1: Employment status of local councillors in Wales (Expert Group on Diversity in Local Government 2014)	134
<u>Tables</u>	<u>Page:</u>
1.1: Proportion of women elected to Welsh local councils (2017)	12
1.2: Return or success rate for women local candidates being elected by each main political party (2017 Welsh local elections)	13
2.1: Key characteristics of Theelen and Streek's Four Types of Institutional Change (adapted from Streek and Thelen (2005) and Mahoney and Thelen (2009))	52
2.2: Adapted from Krook and O'Brien (2012) showing distribution of Ministries by prestige and gender	60
2.3: Presence of each aspect of the theoretical framework within the operationalised research questions	70
3.1: Summary of key characteristics of the four case study sites	80
3.2: Political party membership of councillors in the sample	83
3.3: Number of women in senior positions in Councils A-D and percentage (%) of women in senior positions interviewed in each case study councils	83
3.4: Interviewee details including pseudonym, year elected, political party, and whether she held a senior position at time of interview (or previously)	84
3.5: Length of interview and number of words transcribed per participant	91

4.1: Participants' responses regarding whether they were asked to stand and who by	112
5.1: Remuneration Rates for Welsh Local Councillors where 'Band' is based on population of the council city or borough (Band A = >200,000; Band B = 100,000-200,000; Band 'C' = <100,000)	134
5.2: Travel and Care expenses claimed across four case study councils 2016-2019	140
5.3: Timings of key council meetings across the four case study councils (as of 2021/22 year)	146
7.1: Women's representation in Councils A-D, showing overall % and percentage of women in leadership positions	183
9.1: Summary of research findings as related to the four research questions and the theoretical framework	253-256
9.2: Recommendations	263

<u>Figures</u>	<u>Page:</u>
1.1: Image of map showing the 22 principal areas or city and county boroughs in Wales (as per 1996).	12
2.1: Pictorial representation of Kanter's four minority-majority group distributions	27
2.2: Dahlerup's (1988) six aspects of change possible after achieving critical mass	28
2.3: Diagram showing theoretical framework and relationship between agency and structure and the conditions needed to achieve the substantive representation of women	67
3.1: Braun and Clarke's six stages of thematic analysis	93
3.2: Screenshot of recruitment email to Eleri (Plaid Cymru councillor, Council C)	95
4.1: UK Labour Party rules on candidate selections and gender	117
9.1: Theoretical mapping of findings under RQ1 - agency and structural factors that affected women's experience of becoming a local councillor	235

9.2: Theoretical mapping of findings under RQ2 – agency and structural factors which influence the extent to which institutions are feminised or re-gendered	242
9.3: Theoretical mapping of findings under RQ3 - agency and structural factors influencing the descriptive and substantive representation of women in local leadership	247
9.4: Theoretical mapping of findings related to RQ4 – how agency and structure affect the substantive representation of women in Welsh local government	252
9.5: Repeat of Figure 2.3 showing the theoretical framework and relationship between agency and structure and the conditions needed to achieve the substantive representation of women	268

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You can and you will.

Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis primarily explores women local councillors in Wales' first-hand gendered experiences of gender (in)equality issues and offers a feminist institutionalist analysis of Welsh local government as a gendered institution. Influenced by feminist institutionalism and the cognate theories of political representation and gendered political leadership, this research contributes original empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of social policy and political science. It offers new insight into how Welsh local government institutions are permeated by gendered 'rules-in-use' (Lowndes 2014, 2020), the impact of this on women councillors' experiences, and explores whether the formal and informal practices and conventions of local 'gendered political workplaces' (Erikson and Josefsson 2019, 2020) fetter or facilitate women's political representation and participation.

Reflecting the general shift in the representation literature and research (see Chapter 2.2) from studies focusing on methods for 'getting women in' to what women do once they are present and the experiences of elected women politicians within political contexts, this study centres the voices of women local councillors', exploring their lived experiences and journeys from election through to senior positions in Welsh local government. Prioritising women's viewpoints has been achieved through employing an in-depth qualitative approach, influenced by feminist standpoint theory and feminist interpretivism (see Chapter 3.2), and through a thematic analysis of 'elite' interviews (Chapter 3.3) with eighteen 'locally powerful' women councillors across four case study councils (and one pilot interviewee).

Motivations for this study were scaffolded around an identified gap in extant academic research in the field of feminist political science and feminist institutionalism, where local government in a devolved context has been under-researched, with only a handful of studies previously exploring this political arena (Charles and Jones 2013; Charles 2014; Farrell and Titcombe 2016; Charles 2018). Research into women's political representation in the United Kingdom (UK) has largely focused on Westminster, and the devolved parliaments (Senedd Cymru and Scottish Parliament, particularly), with local government, despite its increased importance given decentralisation, remaining largely invisible. This introductory chapter justifies the crucial nature of this study and situates it within the field, and its international and Welsh policy contexts. It first explores the context

within which this study is situated, through summarising the international policy regarding women's political participation, commonplace arguments for women's political presence, and defines and discusses decentralisation of policy decisions to local government in the UK. The chapter then provides an overview of the specific Welsh context within which the research took place, outlining the "state of play" in the relevant electoral term (2017-2022). Finally, the structure of the thesis is set out, signposting the contribution of each chapter to the overall thesis.

1.1: Motivations for the Study and Research Context

1.1.1: The International Policy Context

Important decisions which affect the lives of all are made in the chambers of international, national, devolved, regional, and local political institutions. It is now widely accepted that, for these institutions to be considered democratic, they must include the voices and interests of all those whom these decisions may affect. Democratic political institutions should be diverse, inclusive of different genders, ethnicities, religions, disabilities, ages, and socioeconomic classes. Whilst figures regarding representation of minority groups¹ suggest that many political institutions have made small steps towards more diverse representation (Miletzki and Wardrop 2015), there is evidence to suggest that the rate of progress in politics has not matched that in other sectors such as Olympic sport and business². This thesis focuses on the political representation of women specifically, though there is discussion of intersections of gender with other protected and non-protected characteristics, including age and ethnicity. Women do not constitute a statistical minority in the research context of Wales and represent a little over half of the country's population and, as is discussed later in this chapter, women's status as numerically equal in the population is one of the core 'justice' arguments for improving women's political representation.

Improving women's political participation was firmly placed at the heart of the international policy agenda through the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA) (UN Women 1995; United Nations 1995) following the United Nation's (UN) Fourth World

¹ It is noted here that political representation literature acknowledges that women do not constitute a statistical minority in the wider population, unlike people with disabilities, but they are a historically marginalised group in politics and, therefore, are described as a minority on this basis.

² For example, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics had almost an equal representation of women (48 per cent) and men for the first time in history (up from 20 per cent in 1976) (International Olympic Committee 2021), and women now comprise 39.1 per cent of UK FTSE 100 board positions (up from 12.5 per cent in 2012) (Department for Business 2022).

Conference on Women. Signatories of this document expressed their commitment to “establishing the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies” and to improving their national achievements regarding “women in power and decision-making” (United Nations 1995, Area and Strategic Objective G). The BDPfA outlined how “everyone has the right to take part in the Government of his/her country” and subsequently called upon nations to augment the number of women in politics through any and all means, including legislative quotas and positive action³, “with a view to achieving equal representation” (UN Women 1995, pp. 79-84). Crucially, the BDPfA called for equal representation for women across *all* levels of politics, contending that “without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women’s perspective *at all levels of decision-making*, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved” (United Nations 1995, p. 79, added emphasis).

At the UN’s Millennium Summit, the BDPfA’s Strategic Objective G.1 was absorbed into the UN’s Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3: “Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women” (United Nations 2013). There was only one target under this MDG, which discussed gender disparity in primary and secondary education, but the UN also adopted a specific sub-goal of improving the “proportion of seats held by women in national parliament” by 2015. When progress towards the MDGs was reviewed 15 years later, women’s parliamentary participation had risen to only 23 per cent – an increase of 6 percentage points over a decade. Consequently, the UN created more specific targets and indicators in its updated Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 – “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” – and shifted the focus from ‘promotion’ or rhetoric around gender equality to tangible ‘achievement’. Under the SDGs, women’s political and other participation is given its own target and updated to reflect the importance of representation in local government alongside national parliament. Goal 5.5 (United Nations 2016) is concerned to “Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life”, with two indicators including “5.5.1: Proportion of seats held by women in (a) national parliaments and (b) local governments”. Women’s political representation in local government was therefore placed firmly on the UN’s international policy agenda for 2030.

³ Positive action systems and gender quotas mean that “women are in effect assured election to the legislature” (Russell and O’Cinneide 2003, p. 587) and have been a popular solution to women’s numerical under-representation in politics. Usually, quotas will take the form of either electoral quotas (such as reserving seats for women), or legislative quotas where individual political parties, by law, must include women candidates.

The most visible political arenas and, predictably, those which are subject to international monitoring for statistics regarding women's political representation are national parliaments, like the UK's Westminster Parliament. National legislatures are the most visible political institutions but gendered inequality of political representation cascades much further down. Unfortunately, resulting from a lack of systematic data, women's statistical political representation at the local level has often been overlooked. Despite the eventual inclusion of local government in the UN's SDGs, data concerning the percentage of women present in national legislatures are more readily available for most countries and "share of seats in parliament" is a key indicator used in the UN's Gender Inequality Index rankings, whilst proportions present in local government are not. The current global average for women in both the lower and upper chambers of national legislatures (circa May 2022) is 26.2 per cent (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2022). Locally, UN Women's (2021b) most recent figures find that, across 133 countries, women constitute 36 per cent of elected members in local deliberative bodies, only two countries have reached gender parity, and only eighteen countries have more than 40 per cent of women. Whilst this gives us some knowledge of global trends for women's representation in local government, data remain limited with data missing from over sixty countries. Knowledge about women's presence in local government is therefore sparse. This thesis addresses this lacuna and contributes empirical case study evidence to a small, yet important collection of research concentrated on women's representation at the local level.

1.1.2: Arguments for Women's Political Participation and Representation

Justifications for the equal political representation of women are scaffolded around why it is crucial to contemporary democracy. Childs and Lovenduski (2012) identified four commonly-cited arguments for gender parity in political representation. (1) Firstly, the 'justice argument', influenced by equality feminism, contends that it is "simply unfair" for men to dominate politics. Women are entitled to "be in politics on the same terms and in the same numbers as men" (Lovenduski 2005, p. 2), especially in countries which claim to be modern and democratic (Childs and Lovenduski 2012). This argument draws from the aforementioned discussion that women are not a statistical minority – they constitute "at least half of the electorate in almost all countries" (UN Women 1995, p. 79) – and should, surely, therefore constitute at least half of the elected officials. (2) Secondly, there is a 'pragmatic argument' which draws on literature and research suggesting that women have specific experiences and interests and that these must be addressed by political parties (Mansbridge

1999). Augmenting women's political representation, it is argued, will change the wider public's perceptions of politics, and political parties that are largely considered women-friendly will attract more women voters and could gain an electoral advantage (Golder et al. 2017). Women being present, therefore, is a 'win-win' situation for pragmatists who believe parties who commit to these increases will experience electoral success.

The third (3) and fourth (4) arguments draw from assumptions about 'difference' – first, the view that women adopt a different political style or approach to politics than men which could alter politics for the better. This is discussed in more depth in Chapter Two (section 2.3.2) which presents gendered political styles as an informal aspect of feminist institutionalism. Linked to views on women's unique political approach is the transformative argument or 'the politics of presence' (Phillips 1995) whereby increasing women's political presence is believed to fundamentally change politics by "improving the democratic functioning of legislatures" (Campbell et al. 2010, p. 173). Women are said to have the potential to transform the political agenda as they behave more democratically, cooperatively, and pay more attention to inequality (Phillips 1995). Finally, others take the alternate view that women, as a heterogeneous group, require equal descriptive representation if diversity is to be reflected in decision-making processes (Dovi 2007). This approach contends that there are differences between women, as there are between men, and that these should be represented in legislatures and policy.

An array of other commonplace arguments can be identified for women's political participation, including the 'role model effect'⁴ and those pertaining to increasing women's political engagement (Lee 2022). However, all four arguments identified by Childs and Lovenduski (2012) assume some link between women's presence (descriptive representation) in politics, the nature and content of political institutions (feminist institutionalism), and the policy outputs and deliberative mechanisms (substantive representation). This was already reflected in the BDPfA (United Nations 1995, p. 79), which asserted that

“women in politics [...] contribute to redefining political priorities, placing new items on the political agenda that reflect and address women's gender-specific concerns,

⁴ The role model effect argues that having more women visible in positions of power in public and political life will encourage young girls and other women to aspire to political office (Ladam et al. 2018).

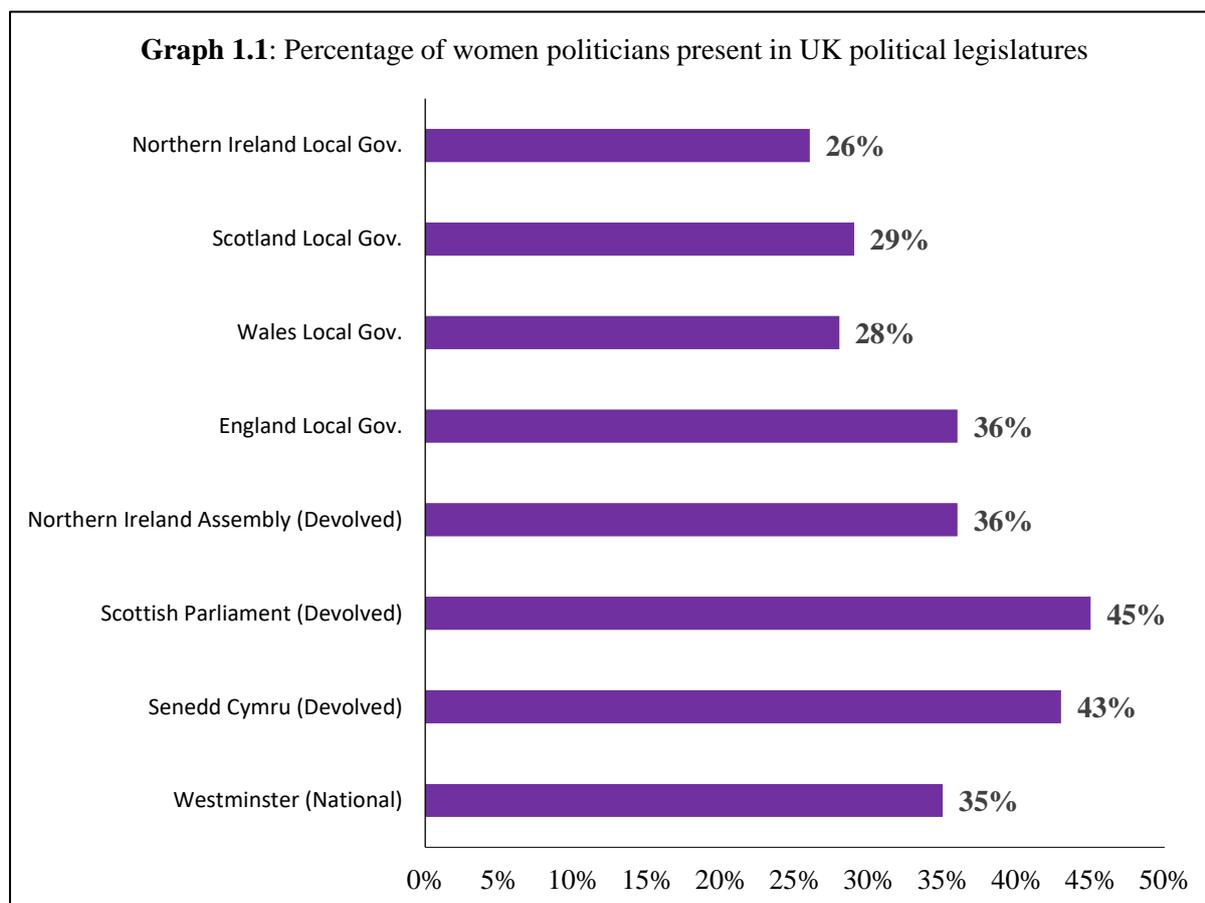
values and experiences, and providing new perspectives on mainstream political issues”.

Feminist institutionalism and the cognate literatures around women’s political representation, as well as the links between them, have subsequently become the focus of feminist political science, and studies have offered comprehensive empirical evidence on how these links ‘play out’ in national (see Norris 1996a; Childs 2001a, b, 2002; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Childs 2004a, 2016; Hargrave and Langengen 2021; Miller 2021) and devolved legislatures (see Russell et al. 2002; Chaney 2006, 2011; Mackay and Kenny 2015). How these theoretical phenomena interlink and interact in local government, however, remains largely ignored. This thesis therefore contributes to the field by exploring the ways in which these traditional arguments for women’s political presence and representation can be supported or refuted by evidence in Welsh local government.

1.1.3: Why (Welsh) local government?

Tightening the focus now to the United Kingdom and, ultimately, to why Welsh local government has been chosen as a research site, women’s political representation in local government in the UK has a mixed history. In the early 1990s, women were more present in local government than at Westminster, and the rate of progress had been admirable – more than doubling in the preceding thirty years from 12 per cent in 1964, to 25 per cent in 1993. Since then, progress in local government has stalled, and as Graph 1.1 illustrates, national and devolved figures for women’s representation outstrip those of women’s representation in

local government in three of the four constituent countries⁵, including Wales which, until 2022⁶, was placed 3rd of the four UK countries regarding local government representation.



Source: (created using data from Uberoi et al. 2022)

Devolved parliaments have, since their inceptions in the late 1990s, generally been consistently better at electing women, with over 30 per cent of members being women at each subsequent election⁷. Wales, specifically, has an impressive legacy of women’s political presence in Senedd Cymru⁸ (previously the National Assembly for Wales), and has never dropped below 40 per cent of Senedd Members (MS –previously, Assembly Members – AMs). In devolved nations, therefore, the lack of women in local government is particularly

⁵ Only in England does the current percentage of women local councillors at 36 per cent outstrip the 35 per cent of women Members of Parliament (MPs) in Westminster.

⁶ Women’s representation in Welsh local government increased to 36 per cent following the 2022 local elections in Wales, meaning it now ties with England as having the best representation of women at the local level (though still less than its devolved legislature. Reflections on this progress are made in Addendum 1. For ease here, however, the statistics and data used to contextualise Welsh local government throughout this thesis are taken from the 2017-2022 electoral term.

⁷ The main exception to this is the Northern Ireland Assembly, however this legislature has seen significant improvements: women’s elected presence there has increased from 13 per cent in 1998 to 32 per cent in 2019.

⁸ The term Senedd Cymru is preferred and used over to the anglicised Welsh Parliament.

disappointing. Additionally, poor levels of representation at the local level in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland contradict previous predictions by academics and gender equality activists that achievements in devolved political legislatures would lead to a ‘contagion effect’ or ‘cascade down’ to local government and grassroots politics, creating a more gender equal political sphere from grassroots upwards (McAllister 2020).

Local government is interesting from a policy perspective because the decisions made in council chambers have a profound and immediate impact on the public’s lives, and especially on women⁹. Decentralisation – the process of shifting power and funding from national to local government and of moving decision-making closer to individuals, their communities, and businesses – has meant that local government in the UK has become a significant sphere of political decision-making. Local government controls a quarter of all public spending and is responsible for approximately £137.1bn of taxpayers’ money in the UK (HM Treasury 2021), with latest Welsh Government (2021) statistics placing spending at £9.1bn in Wales.

Local government policy has a central impact on most women’s lives as women are more likely to be in contact with local government as service users, for example, because of continued gendered division in caring roles and in domestic labour. The Women’s Budget Group (2020, p. 3) find that

“local government is responsible for providing or funding many of the services crucial to the daily lives and wellbeing of women and those they care for [and] these services are integral to redistributing unpaid care and ensuring women have equal opportunity to participate in the paid economy”.

Furthermore, local government is under statutory duties to provide services which enable women to lead fulfilled and healthy lives (education of children, or assessing social care needs, for example).

Since the 2008 economic crash, local government has been at the forefront of delivering, and suffering from, austerity-driven cuts to funding and services. It is local government which now makes tough decisions about how best to meet the needs of as many citizens as possible, with much less funding. Given their disproportionate reliance on local

⁹ Local government, it could be argued, discusses policies which are more relevant to its constituents’ daily lives than national government, given the absence of Foreign Affairs or Defence matters, for example, and delivers and controls core ‘cradle to grave’ support services relied upon by most.

government services and funding, women, figures suggest, by 2017 had borne the brunt of circa 80 per cent of all welfare cuts, tax and benefit changes since the 2008 economic crash (Keen and Cracknell 2017). Consequently, having to “do more with less”, has meant that local government’s town and city hall chambers are where significant and difficult decisions – which disproportionately and profoundly affect women’s lives – are being made. Therefore, it is important to examine local government to understand *how* these difficult decisions are made, the context within which they are made, and by whom.

A further justification for local government as the focus of this thesis is that local politics has historically been considered a more accessible arena for aspiring women politicians. For example, Hollis (1987) argued that local government, being *local* by definition and thus demanding less time away from home, was easier for women, integrating better with working and domestic life. Moreover, local government elections are less fierce with shorter campaigns and little media scrutiny. Accordingly, holding an elected position in local government has often been a “training ground” or “springboard” for aspirational politicians who wish to progress to national politics (Allen 2014). Allen (2012a) reported that 42 per cent of the newly-elected MPs following the 2010 general election had previously been local councillors, although most of those who ‘graduate out’ of local councils to take this route are, in reality, younger men. It is therefore important to discover why local government has, as figures suggest, become less accessible or desirable a political arena for women than national or devolved politics. This thesis contributes evidence to this discussion, exploring the experiences of those women who are elected to local government, and their perceptions about why Welsh local government may not be an attractive option for women who might otherwise seek elected local office.

It is pertinent now to examine the current ‘state of play’ for women in Welsh local government. This study is not primarily concerned with women’s political recruitment or solely the numbers of women in politics. However, to establish the Welsh context for this research, it is necessary to explore what we can easily ascertain about women’s political representation in Welsh local government: the numbers and proportions present. Wales has 22 local authority councils or ‘principal areas’, known as city or county borough councils, established since 1996 (see Figure 1.1). The number of elected members in each council ranges, from the smallest having only 30 members, to the largest with 75. Local councils in

Wales primarily use a simple majority/first-past-the-post electoral system¹⁰ and, in more populous areas, it is common to have multi-member wards¹¹.

This thesis' empirical research took place within the electoral term of 2017-2022¹², and therefore the figures presented here and interviewees' comments about their current experiences refer to this electoral cycle. In 2017, only thirty per cent of Welsh local election candidates were women, with the Welsh Labour Party fielding the highest percentage of women candidates (35 per cent). 352 women councillors were subsequently elected, with an average of 28 per cent women elected across councils. This was a 2-percentage point improvement from 2012, and only a 6-point improvement since 2004. This disappointing rate of progress led to predictions that it would take Wales over eighty years to reach gender parity of representation in local government (Fawcett Society 2017). Evidently this headline figure masked significant differences between councils¹³. Councils' individual proportions of women councillors ranged from 10 to 43 per cent (see Graph 1.2), suggesting that some councils were succeeding in attracting women councillors whilst others lagged behind. Concerns surrounding anonymity (see Chapter 3.3 and 9.3) mean that statistics are anonymised here with Graph 1.2 and Table 1.1 showing the spread of women's representation across all 22 local authorities in 2017. As the table suggests, eleven councils elected below 30 per cent women¹⁴, with one council electing having less than 10 per cent women elected representatives, whilst only two councils elected between 40 and 44 per cent women. Eleven councils elected between 31 and 40 per cent women to their chambers.

¹⁰ Under the 2021 Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act, local authorities can now opt to move to Single Transferable Vote system following a vote in favour by councillors in that elected council (Welsh Government 2021).

¹¹ Where more than one elected official represents the ward/constituency.

¹² Local government elections in Wales previously occurred every four years, however, the elections originally scheduled for 2016 were postponed to 2017 to avoid a clash with the Senedd election which itself had been postponed, avoiding a clash with the 2015 UK General election. Local elections were then delayed again from 2021 to 2022 to avoid another similar clash with the 2021 Senedd elections. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act (Welsh Government 2021) has subsequently been updated permanently to establish a term length in Welsh local government of five years, rather than the previous four.

¹³ Data is not readily available for women's descriptive representation in Welsh local government and, in order to address concerns about changes within councils since the elections, all data presented here and in subsequent graphs were collated manually by the author from individual council websites to ensure accuracy.

¹⁴ 30 per cent is chosen as a key statistical benchmark here as having above 30 per cent women elected representatives has historically been the benchmark for legislatures boasting a 'critical mass' (see Chapter Two, section 2.2).

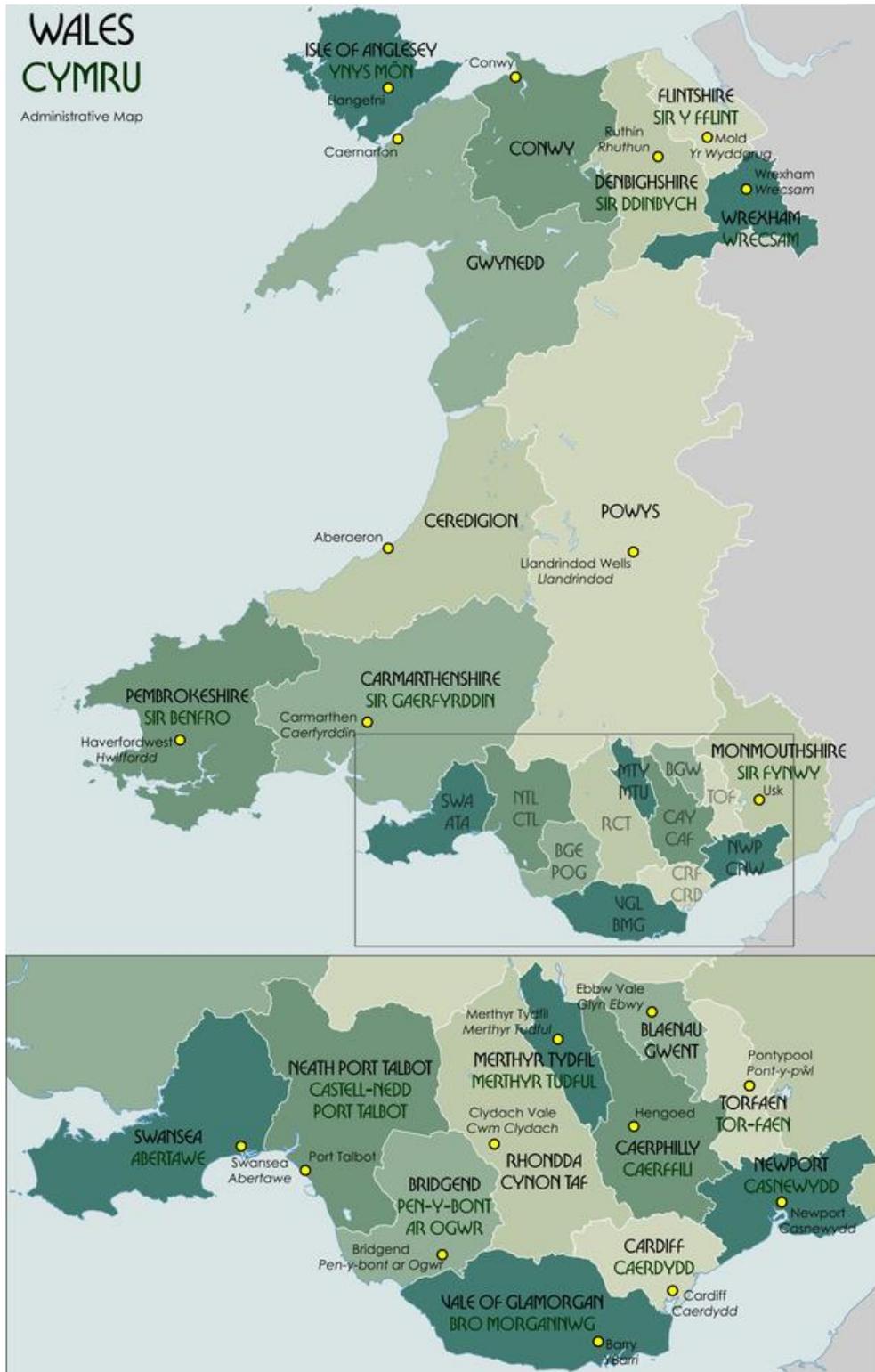
Furthermore, pertinent to later discussion, these figures obscure the role of political parties in women's elected presence in Welsh local government (Graph 1.3). Mirroring its achievements elsewhere in electing women¹⁵, 45 per cent of all elected women councillors in 2017 belonged to the Welsh Labour Party (158 women). Welsh Labour were the most successful political party overall in the 2017 local elections in Wales, gaining 30.4 per cent of the overall vote, although they did record a net loss of 112 seats, and lost control of three previously-held councils. Welsh Labour elected more than double the proportion of women councillors than any other party, with Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Conservative women councillors comprising 14 per cent of the total, and Independent women councillors slightly more at 19 per cent. When looking at the return or 'success' rate of women candidates becoming women councillors¹⁶, Labour outstripped all other political parties. Table 1.2 shows that almost half of women Welsh Labour candidates were successful in being elected¹⁷ – much higher than the average of 36.4 per cent for women across all political parties.

¹⁵ The UK Labour Party has been praised elsewhere for its successes in electing more women to politics with, for example, the large number of women Labour MPs elected in the 1997 General Election following the party's use of all-women shortlists – BBC headlines stating: "All-women shortlists clear new hurdle", for example.

¹⁶ Calculated thus: $Success\ rate = \frac{Number\ of\ female\ councillors}{Number\ of\ female\ candidates} * 100$

¹⁷ 49.2 per cent or 157 of 319 women candidates.

Figure 1.1: Image of map showing the 22 principal areas or city and county boroughs in Wales (as per 1996). (Wikipedia 2009)



Graph 1.2: The Range Of Women's Descriptive Representation Across Councils In Wales (data collated manually by researcher via individual council websites)

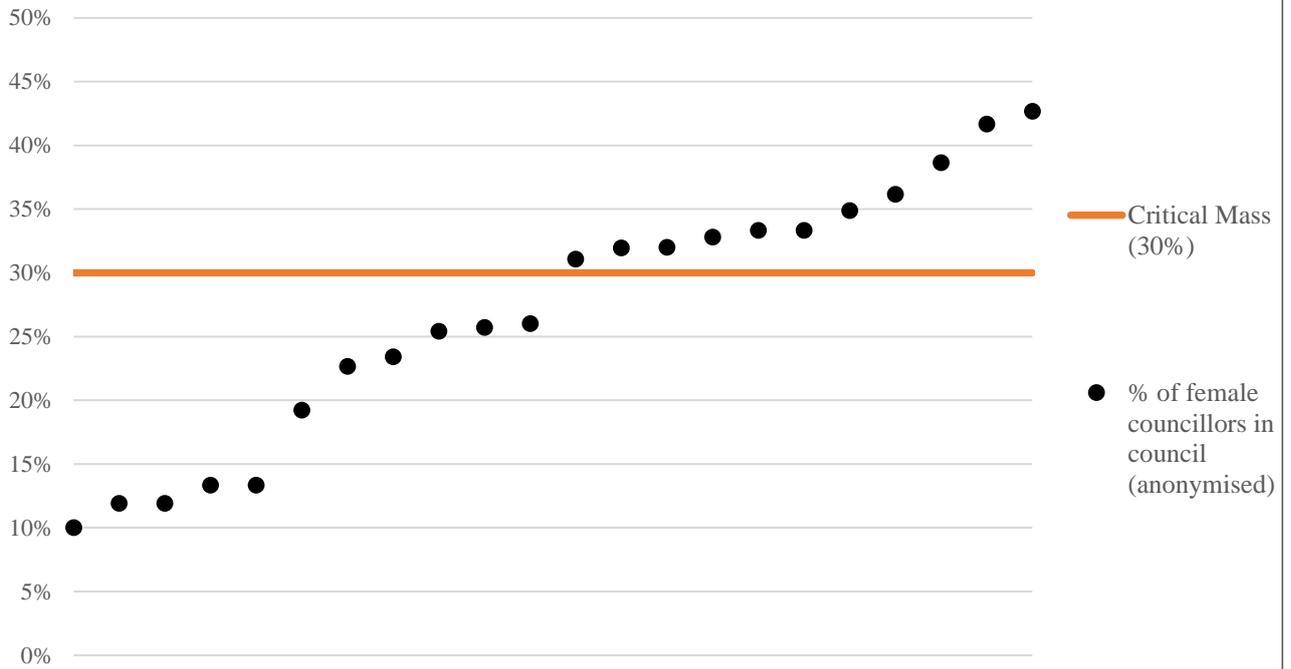


Table 1.1: Proportion of local councils (2017)

% of councillors who are women	Number of Councils
0-10%	1
11-20%	5
21-30%	5
31-40%	9
41%+	2

women elected to Welsh

Graph 1.3: Percentage of all female councillors elected by political party

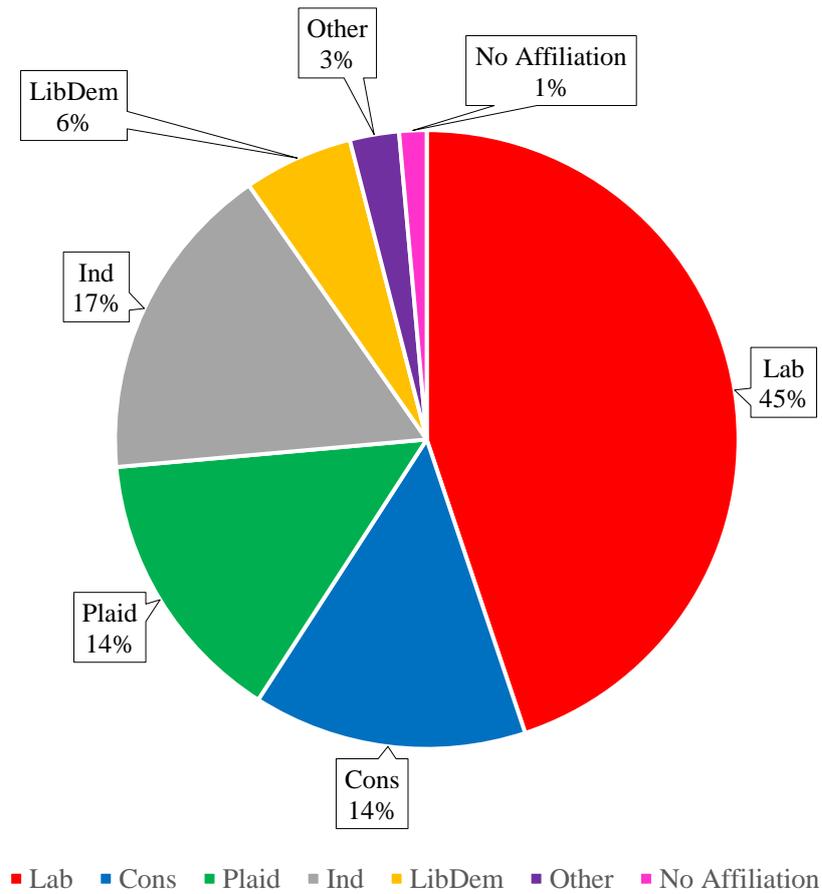
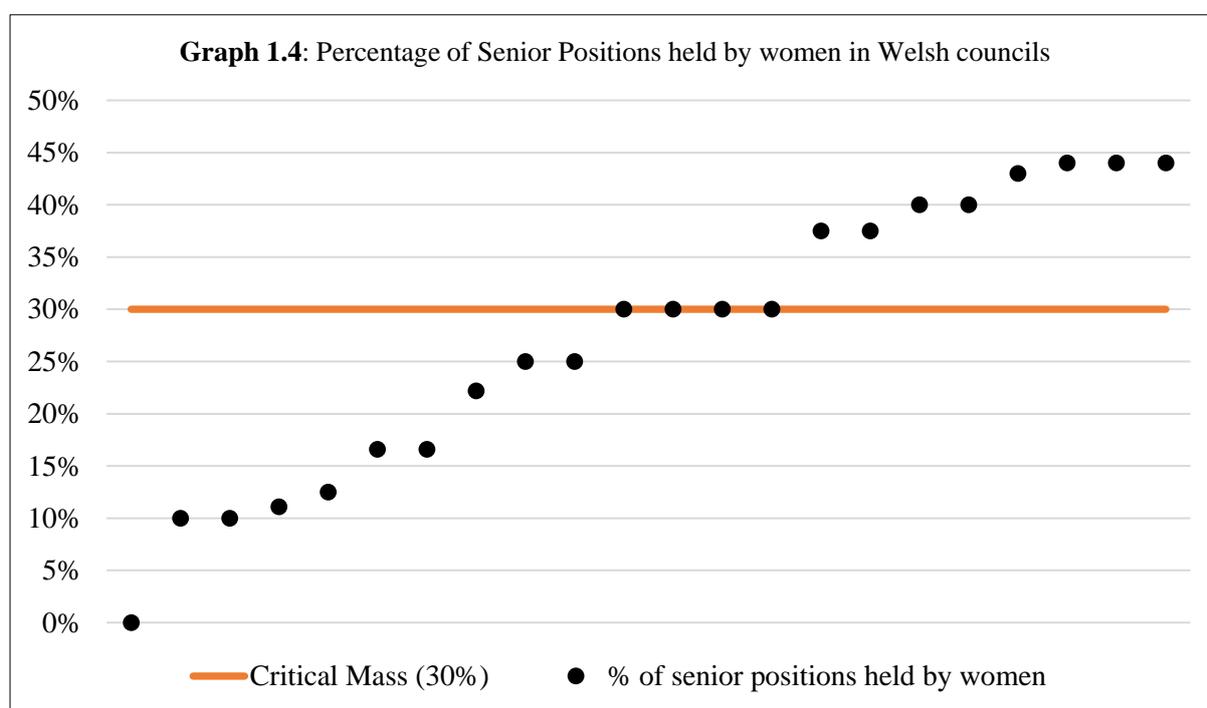


Table 1.2: Return or success rate for women local candidates being elected by each main political party (2017 Welsh local elections)

Political Party	Return/Success rate (%)
Labour	49.2
Conservative	26.4
Lib Dem	21.1
Independent/Other	36.5
Plaid Cymru	32.1
Average across all parties	36.4

Statistics thus suggest that women were significantly underrepresented amongst candidates and councillors in local government in Wales between 2017 and 2022, and that representation was not equal across political parties or councils.

Given that this thesis further focuses on the representation of women in senior council positions, it is also relevant to show how many women were present in senior positions¹⁸ across councils in Wales (Graph 1.4). This ranged from 0% to 44% at time of data collection.



In summary, this research attends to a lacuna in existing research and literature in the field of social policy and of feminist political science, and contributes original empirical evidence pertaining to the gendered nature of local government in a devolved Welsh context. This thesis presents evidence to suggest why Welsh local government has not yet benefitted from a contagion effect and seen significant increases in women’s political participation, and explores why local government institutions are not welcoming to otherwise politically aspirational women. It turns the lens on local councils as gendered institutions and centres the experiences of those women who were successful in ‘getting in’, their perceptions as to the

¹⁸ Here, senior positions refer specifically to Cabinet positions (including Leader and Deputy Leader).

barriers they and other women face, and their journeys to and through the ranks of local elected office.

1.2: Structure and Outline of This Thesis

The structure of this thesis is now outlined, with a summary of the core contributions of each chapter to the overall thesis. Firstly, Chapter Two explores the key and influential literature in the field. It starts first with a brief note of justification for the use of gender and woman/en, rather than sex and female, before moving to definitions of political representation. Starting with the broad and formative works of Pitkin (1967) on representation, it then discusses those understandings of political representation most relevant to discussions of minority groups in this thesis – descriptive and substantive representation. Section 2.2 explains the shift in focus from the former to the latter in the field, and explores the related theories of critical mass and critical actors, concluding that assumptions about political presence guaranteeing changes to political content and contexts must be challenged, and that this research understands representation as multifaceted and reliant on factors beyond strength in numbers.

The chapter then defines and outlines the key theoretical framework upon which this thesis is based – feminist institutionalism (Section 2.3) – and its core understanding that political institutions must be considered and researched through a gendered lens which appreciates both the formal and informal aspects of gendered political workplaces. The section (2.3.3) discusses the intricacies of institutional change, exploring which conditions have been identified as necessary, and why it is harder for established institutions to be feminised or ‘re-gendered’ than newly established legislatures. Finally, this chapter considers women and political leadership, the gendered ‘labyrinth to leadership’ (Eagly and Carli 2007) faced by aspirant senior women, the gendered nature of leadership attributes and the gendered hierarchy of portfolios, as well as how committee position ‘makes a difference’ to women’s substantive representation. At the end of Chapter Two, the research questions operationalised in this thesis are introduced.

Chapter Three shifts attention to the epistemological and methodological approaches taken, as well as the practicalities and intricacies of the research design, before discussing researcher reflections on the interviews and the impact of positionality. Feminist interpretivism and standpoint theories are explored first, justifying the use of a qualitative approach which centres and prioritises women’s lived experience and situated knowledge in data generation and analysis. There is discussion of the methodological traditions of social

science and feminist institutionalism to illustrate the context within which choices about research design were made – namely, the necessity to research qualitatively, in-depth, and ‘in situ’ to uncover gendered practices within institutions and the daily lived realities of women politicians.

The research design is then outlined, explaining the exemplifying case study approach, providing some detail about the chosen four case study councils, and overviewing the purposeful sampling technique for choosing interviewees. The choice to use semi-structured ‘elite’ interviews is explained, with attention given to the benefits and drawbacks of both interview designs with women and, specifically, interviewing those we can consider “locally powerful”. Section 3.3 also discusses ethical concerns regarding anonymity, as well as the shift from in-person to online interviews following the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the approaches taken for transcription and data analysis. Finally, this chapter considers the influence of researcher positionality – gender, class, nationality, and age – on the interview process, offering reflections on interviewer and participant rapport and the process of conducting interviews with elite women.

Chapters Four through Eight present and discuss this thesis’ key findings from the analysis of the data. They are loosely organised in a chronological order (from election and initial experiences, to seniority), but further are scaffolded around discussions of feminist institutionalism (Chapters Four, Five, and Six) and the cognate literatures of representation theory (Chapter Eight) and gendered political leadership (Chapter Seven).

Chapter Four – *Gendered (S)elections, Expectations, and Political Socialisation* – presents women’s experiences pre- and immediately post- election. It explores interviewees’ motivations for political office, their experiences of the selection process within political parties, opinions regarding measures and tactics for increasing the representation of women amongst electoral candidates in Welsh local elections (such as All-Women Shortlists, and other positive action techniques), and finally considers women’s first weeks or months in office and their socialisation into the gendered norms and practices of Welsh local councils.

Chapter Five (*Gendered Institutions I*) is the first of two chapters focusing specifically on the cultures, norms, and practices within Welsh local government, and takes a feminist institutionalist lens to the formal organisational practices. This chapter explores the formal working practices which gender everyday life in Welsh local government political workplaces, exposing the ‘rules-in-use’ which interact and intersect to form specific gendered

barriers to women's political participation. Women councillors reported facing either a double or, in some instances, a triple duty of balancing the political with their personal and professional lives, the hardship of which was compounded by the organisational structures and systems in local government in Wales which continue to privilege traditional, masculine procedural norms and rules. Perceived issues are discussed, including remuneration, meeting times, a lack of engagement with remote meeting attendance (see also Hibbs 2022b), childcare issues, as well as a reticence towards job-share. The impermanency and ineffectiveness of solutions through layering and conversion forms of institutional change are highlighted here.

Chapter Six (*Gendered Institutions II*) turns the feminist institutionalist gaze upon the informal norms, cultures, and contexts of Welsh local government, examining women's experiences of sexism, sexual harassment, and, at times, the abuse experienced by women local councillors. Data suggest that women perceive councils to be less sexist than previous decades, with the 'old boys' club' said to be somewhat weakened by the increased political presence of women. Sexism, where it does exist, is said to be more veiled, subtle, and less overt – though there remain uncomfortable and disconcerting stories of sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. Treatment of women councillors from outside the council – both in the community and on online platforms – is discussed in this chapter, with women sharing stories of vulnerability whilst visiting constituents' houses and of receiving death threats and 'trolling' online. In addition, this chapter explores the gendered language within council chambers, arguing that some women often prefer a traditional political style whilst others feel the pressure to assimilate existing practices and 'grow a thick skin' to participate fully as local councillors. Study participants spoke about micro-machismos such as 'mansplaining' or women being interrupted, spoken over, or having ideas stolen remain common – as they do in other arenas (Och 2020).

Chapter Seven (*Gendered Leadership*) focuses on those who women 'make it through the labyrinth' to senior positions. This study finds that women undergo lengthier proving and re-proving periods. To get to senior positions, women councillors here experienced spending many years working their way up through the ranks, and once they attained seniority, women expressed having to work harder, be tougher, and the necessity of resilience. Interviewees shared that being at the top is tough yet can, for the substantive representation of women and for the re-gendering of institutions, be rewarding. Women 'critical leaders' often feminise

from the top, changing organisational practices, picking gender-balanced cabinets, and reaching hands down to other women councillors to “pull them up the ladder”.

Chapter Eight (*Gendered Representation*) examines the impact of the factors explored through Chapters Four to Seven on the political representation of women. It explores whether the predictions and hopes of critical mass theorists are warranted in Welsh local government, examining the impact of women’s heightened political presence on local government as well as on the substantive representation of women. The data indicate, as other studies have (Mackay 2008), that there are certainly no guarantees. Substantive representation is found to be contingent on critical actors, on women holding committee positions, as well as on other factors outside of political actors – these include: partisanship and a reluctance towards cross-party working, the positioning of parties and critical actors as either enabled by power or as frustrated in opposition, as well as the impact of austerity budget cuts.

Lastly, Chapter Nine summarises how the foregoing analysis chapters attend to the research questions outlined in Chapter Two, summarising in turn how each have been considered through the evidence and discussion provided. The chapter reflects on the study’s limitations before making recommendations for future research and for policy changes – both specific actionable changes, and broader recommendations. Finally, the chapter draws together discussion to conclude on how this thesis extends and makes a novel contribution to the field through its empirical evidence of women’s experiences in Welsh local government, and its exposé of the gendered nature of local council workplaces.

Chapter Two **Literature Review**

This thesis draws primarily from feminist institutionalist theory and employs a feminist institutionalist analytical lens to examine the gendered nature of Welsh local government. Feminist institutionalism is defined and discussed in depth in Section 2.3, however it is pertinent to discuss other relevant cognate fields of study through which feminist institutionalism was founded here – namely, concepts regarding political representation, and literature on gendered political leadership. The chapter outlines the concepts and understandings of gender adopted throughout this thesis, before offering some key broad definitions of ‘representation’ drawn from Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) formative work. Descriptive and substantive political representation, the two most relevant concepts for the field of

politics and gender, are explored in more depth along with their respective theories of critical mass and critical actors.

This thesis is premised on the belief that political actors and representation are embedded in institutional contexts which constrain or facilitate. Consequently, the chapter then turns its attention to an exploration of feminist institutionalism and related contemporary research into how political settings are permeated by and constructed around gendered (in)equalities, and ‘rules of the game’. This section further explores how and when institutional change occurs, with particular emphasis on layering and conversion as the most relevant to this thesis. The final section of this chapter outlines formative writings surrounding gendered political leadership, including the aptly titled literature concerning the ‘labyrinth to leadership’ (Eagly and Carli 2007), research into gendered leadership styles, and the impact of institutional position (committee or portfolio positions) on the substantive representation of women. This literature is included as women in senior positions in Welsh local government were purposefully sampled for in this thesis to understand women’s experiences in all positions in Welsh local government¹⁹. The chapter ends by outlining the research questions operationalised for this thesis.

2.1: A Note on Gender

For the purposes of this research, gender is preferred over ‘sex’ to escape the binary biological categorisations of ‘female’ and ‘male’. Gender, as a social construction, produces a normative set of beliefs based on the social meaning and understanding ascribed to biological differences. Adopting this gender approach applies categorisation with reference to social and cultural constructions and differences, addressing the unequal relationships between the characterisation of masculinity and ‘manliness’ and femininity and ‘womanliness’. These categories are not socially equal and are, instead, enshrined in relations of dominance and derogation.

This thesis is premised on the understanding that gender is a fluid, socially constructed, and ‘achieved’ status that is performed through everyday actions, relationships, and interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender is not attached or tied to any human body, but is instead deeply rooted in normative beliefs of masculinity and femininity – it becomes a ‘free-floating artifice’ (Butler 1990, p. 9). The notion of gender embraced in this

¹⁹ Specific sampling techniques and approaches are discussed further in Chapter Three

thesis does not align itself entirely with deconstructionist gender theorists like Judith Butler²⁰, and retains the argument that gender remains inherently linked with power – there are dominant and oppressive relations between genders, determined and maintained through contexts – crucially, institutions, and discourse. This thesis explores, through its feminist institutionalist lens (see section 2.3), the gendered nature and context of political representation, exploring how gender power plays out through ‘rules in use’ in political institutions to benefit and privilege those aligned with masculinism and hegemonic masculinity.

There are further specific reasons for the use of gender, in place of sex, in research concerning political institutions and representation. As Lovenduski (1998, p. 334) contends, using gender in place of the dichotomous ‘sex’ in political science research, means that we refrain from using an “add women and stir methodology”. Accordingly, the “concept of sex is meaningless except when understood in the context of theories of gender relations”, because gender is “embedded in individuals [and] relationships” and is conditioned by institutions and organisations (Lovenduski 1998, p. 337). Furthermore, the continued use of ‘sex’ as the basis on which we believe women represent women, risks essentialising our “understanding of women’s identity”, reducing “women’s attitudes and behaviour back to their bodies” (Childs 2006, p. 9).

As Butler (1990, pp. 2-3) contends, assuming there is an “existing identity” or “category of women” as “the subject for whom political representation is pursued” is futile given the vast disagreement concerning what this constitutes. A woman’s gender may not be the “primary factor” determining her experiences, opinions or actions (hooks 1984), ergo an intersectional approach allows women politicians’ experiences of politics to be “differentiated in terms of class, ethnicity and sexuality at the very least” (Childs 2006, p. 10). Embracing intersectionality enables the researcher to disaggregate the ‘one-dimensional’ and essentialist view of women as a monolithic category which sees them “gendered beings but not as individuals” (Hoffman 2006, p. 358). For clarity, therefore, the use of ‘woman/en’ in this research and the text of this thesis concerns any local councillor, research participant, or member of wider society who currently, or previously, self-identifies(d) as a woman at the time of research.

²⁰ Butler (1990) and other deconstructionists favour an abandon of gender categorisation altogether.

2.2: Representation – From ‘looking like’ to ‘acting for’

2.2.1: Defining ‘representation’

Shifting attention now to the influence of political representation theory on this thesis, it is necessary to define what it is meant by the term ‘representation’. A non-specialist definition of ‘representation’ can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary: “The action of standing for, or in the place of, a person, group, or thing, and related senses” (Oxford English Dictionary 2017). In the narrower field of political representation, Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) influential and formative text *The Concept of Representation*, describes representation as “a rather complicated, convoluted, three-dimensional structure in the middle of a dark enclosure” (1967, p. 10). Pitkin centres the understanding that representation is to “make present again” (hence *re*-presentation), and further posits that representation entails some element of ‘action’ – political representatives must *act*. Representation thus engenders “the activity of making citizens’ voices, opinions, and perspectives “present” in public policy making processes” (Dovi 2017, p. 1). Pitkin (1967) adds that representation is an “active and contingent process” of responsiveness whereby there must always be a “potential readiness to respond”.

Pitkin, rightfully, questions whether a representation system which fails to deliver any policy initiation or implementation (action), through reform or change in legislation, can be considered a representative system at all. Dovi (2017, pp. 1-2) outlines five essential components that political representation will always exhibit. Firstly, there must be a *representing* party(1). In the context of politics this will be the elected ‘representative’. The nebulous and populous nature of society today means that it is necessary to entrust the “advocacy of citizen interests to a smaller number of individuals who gather in assemblies and make decisions” (Childs and Lovenduski 2012, p. 490). In the Welsh political context, either a local councillor, Senedd Member (MS), or Member of Parliament (MP), for example, or a political party or other organisation such as a trade union body or third sector organisation. Correspondingly, there must be a *represented* party (2) – those members of the public by whom the representative was chosen. In UK politics, representatives are chosen by those within a “constituency” or “ward” – an intangible geographical boundary. Alternatively, represented parties can denote members of a particular group or organisation, or, crucial here, members of a particular sub-group, for example: women, ethnic minorities, or religious groups. Thirdly, there must be some *thing* (3) that is being represented – perhaps a

specific opinion or interest on an issue, or something less narrowly-defined and more abstract, such as a perspective, ideology, or discourse.

Representation must also have an *arena* (4) within which it is enacted – there must be a setting where representation takes place. Examples of institutional arenas include legislative settings or political institutions, such as local government council chambers, devolved political parliaments, such as Senedd Cymru or the Scottish Parliament, Westminster’s House of Commons and House of Lords, or grassroots political party branch meetings. These settings, as will be explored in section 2.3, are inevitably characterised by, and built upon, historical conventions, traditions, and hierarchies. They also have certain expectations of their members, rules for participation, and, embedded within them, hegemonic organisations of speech and micro-level interactions, which have an impact upon how representation is achieved.

Dovi’s first four elements (the representative, the represented, the representational content, and the representational context) are sometimes regarded as all that is necessary for political representation. This assertion is naively characterised by an assumption that representative systems are unflawed, insofar as the interests or representations of the represented are paid proper attention by their representative – it presupposes that elected officials will automatically debate and discuss the issues and opinions of their constituents. However, political representation is not this simple. Partly this is a consequence of necessity – political meetings and debates which represented *all* ideas *all* the time would not be conceivably possible given limits to debate times. Moreover, political actors are not opinionless vessels, have agency over whether they contribute to debate and decision-making on salient issues, and also may be constrained by those elements discussed regarding the political arena – its conventions and traditions. Dovi (2017) therefore contends that there must be a fifth element – that which is *not* represented (5), namely the opinions, interests, perspectives, and populations which/who are not heard and remain silenced. Political theorists may prefer to limit their conceptualisation and operationalisation of political representation to the first four components as it is, understandably, easier to research what *is* represented rather than what is not. This thesis, conversely, adopts a conceptualisation of political representation which emphasises the importance of Dovi’s fifth and final element, seeking to examine those otherwise-silenced and underrepresented voices, interests, and perspectives of one marginalised group of the population – women.

2.2.2: Descriptive and Substantive Representation – Definitions and Debates

Pitkin (1967) identified four ‘types’ of representation, two of which serve as influential concepts for this research and the field of feminist political science. Those not explored in depth are: (1) **authorised** (also sometimes called **Formalistic**) and (2) **symbolic** representation²¹. Types (3) **descriptive** and (4) **substantive** representation, and the links between them, are central to this study, and are defined here. Briefly, descriptive (3) representation is primarily concerned with elected representatives’ characteristics or “what (s)he *is* or is *like*, on *being* something rather than doing something” (Pitkin 1967, p. 61, *original* and added emphasis), and whether politics and representatives are ‘typical’ of those they represent by virtue of “sharing similar characteristics such as race, sex, ethnicity, or residence” (Childs and Lovenduski 2012, p. 490). Substantive (4) representation, in contrast, is interested in the ‘doing’ and the ‘acting for’: “what goes on during representing, the substance or content of acting for others” (Pitkin 1967, p. 114) – it primarily asks: do elected politicians act for the group they represent? And so, for women’s political representation: does policy, law, and deliberation reflect the interests of women and girls (Mackay 2008; Childs and Krook 2009)?

Descriptive representation places emphasis on numbers and proportions and is scaffolded around whether elected representatives resemble those they represent. This is commonly referred to as a ‘politics of presence’ – Anne Phillips’ (1995) term which challenged traditionally-dominant assumptions that political representatives in western democracies were elected based on political ideology or ‘a politics of ideas’²². Within her concept of the ‘politics of presence’, Phillips contested and eschewed previous assumption and embraced, conversely, the notion that *who politicians are* must also be considered, alongside what they represent. Previous dismissal of the importance of politicians’ characteristics was challenged by a change in how difference is conceived, influenced by wider shifts towards an acceptance

²¹ The former refers to situations where a representative is legally empowered to act for another, and the latter to a leader standing for or ‘representing’ national ideas (for example, a King representing a Kingdom).

²² Phillips (1995) saw this as an ‘inadequate’ solution to increasing awareness of political exclusion as it assumed that diversity or difference between representatives was merely based upon ideological diversity – that of belief, opinion, or preference. This assumption maintained and justified the overrepresentation of the ‘usual suspects’ (male, white, educated, middle/upper-class) in politics as it conveyed that only opinion mattered, and not who was doing the representing – the politician was merely an empty vessel or ‘identikit’ messenger because their role was limited to that of ‘mouthpiece’ for the views held by those they represented.

of the significance of lived experience, and the growing support for ‘identity politics’²³ (Heyes 2020). Social movements, including Third Wave feminism and the Black Civil Rights movement foregrounded the crucial importance of politically-inclusive democracies and, as Phillips (1995, p. 39) contended, political decisions being made only by white, educated, and middle/upper-class men “put the others in the category of political minors [...] like children, to be cared for by those who know best”.

Descriptive representation has also been termed ‘mirror representation’, defined as a legislative or representative body with a “composition [that] corresponds accurately to that of the whole nation” – it ‘mirrors’ “the people, the state of public consciousness, or the movement of social and economic forces in the nation” (Pitkin 1967, pp. 60-61). Mirror representation was consequently identified as when elected individuals are “in their own personas and lives, in some sense typical of the larger class of persons whom they represent” (Mansbridge 1999, p. 629). Mansbridge (1999) develops this further, contending that, in a representative democracy, the characteristics of the population should, to some extent, be reflected “in the legislature in proportion to their occurrence in the population”. She attests that, not only do the protected characteristics of the elected representative matter, but representatives share “lived experiences” with the group(s) they represent, securing their commitment to consistently working in the represented group’s best interests in their political activities.

Within academia, influential writings around standpoint theory (Hartsock 1983; hooks 1984; Hekman 1997; Harding 2004; Hill Collins 2004; Wood 2005) centring the importance of situated knowledge have questioned how men could ‘legitimately stand’ for women when representation of women’s issues were at stake. Women, it is argued, are best placed to represent and understand women’s lived experiences. Feminist epistemology in the form of standpoint theory (discussed further in Chapter 3) contends that “starting off research [or, indeed, representation] from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives, but also of men’s [and the] whole social order” (Harding 1993, p. 56). Starting representation from a woman’s standpoint enables the recognition of aspects of social relations that are otherwise unobtainable from the dominant, male, perspective and, in

²³ Identity politics is defined by Heyes (2020, para 1) as “a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups [...] typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context”.

turn, leads to a holistic account of the social world through which policy can be deliberated and delivered.

Descriptive representation therefore surmises that shared gendered social perspectives and experiences will advantageously provide a basis for dialogue, communication and, subsequently, representation between women elected politicians and women of the electorate (Childs 2001b; Mackay 2008). Assumed shared affinities created through women's "social location in gendered hierarchies" mean that women politicians, simply by being 'women' are considered best-placed to campaign for women-friendly policy initiations. Some supporting evidence for this position has been offered (Chaney 2006; Dodson 2006; Schwindt-Bayer 2010). For example, Childs' (2001b) interviews with 34 of New Labour's 'record-breaking' number of women MPs following 1997 found that they created an 'initial politics of transformation', including a feminising of the agenda between new women MPs and their constituency as women constituents approached women MPs and stated their preference of a woman representative. A more recent study by Ceron and Zarra (2022, p. 18) which coded over 200 parliamentary speeches found that "women MPs [in the Italian Parliament] were those contributing the most to the advancements of themes relating to women's empowerment within parliamentary debates [...] women played a key role in raising parity-relevant concerns [...] especially in the direction of mitigating the most detrimental legacies of the pandemic for equality". It is on this basis that political scientists who write about descriptive representation contend that more women politicians will lead to better representation for women as a group.

The 'politics of *presence*' and descriptive representation theory thus centres the equal numerical representation of women in legislative settings and political institutions, as well as the political inclusion of other marginalised groups. The necessity for women to represent women has supported research and campaigns concerning gendered electoral processes, including the electoral techniques employed to increase the number of women politicians. It is women's political ambitions (Fox and Lawless 2014; Allen and Cutts 2018), their propensity to be elected to political positions, barriers to this (Fawcett Society 2017, 2018; Maguire 2018), and measures that can be implemented to increase the proportion of women which form a key focus of research influenced by the concept of descriptive representation (Dahlerup 2007; see Krook 2007; 2010; Franceschet et al. 2012; Nugent and Krook 2016; Rosen 2017; Turnbull 2021). Scholars in the field have called for the introduction of gender quotas and other legislated positive action techniques, proven to improve women's political

representation from arbitrary amounts to gender parity (see Squires 2003; Krook 2006a, b, 2007, 2010; Childs and Lovenduski 2012).

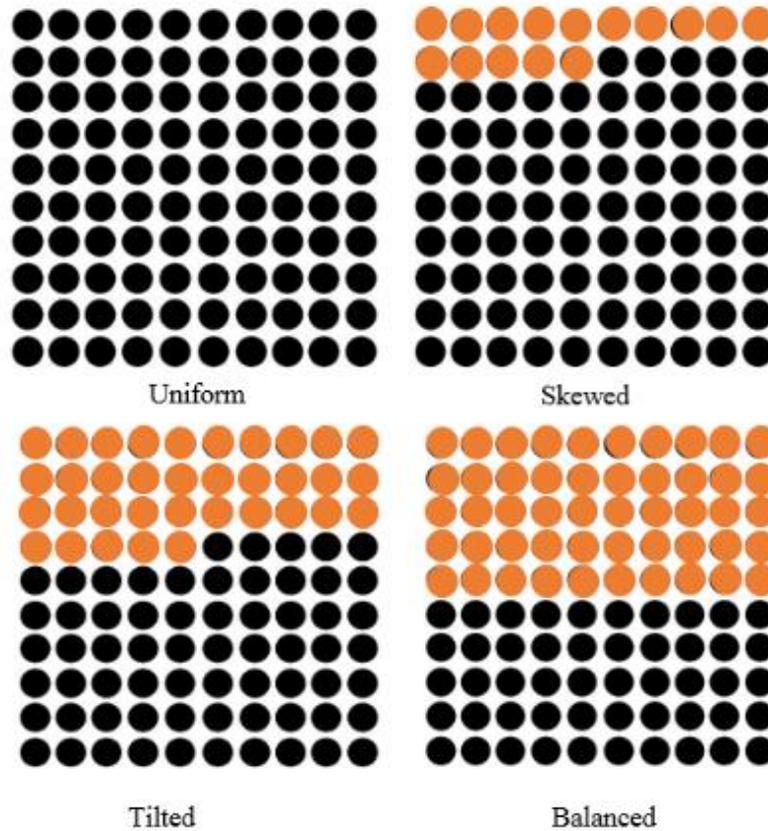
The question remains, however, as to why women's political presence needs to escape tokenistic numbers – what difference does it make? To address this, many have turned to the related concept of critical mass. A theory adapted from nuclear physics²⁴, critical mass theory in political science posits that, once numbers of a minority or underrepresented group in politics increase from token individuals to a 'considerable minority', a qualitative and recognisable shift occurs in the content and the context of politics (Childs and Krook 2006b). Ergo, once a sufficient proportion of women politicians are present in a political legislature, women will be "freer to behave in ways that do not conform to masculinist organizational cultures" (Charles and Jones 2013, p. 186), will begin to form alliances with other women, and there will be a 'feminisation' of politics (Norris 1996b; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Lovenduski 2005; Krook and Mackay 2011). Women's argued potential for transforming political cultures away from those which are masculinist emphasises the inherent focus on institutional norms and organisational rules in representation theory, directly connecting it with feminist institutionalist analysis (Section 2.3).

The works of Kanter (1977b, 1977a) were formative in the development of critical mass theory in feminist political science. Building upon Simmelian theory: namely, group form determines group processes or content, Kanter attested that the relative numbers of dominant and minority groups play a crucial role in "shaping interaction dynamics" in group settings (Kanter 1977b, p. 965). Kanter's research on 20 women employees in a 300-person salesforce led her to identify four distinct majority-minority group distributions (represented pictorially in Figure 2.1): 1) **uniform** groups with only one group present (100:0 ratio); 2) **skewed** groups with a ratio of approximately 85:15; 3) **tilted** groups with a less extreme imbalance of minority/majority groups (65:35); and 4) **balanced** groups with equal or 'almost equal' balance between groups (ratios of 60:40 or 50:50). Kanter (1977b) found that, as proportions of minority groups changed from skewed to tilted and, ultimately, to balanced groups, so did the experiences of the minority group members. They were no longer reduced to 'tokens'

²⁴ In nuclear physics, critical mass denotes the "minimum amount of a given fissile material necessary to achieve a self-sustaining fission chain reaction under stated conditions" (Britannica 2018).

with heightened visibility which made them more likely to be compelled to conform by the ‘dominants’, incapable of creating a counterculture, and being forced to assimilate²⁵.

Figure 2.1: Pictorial representation of Kanter's four minority-majority group distributions

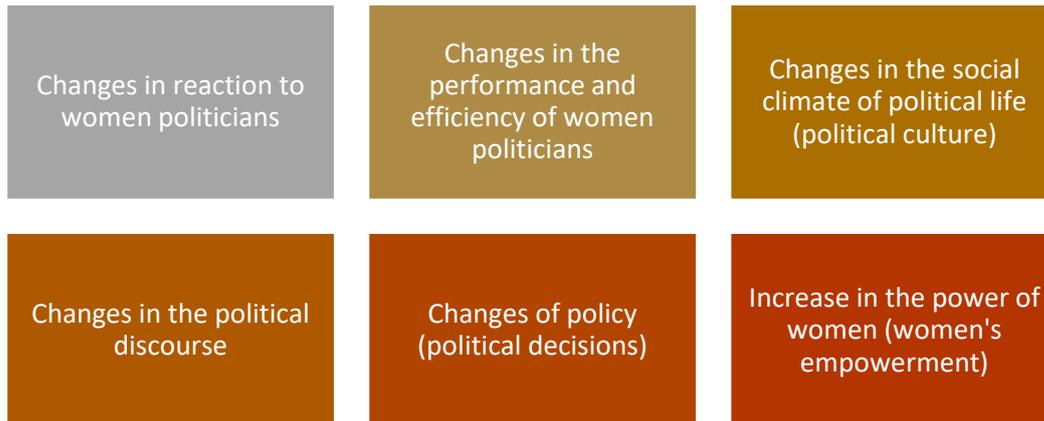


Achieving a tilted group means that minority individuals are less likely to be isolated, will form coalitions to “affect the culture of the group”, and minority group members will become “differentiated from each other” (Kanter 1977b, p. 728). Individual feminist women may be present in a skewed group, but critical mass theory contends that larger numbers are necessary to achieve a feminisation of the institution or context (see Section 2.3.1). Dahlerup (1988), influenced by Kanter, constructed critical mass theory’s application to feminist political science and extended the concept to understand “six different aspects of changes” that could occur when critical mass is achieved (Figure 2.2). A ‘specific turning point’ of 30-

²⁵ Tokens, Kanter (1977b) identifies, faced three unique challenges. Firstly, the token’s heightened visibility made them vulnerable to performance pressures which caused them to either “over achieve” or “limit” their visibility. Second, token individuals suffered token isolation, forcing them to either remain a natural clear outsider or to become a complicit insider. For female tokens this often means becoming ‘one of the boys’, even if it means acting in a way that is prejudiced against your own gender (see Childs and Krook 2008). Finally, token individuals faced role entrapment, having to choose between certain female-coded stereotypes.

35 per cent has often been cited²⁶ as the irreversible point at which women politicians are freed from constraint to “promote women-friendly policy change and influence their male colleagues to accept and approve legislation promoting women’s concerns” (Childs and Krook 2008, p. 725).

Figure 2.2: Dahlerup’s (1988) six aspects of change possible after achieving critical mass



Critics of Kanter, however, argue that her conclusions are flawed. Kanter wrote about women in a corporation setting as employees, not about women in political legislatures as elected representatives. Accordingly, ‘tokens’ were judged by superiors on their daily job performance, rather than by the electorate through voting on a multi-year basis (Bratton 2005; Childs and Krook 2008). Additionally, whilst Kanter identifies the root cause of the issues the women in her study faced as their minority status *inside* the organisation, in the case of women politicians, it is women politicians’ minority status *outside* the political organisation *interacting* with their minority status within it which causes the difficulties they face (Dahlerup 1988, p. 278). Moreover, as per feminist institutionalism (see section 2.3), the organisational contexts and cultures of political institutions, and the ways in which this constrains or facilitates women’s political representation, must also form some of the basis of a fully-informed research study (Childs and Krook 2006a; Mackay 2008; Chaney 2011).

2.2.3: ‘Acting For’ – Substantive Representation and Critical Actors

The focus on descriptive representation, critical mass, and the calls for a politics of presence achieved important increases in the numbers of women elected to political settings across the

²⁶ Indeed, in the 1990s, 30 per cent became a much-repeated target for women’s political representation, with international declarations recommending it as a basis for gender quotas and is therefore used as the benchmark for critical mass here (Dahlerup 1988; UN Women 1995).

globe through its engagement with positive action techniques and gender quotas. Subsequent evidence has shown that women's increased political presence has, to some extent, transformed political legislatures and institutions, as well as the academic discipline of feminist political science itself. Once elected in larger numbers to critical mass levels in some legislatures, questions regarding whether and how women representatives make a difference and what women do when holding political office, became possible to answer. This engendered a shift in focus from the politics of presence, descriptive representation and critical mass, to how women politicians act, substantive representation and critical actors, as well as research ascertaining any links between the two (Childs and Lovenduski 2012, p. 492). Given that women's overall representation in Welsh local government was just below critical mass at 28 per cent, and that some Welsh councils have achieved tilted and balanced ratios²⁷, this thesis mirrors the shift in focus in the field and contributes to discussions on the links between descriptive and substantive representation and the role of critical mass and critical actors, extending the evidence available at the local level.

Substantive representation has been multitudinously defined as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967); “to act ‘on behalf’ of others, ‘in their place’ or ‘stead’, ‘in their interests’, ‘in accord with their desires’, pursuing their ‘welfare’, and so on” (Duerst-Lahti and Verstegen 2011, p. 218). For Childs and Lovenduski (2012), the substantive representation of women occurs when elected officials routinely act for women, but also bring a diverse range of women's perspectives to political debate. In this sense, substantive representation addresses another common critique of descriptive representation and critical mass theory, insofar as it recognises intersectionality and the crucial diversity *between* women, and their agency to act upon and be influenced by their situated knowledge.

One key criticism of critical mass and descriptive representation is that it puts elected female representatives, especially those who are members of a smaller critical mass, under pressure, stemming from what Dahlerup (1988, p. 279) contends are “two conflicting expectations”. Firstly, women must prove that they are just as capable as their male counterparts who, due to women's sustained exclusion from political arenas, are automatically in positions of seniority and benefit from institutional hierarchies (see section 2.4). Secondly, women politicians should endeavour to make a difference once elected to

²⁷ As per Graph 1.2 and Table 1.1, eleven Welsh local councils had achieved descriptive representation of women at above critical mass levels after the 2017 elections.

prove critical mass theorists correct (and critics wrong) in their conclusions that electing women feminises politics.

Dahlerup's (1988, p. 296) original critique of Kanter's research and of critical mass theory generally argues that to adapt a concept from nuclear particle physics ignores human agency – "human beings do not act automatically like particles". Descriptive representation and critical mass theory are too presumptive in their assumptions that representatives will consistently, and unconstrained by context, adopt the 'gyroscopic' form of representation identified by Mansbridge (1999) and "look within" at their own lived experience to derive and act on the basis of shared gendered interests. Whilst the critical mass assumption might be a comforting thought for feminists fighting for women's increased presence in politics, this assertion has been found by many to overstate a direct and predictable relation between gender and the likelihood that a representative will substantively represent women (see Childs 2001a, 2002, 2006; Childs and Krook 2006b, 2009; Celis and Childs 2012; Celis and Erzeel 2015). Strong claims for shared female interests and opinions have been to some extent disproven by research in the field. Despite her acknowledgement of the movement towards a 'politics of presence', even Anne Phillips (1995) conceded that there is "no empirical or theoretical plausibility" to the guaranteed translation of women's shared experiences into beliefs or targets shared between female legislators.

As Mackay (2008, p. 127) states: "whilst it is plausible that women representatives may act for women, there are no guarantees". Furthermore, the neoliberal context in most societies and politics today has often meant that whilst the 'recognition' or symbolic side of Nancy Fraser's (1995) two-part framework has been met by women being present in politics, the 'politics of redistribution' has been limited. Governments may *appear* more democratic from women's increased political presence, but when it comes to tangible policy outcomes like gendered budgets, the funding or cutting of resources, and reorganising power structures or discourses in favour of women's substantive representation, there is less evidence of progress.

Chaney's (2006, p. 691) analysis of plenary debate transcripts in the National Assembly for Wales (now Senedd Cymru) affirmed this counter-declaration, finding that there were links between women's descriptive and substantive representation, but the assertion that critical mass leads to women's increased substantive representation in political debates was "'probabilistic' rather than 'deterministic'". Chaney found that between 65 and

78 percent of interventions on the topics of childcare, domestic violence, equal pay, and ‘women’s issues’ more generally *were* made by women Assembly Members (AMs). However, on deeper examination, it emerged that it was three individual women, identified by Chaney as ‘equality champions’ (critical actors), who made a “disproportionately high number of interventions in debate in selected issues” (Chaney 2006, p. 702). At the time of this research, Senedd Cymru boasted a critical mass and, impressively, a balanced group (Kanter 1977b), yet the likelihood of female parliamentarians representing women was more dependent on “who the women are”, than the presence of women above the turning point of critical mass (Chaney 2006, p. 709). Other empirical research has also found similar results (see: Childs and Krook 2006b; Childs and Withey 2006; Childs and Krook 2009; Rodríguez-García 2015).

This suggests that other factors have an impact on the likelihood that a female political representative will substantively represent women and that political arenas with critical masses will not automatically discuss women’s issues. Mackay’s (2008) ‘thick’ conception of substantive representation attests that it occurs and is enacted through “multiple actors, sources, and sites”. Achieving a “fluid and evolving conception of what it means to ‘act for women’” (Childs and Krook 2009, p. 126) means that it is necessary to move beyond the approach of critical mass to focus, instead, on how the substantive representation of women occurs through pivotal and other moments, often initiated by these critical actors. Advocates of the turn towards critical actor theory have contended that, whilst there is a place for critical mass and campaigns for women’s increased political presence which will still retain their popularity and support amongst academics and activists for gender parity in political institutions, there is no longer a need for critical mass *theory*. “Prior assumptions about men and women as political actors” (Childs and Krook 2009, p. 145) and the probabilistic models of numeric strength have largely, in academic research into substantive representation, been abandoned in order to interrogate the contingent and complicated relationship between what politicians may look like, and what it is, that they do or achieve. This approach is adopted in this thesis. Not least, as the following explains (section 2.3), we need to examine the role of institutions.

Critical acts have variously been defined as those which “will change the position of the minority considerably and lead to further changes” (Dahlerup 1988, p. 296), with critical actors multitudinously labelled as ‘feminist champions’, ‘policy entrepreneurs’, ‘preferable descriptive representatives’, and ‘gender equity entrepreneurs’. Critical actors are radical in

their politics and have a low threshold for political action regarding the representation of women (Rodríguez-García 2015; Johnson and Josefsson 2016; Thomson 2018; Staab and Waylen 2020). Drawing from a body of literature abundant with definitions, the working definition of a critical actor developed for this thesis is: a political representative with a low-threshold for political action through which they consistently advocate for, and have disproportionate influence on, policy initiation, debate, and proposal which is women-friendly.

Critical actors may also encourage and ‘embolden others’ (Childs and Krook 2009) to follow in their footsteps, forming and spearheading alliances or cross-party groups, and encouraging or mentoring fellow current and prospective women representatives. Although this thesis focuses solely on the experiences and political representation of women, a crucial element of critical actor theory and at the crux of its critical response to critical mass, is the concept that critical actors are not gendered insofar as all politicians, regardless of gender identification, are believed capable of acting for women. Childs and Lovenduski (2012, p. 9) contend that we cannot “rule out the possibility that individual male representatives might well have ‘acted for’ women in the past and may well do so today”. This thesis later discusses findings concerning the role of men as critical supporters of women in local government (see Chapter Eight).

Shifting from views of representation ‘en masse’ to an individualised sense of substantive representation also challenged the idea of ‘women’ as a monolithic category, recognising instead that women’s lived experiences are inherently multiple, with key differences stemming from intersections with social class, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual identity and more. Although, as Young (2002) attests there are shared gendered social perspectives which could form the basis of collective action and the representation of a shared political agenda, we cannot identify a clearly defined, homogenous or ‘stable’ set of ‘women’s issues’²⁸. Weldon (2002, p. 1154) aptly surmises that “it is impossible to conclude that group perspective resides complete in any individual”. Women do not all think the same

²⁸ Whilst there is a myriad of definitions of ‘women’s issues’, it was widely understood to refer to women-specific policies or a wide notion of “issues that concern women”. However, the basis of their content has largely been recognised as embedded in traditional gendered caring roles alongside residual concerns left over from the Second Wave feminist movement. Lovenduski (2005, p. 19), for example defined ‘women’s issues’ as “issues that might affect women, either for biological reasons (for example breast cancer screening) or for social reasons (sex equality of childcare policy)”.

way or hold the same views as other women – some will be feminists, some will not (Childs 2001a, b, 2004a, b; Celis and Childs 2012).

The existence of a universal set of ‘women’s issues’ is contested in feminist political science (Lovenduski 1997; Childs 2001a, b, 2002; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Lovenduski 2005; Chaney 2006, 2011; Celis and Childs 2012). The term makes essentialist assumptions about the existence of a homogenous and stable ‘women’ group with their own specific policy issues or interests, ignoring intersectionality, and, consequently, leading to “bias that impacts upon the type of representative and representative acts that are captured by research” (Celis and Childs 2012, p. 216). Consequently, others have adopted a broader sense of the term, with Carroll (1994, p. 15) defining it as “where policy consequences are likely to have a more immediate and direct impact on significantly larger numbers of women than of men”. As Celis and Childs (2020) contend, women’s political representation is “no longer understood in the dominant terms of particular feminist content carried into our political institutions by descriptive representatives”, but the three feminist principles of inclusiveness, responsiveness, and egalitarianism must be held onto²⁹. Academic literature concerning feminist political science and political representation has thus moved away from research which assumes that substantive representation equals representing ‘women’s issues’.

The essentialist definitions of ‘women’s issues’ led to a conflation of substantive representation with feminist interests – substantive representation became synonymous with *feminist* substantive representation. This resulted in research which overlooked men representatives substantively acting for women, but additionally any activities engaged in by centrist or right-wing, C/conservative women representatives or groups who may substantively represent women in ways which fall outside of a feminist definition of ‘women’s issues’ (Celis and Childs 2012; Celis and Erzeel 2015; Gwiazda 2021a). One cannot assume that all women politicians will be ‘gender-conscious’, and even those who may consider themselves to be feminist will not hold a homogenous set of interests or perceive policy issues in the same way as feminism, itself, is not homogenous³⁰. Moreover, as Celis and Childs (2012, p. 219) concede, feminism “does not speak for, or to, all women and [...] feminist substantive representation can only be considered to be part of the substantive

²⁹ Inclusiveness is defined as “the presence of women’s heterogenous interests among representative claims”; responsiveness is when “claims about and for women reflect and connect with women in society”; and egalitarianism addresses the need for consideration of “the power status of diverse voices and different women’s interests” (Celis and Childs 2020, pp. 177-178).

³⁰ Indeed, researchers have moved towards a pluralisation of the term: feminisms.

representation of women”. Lovenduski and Norris (2003) discuss how the recognition of women’s interests occurs through a ‘process of politicisation’ which requires a number of steps:

1. Women become ‘recognised as a social category’ and politics’ gender ‘neutrality’ is challenged;
2. Gender-based inequalities of power are recognised;
3. Creation of policies to improve women’s autonomy.

One unintended consequence of the traditional understanding of ‘women’s issues’ was that it resulted in an elitist tendency of ascribing what women politicians *should* be interested in. Elected women were consequently considered best suited to, or ‘bound’ (in both senses of the term) to prioritise, areas of policy that fit the traditional gendered feminine stereotype such as: childcare services, social services, housing, and education, or issues like domestic violence, sexual harassment, gender pay gaps, and the gendered division of labour. The reality however is likely to be different, particularly at the local level where larger-scale gendered policy issues³¹, such as women’s health agendas around abortion, or gender pay gaps, are not within the scope of the institution. In summation, therefore, the substantive representation of women cannot be limited to a consideration only of feminist ‘women’s issues’, and must explore other conceptions of women’s interests, and the substantive representation of women by *any* actors in *all* policy areas. As Childs and Lovenduski (2012, p. 503) contend: “most issues have gender dimensions as they implicitly or explicitly reflect some notion of relations between women and men and masculinity and femininity”. What is necessary is a gendering of general interest and policy (Lovenduski 2005; Stokes 2005; Celis 2008), and the mainstreaming of gender into public policy discourse through means of gendered policy framing by critical actors (UN Division for the Advancement of Women 2005). Consequently, for the purposes of this research, the traditional concept of ‘women’s issues’ is largely abandoned in favour of adopting a focus on ‘women’s interests, concerns, and perspectives’, as well as what the research participants believed was ‘acting for women’.

In summary, it is necessary to move beyond traditional approaches to research solely concerning women’s descriptive representation and critical mass, to a focus on the links

³¹ Whilst one must avoid an over-emphasis on women’s issues in one’s research into substantive representation, there are clearly some policy areas (mostly those based on biology and health) which will, primarily, affect women. Reproductive policies concerning abortion, contraception, pregnancy and maternity leave, for example, do disproportionately have an impact on women.

between this heightened presence, interactions between critical mass and critical actors, and the subsequent impact this has on women's substantive representation. Descriptive representation has been critiqued here as being too concerned with a guaranteed relationship between who representatives are or look like and their likelihood to include women's interests in their political rhetoric. Whilst descriptive representation is not wholly cast aside, the assumptions of critical mass theory causing automatic change are replaced with a research project which considers agency and individual propensity of individual women politicians in acting for the substantive representation of women. As Rodríguez-García warns, this relationship is "not lock-step by nature" and a great deal of untangling is necessary to fully ascertain how factors, which have previously been found in the cited studies of women's substantive representation at the national state (Westminster) and national sub-state levels (NAfW, Scottish Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly), have similar effects in the under-researched context of local government. All the foregoing suggests that representation does not, of course, take place in a vacuum. Authors and research make repeated reference to 'organisations' and 'sites' of representation, alluding to the pivotal role of institutions and their contexts. It is to this we now turn and the next section, which details the feminist institutionalist influences on this research, highlights importantly the masculinist institutional factors which have been identified as constraining would-be critical actors and affecting representational processes. This research therefore situates the political representation of women in Welsh local government in its gendered institutional contexts.

2.3: Feminist Institutionalism

In the definition of representation and its five elements (Dovi 2017) outlined in section 2.2.1, the fourth element reminded us that political representation and, subsequently, the representation of women through claim-making, framing, debating, policy-initiation and proposal, are embedded in a political and institutional context or setting. Political institutions come with their own 'political opportunity structures' which affect "the ways in which [minority] groups seeking to influence political decision-making can emerge and take action collectively" (Stevens 2007, p. 174). Traditionally, in the field of political science, there was a shared understanding that it was the patriarchy which was the root cause of gender inequality in political settings (Krook and Mackay 2011, p. 3), meaning that institutional processes and practices remained overlooked and under-researched. However, as this section details, the relatively recent move from studying universal structures to investigating specific gendered relations of power has led to the development of a new Feminist Institutionalism: an

approach with its eye firmly fixed on scrutinizing and unboxing the gendered ‘black box’ of political rules and conventions. This section explores the origins of Feminist Institutionalism, its key features as concerned with the formal and informal gendered conditions of political institutions, and finally the conditions under, and mechanisms through, which institutional feminisation or ‘re-gendering’ occurs.

2.3.1: Origins and Influences

The popularisation of a ‘Feminist Institutionalist’ approach was scaffolded around the argument that it was necessary to bolster New Institutionalism with a new gendered dimension which considered institutional strengths and weaknesses when specifically accounting for women’s inclusion and exclusion. New Institutionalism, is an umbrella term which incorporates different perspectives on institutions (including rational choice, historical, sociological, and discursive approaches³²). Broadly it contends, as does this thesis, that institutions matter and that “the rules of the game [...] that structure political, social, and economic life [...] the organisation of political life makes a difference” (March and Olsen 1984, p. 747). New Institutionalism is based around the key tenet that “political structures shape political conduct, and are normatively and historically embedded” (Lowndes and Roberts 2013) . However New Institutionalism also emphasises the importance of the *interaction* of informal norms and conventions in conjunction with formal rules and structures which shape political conduct, something echoed in Feminist Institutionalism. Moreover, this perspective considers how institutions and their practices are value-embedded and characterised by relationships of power, recognising that institutions can constrain individuals but also contending they are malleable, can evolve and can be influenced by actors.

Feminist institutionalism builds on these key tenets but additionally centres the importance of mainstreaming a gendered approach into political science research on

³² Historical New Institutionalism focuses on the ‘meso’ or ‘macro-level’ factors such as “timing, sequence, and context [...] the ways in which particular configurations of institutions shift over time” to create a timeline within which policy is deliberated, framed, and implemented (Kenny 2015, p. 25). Rational choice approaches are centred on the micro-level interactions, origins, and mechanisms employed by institutions and their members which affect policy outcomes. Sociological institutionalism mirrors the qualitative turn in the field of sociology to research how formal rules, procedures, and norms guide behaviours and legitimise the institutions’ culture. Discursive approaches emphasise the role of discourse which affect politicians’ behaviours and the contexts where this takes place. Institutions structurally constrain or enable members through constructing meaning and affect the way “in which and through which ideas are communicated via discourse”.

institutions, exploring how institutional social practices and interactions which, in turn, affect policy decisions, are permeated by gendered choices. Feminist institutionalism asserts that political institutions are mainly influenced and constructed around those who have been present the longest: men. Dominant masculinity and, consequently, gender inequality are often built-in to political institutions and have a significant impact on institutional procedures and policy outputs. Historical male domination has, Lovenduski (2005, p. 2) attests, meant that masculinist ideology is central to political institutions, with “centuries-old, male-designed traditions of politics” presented as commonplace, hegemonic, and even “apparently gender-neutral political institutions have differential effects on women and men” (Mackay 2011, p. 181). Gendered distributions of power are present “in the processes, practices, images, and ideologies [of] institutions historically developed by men, currently dominated by men” (Acker 1992, p. 567). Crucially, therefore, political institutions must be conceptualised and conceived of within research as gendered, with women’s political representation accepted as shaped by masculinist institutional contexts. The ‘gendered’ nature of political institutions is constructed through and embedded within daily activities, policies, and practices – the very ‘logic’ of political arenas are permeated by constructs of masculinity and femininity which shape values, behaviours, and the ways in which politics is ‘done’ (Kenney 1996; Childs 2004a; Stevens 2007).

Feminist institutionalism enables an analysis of “scenarios where gendered informal institutions reinforce formal institutions by filling in gaps, and play a completing role”, making up for vagueness and ambiguity around formal rules (Waylen 2014, p. 19). Dahlerup’s (2006b) ‘politics as a workplace’ perspective turned the gaze towards the gendered conditions and practices within political institutions, recognising that women “have to fight for their basic rights as women parliamentarians and local councillors” (Dahlerup 2006b, p. 519). These conditions and practices are, in feminist institutionalist analysis, understood as both formal and informal “rules of the game [...] shared prescriptions about what actions are required, prohibited, or permitted” (Ostrom 2011, p. 7), referred to variously as gendered norms, practices, conventions, cultures, and traditions which condition the political agency of minority groups. Lowndes identifies four variables which form of model of the gendered nature of political institutions:

1. Rules about gender – These are rules which “serve to differentially allocate roles, actions, or benefits to women and men”. They can be formal rules about equality – such as the UK Equality Act 2010 (EA2010). They may also take the form of “ruling-

out” where women are excluded from areas which are not considered feminine or “ruling-in” to the traditionally-gendered policy areas of education or social services.

2. Rules with gendered effects – This is when rules may not specifically be “about gender”, but have gendered effects because they interact with wider societal inequalities. For example, as is discussed below, the rules of the UK political institutions cannot outwardly contradict the EA2010, but organisational practices of institutions can interact with gendered divisions of caring and domestic labour to create political workplaces which exclude women.
3. Gendered actors working with rules – Lowndes contends that we need to consider those who are affected and who “negotiate the rules of politics, as rule-takers and rule-makers”.
4. Gendered outcomes of action shaped by rules – outcomes of political institutions which are gendered to either favour or disadvantage men’s or women’s interests.

Feminist institutionalist analysis allows researchers to consider these four aspects and to further examine how these are enacted and reproduced through daily political behaviours and the interaction of the formal with the informal. Erikson and Josefsson (2019) found, for example, that whilst Sweden’s Parliament was gender-equal ‘on paper’ with “no different rules or regulations for men and women”, the practices of the institutions still better suited men (and discriminated against women) because they interacted with “informal aspects of the work environment”– even gender-neutral institutional rules can have gendered effects (Lowndes 2014).

Political institutions have been understood as gendered political workplaces, with evidence from many countries’ parliaments contributing to a growing portfolio of research into how institutional rules and norms and practices benefit men’s participation and exclude women, particularly those with domestic, employment, or caring responsibilities outside of their elected roles (see, for example Jones et al. 2009; McKay 2011; Charles and Jones 2013; Campbell and Childs 2014; Charles 2014; Galea and Chappell 2015; Farrell and Titcombe 2016; Erikson and Josefsson 2019, 2020, 2021; Hibbs 2022b). In UK political institutions, despite legal measures including the EA2010, which legislate against the discrimination of employees based on sex or gender reassignment, and pregnancy or maternity (which

disproportionately impact women), evidence shows that institutions contravene this and that women face wide-spread institutional sexism which disadvantages them and where “male preferences are conditioned, favoured and rewarded” (Lovenduski 2014, p. 19). In The Good Parliament report, Childs’ (2016, p. 7) highlights how the House of Commons fails to achieve a diversity sensitive parliament and realise aspects of the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s ‘Gender Sensitive Parliaments’ framework which encourages institutions to be responsive to “the ‘needs and interests’ of both women and men in terms of its ‘structures, operations, methods and work’ [and] remove[d] the ‘barriers to women’s full participation’”. Childs’ (2016) own judgment of the various practices of the House of Commons rated eleven of her twelve identified measures of equality of participation, infrastructure, and culture as ‘red’ (7) or ‘amber’ (4), with only one measure achieving ‘green’ status. This included measures such as calendar and sitting hours (red), childcare and child-friendly provisions (amber), and chamber culture (red).

As was discussed in Chapter 1.1.3, local government is often cited as a more ‘suitable’ arena for women’s political participation given that it has fewer gendered formal rules around working hours, and does not require significant time, or overnight stays, away from home (Hollis 1987). However, the little previous research there is finds that the organisational practices present in local government do not construct a political institution that ensures women’s, and particularly mothers’ or working women’s, full participation (Briggs 2000; Charles and Jones 2013; Charles 2014; Farrell and Titcombe 2016; Charles 2018) – something that is reflected in the statistics³³. Councillors are predominantly older, are unlikely to have young children, and are retired – local government is dominated by “grey men in grey suits” (Charles and Jones 2013). Therefore, it can be argued that local government working practices are historically arranged around the assumption that local councillors do not have caring or professional responsibilities or commitments. This thesis extends feminist institutionalist evidence of local government’s working conditions, their gendered nature, and how formal institutional rules of the game interact with informal norms and conventions to reproduce a political arena that is often hostile for women councillors.

³³ For example, data from the Survey of Local Government Candidates 2017 (Murphy and Jones 2018) found that only 16 per cent of elected county councillor candidates who responded had parental responsibility for a child aged 16 or under, 37 per cent were retired, and 47 per cent of county councillors were aged 60 plus. Though not a direct comparison, recent data finds that approximately 21.1 per cent of the Welsh population are over 65 years of age (Welsh Government and statsWales 2021)

2.3.2: Investigating Informal Institutional Norms

By researching the informal alongside formal institutional rules, feminist institutionalist research considers the normative barriers and male-dominated cultures, discourses and gendered power relations encountered by female political representatives through the daily conduct in institutions. Feminist institutionalism enables an in-depth understanding of how the formal political ‘rules of the game’ – like those discussed in Childs’ dimensions of infrastructure (sitting hours, provisions for children and parents, and physical spaces) – interact with other informal norms, conventions, and cultures of political spaces. It enables an understanding of how gender inequalities play-out at the micro-interactional level, allowing for research which considers both structure and agency. Studies focused on the gendered informal norms and cultures have discussed aspects of politics such as political behaviours and micro-machismos, political language and styles or ways of ‘doing politics’ (Norris 1996a; Shaw 2000, 2002; Childs 2004a; Biquelet et al. 2012; Cameron and Shaw 2020; Hargrave and Langengen 2021; Hargrave and Blumenau 2022), the interactions of politicians within chambers and with other stakeholders (constituents, service delivery partnerships, and third sector or pressure groups) in their elected capacities (Costa 2021), and physical and online sexual harassment and violence against women in politics (VAWP) (Krook 2017; O’Connell and Ramshaw 2018; Krook 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020). The next section of this chapter discusses previous feminist institutionalist analyses and research of these informal elements in political gendered workplaces.

As discussed in section 2.2, supporters of descriptive representation and critical mass contend that increasing the number of women in the legislature will cause fundamental change to the informal elements of political institutions, through embedding a feminised ‘style’ of politics, or altering the way that politics is ‘done’. There is some evidence to suggest that women politicians communicate and approach politics with a distinct language and discourse, adopting a “feminised, kinder, gentler politics” (Norris 1996a, p. 3).

Politicians’ styles or the ways that they claim to ‘do’ politics are perceived as gendered, with differences between gendered styles organised around traditional bifurcated masculine and feminine gender roles (Childs 2004a, p. 7). Political institutions, because of the historical domination of men, devalue or disparage “things coded as ‘feminine’, paradigmatically [...] women” and, despite arguments that there are benefits of a feminised political style (Fraser 1995, p. 26), assimilation into masculine ways of doing politics is often women’s easiest route to being taken seriously in political debate.

Female politicians have been found to consider themselves more collaborative and cooperative, and as adopting a feminised political style that is: kinder; gentler; quieter; less combative; less aggressive; measured; personal; less defensive; caring; practical; less corrupt; and honest denouncing conflict, hierarchy, and sleaze (Norris 1996b, p. 93; Bochel and Briggs 2000; Childs 2004a; Lovenduski 2005). Furthermore, feminised political language is judged to cut through ‘pompous male rhetoric’ (von der Fehr et al. 2005) by being less focused on political jargon or ‘babble’, with preference for a less adversarial communication style, evidence-based arguments, and action-driven discussion of policies and politics rather than deliberation in abstract terms. Bjørnå (2012, p. 66), for example, observed that the political style in an Australian local council that had a female majority of over 70 per cent was, in contrast to others, characterised by a political culture “based on consensus and inclusion” with a “more deliberative and consensus-oriented style”.

Moreover, Childs’ (2004a, pp. 5-6) important study involving 23 interviews with UK Labour women MPs asked about their perceptions of their own political style, finding that they believed that their increased presence had changed the chamber a little, rendering it ‘a slightly softer place’ with less ‘yah-boo politics’. More recently, Hargrave and Langengen’s (2021) content analysis of 200 parliamentary speeches in the House of Commons between 1997 and 2016 found that women, whilst as likely to refer to facts as men, were three times more likely to use personal or experience of others³⁴ than their male counterparts – something the authors identified as ‘more engaging and effective’, particularly for the public and fellow politicians. Similar, though limited, findings of women preferring a substantive framing of arguments and a more personal approach were also found by Biquelet et al. (2012) when examining gendered differences in political speech around abortion matters. Moreover, in Hargrave and Langengen’s (2021, p. 582) study, women oriented ‘discussion to consider the effects of policies on specific groups and individuals in society’, offering a distinctive perspective on debate, shifting it away from the abstract terms preferred by men. The way they spoke in the chamber was also less adversarial than men who specifically directed comments at individuals, other political parties, and certain groups in their speeches, and women’s approach was said to ‘offer a welcome change to the kinds of parliamentary behaviour the public finds dissatisfying and disengaging’ (Hargrave and Langengen 2021, p. 583).

³⁴ Members of Parliament may reference the experience or opinion of their constituents, for example.

Conversely, other research has contended that women are largely constrained by institutional contexts and that politics is not conducive to the adoption of feminine political style with women, especially token women, being forced into assimilation or becoming “one of the boys, acceptable to the men who dominate the political world, and therefore, implicitly, like them: masculine” (Pilcher 1995, pp. 502-504). Both Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May – Britain’s only female Prime Ministers (to date) – have, for example, been considered to adopt masculine communicative and behavioural political traits (Chiu 2019). Surprisingly, by analysing political speech data Hargrave and Blumenau (2022) have found that women MPs have actually become increasingly more likely to adopt style traits associated with ‘masculine’ stereotypes of communication in UK parliamentary debates between 1997 and 2019, suggesting critical mass does not automatically guarantee feminised political styles and there may be other factors at play. In Wales, Charles and Jones (2013, p. 193) interviewed 52 women and men AMs and councillors between 2005 and 2008. They explain that, due to the masculinised nature of Welsh local councils and the few cases of a critical mass, “women councillors felt that in order to be accepted and taken seriously by their male colleagues they had to adopt ‘masculine’ modes of behaviour”. Farrell and Titcombe’s (2016, pp. 878-879) semi-structured interviews with 18 women and men local councillors between 2014 and 2016 found that female councillors universally believed that they had to be “assertive to be successful” and that council chambers were “not a place for shrinking violets”. Using a feminist institutionalist analytical framework enables consideration of when, how, and whether women feel able to do politics differently, or whether they are constrained or fettered from performing their preferred political style by the conditions of their political institution. This thesis contributes to this evidence at the local level, by examining women councillors’ perceptions of dominant styles of political communication in Welsh local government, and their own political styles and ways of doing politics.

Another particularly salient and serious issue identified as an obstacle to women’s political participation³⁵ is the well-documented and, at the national level particularly, recently well-publicised gender-based abuse, sexism, and violence experienced by women politicians both inside and outside of political chambers (Matfess et al. 2022). The spread of the #MeToo movement in the UK and the subsequent #WestminsterToo revelations (Murray

³⁵ Not only is violence against women politicians a barrier to women considering political office and those already elected, recent research by Collignon and Rüdiger (2021) has found that violence against women candidates has a negative electoral effect and limits women’s chances as it forces them to adopt campaign modifications to reduce their vulnerability.

2017; Buchan 2018; Krook 2018; Newman 2018) placed politics under the microscope, with numerous MPs investigated by their parties, some facing suspension, and Cabinet members being demoted following the whistleblowing of female politicians and staff about sexual harassment. Infamous reports of knee-touching, an MP asking a woman member of political staff to purchase him sex-toys, inappropriate text messages, and sustained, unwanted sexual advances spread throughout the media.

Women politicians are significantly more likely to be the recipients and victims of sexist language, of sexual harassment and misconduct, and otherwise inappropriate behaviours from peers – indeed, such treatment has become known as the ‘cost of doing politics’ (Krook 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020). As Murray (2017) contends, incidences of sexual harassment are “motivated by a craving for social status [...] not just about sex, it’s about power”, and to diminish women’s political contribution and, at times, scare them into silence. Marginalising women, Lovenduski (2014, pp. 16-19) argues, is “hardwired into the rather traditional institutions” with masculine dominance, power and might “embedded in the institution in various ways” which maintain ‘established norms of appropriateness’ and have an impact on the behaviour ‘even of men who claim to know better’.

Sexual harassment is a key example of an informal norm through which male politicians resist women’s presence to defend their status in the existing gendered political hierarchy. Women, historically, have been discouraged from speaking of their experiences of sexual harassment due to fears it would negatively reflect on their own morality, and their ability to ‘cope’ in political arenas would be criticised. Women being victim-blamed for being targets of sexually-fuelled harassment as a result of “uncontrollable male lust” (Krook 2018, p. 3) was not uncommon. In politics today, definitions of sexual harassment are multitudinous and there is intense debate over what exactly constitutes sexual harassment. Some have contended that, due to the rising numbers of women in politics and, arguably, a wider acceptance of gender equality goals, the sexual harassment experienced by female politicians has become less overtly hostile (Lovenduski 2014; Trenow 2014; Krook 2018). Ambivalent sexism, a term used by Krook (2018) to describe the negative sentiments towards women still held by some in political arenas, has led to a political culture characterised by ‘male banter’ (Farrell and Titcombe 2016), sexist humour, sexist language and comments, and discriminatory behaviour. Evidence, however, suggests that there still remain examples and incidences of overt sexual harassment in British political arenas. Violence against women

in politics now has an online ‘face’ with women experiencing sexism and abuse online from members of the general public (Harmer and Southern 2021), as perhaps a reflection of the proliferation of similar treatment and informal conventions which permit it within the political chambers of UK political institutions.

Comparatively less research and media attention has been paid to sexual harassment and behaviour of politicians in local politics, but what evidence there is suggests a similar picture (Trenow 2014; VAGO 2020). The Fawcett Society’s (2017) report *Does Local Government Work for Women?* surveyed 2304 councillors in England and Wales and conducted an array of other qualitative research with councillors³⁶ found that, whilst only 10 per cent of their sample had faced serious sexual harassment, 38 per cent had experienced sexist treatment, and a third had received sexist comments from fellow councillors which “would not be out of place in the 1970s” (Fawcett Society 2017, pp. 40-42). In Wales, sexist treatment of councillors has received some limited media attention, particularly as numerous women councillors have resigned from their councils following experiences of sexism and bullying by male colleagues over the past two electoral terms. Cardiff City Council, for example, experienced the resignation of seven Welsh Labour councillors in quick succession, all who cited reasons of bullying, sexism, sexual harassment, and in-party chaos (Silk 2016). Moreover, a Welsh Conservative councillor received rape threats and her car and home being vandalised and targeted which led to her being issued a panic alarm by police (BBC Wales News 2019). Titcombe’s and Farrell’s (2016) research on the gendered experiences of Welsh local council members found further evidence of sexism, concluding that Welsh local councils remain ‘old boy’s clubs’. Female local councillors in their study often felt patronised and bullied by older male councillors, and also experienced sexist comments including (Farrell and Titcombe 2016, p. 877): “Women have little feet so they can stand closer to the sink”, and “Well lads, I won’t object to looking at that for the next 4 years!”. However, male councillors reported that gender discrimination did not happen in Welsh councils due to improvements in women’s descriptive representation since 1996. Where a sexist culture was identified, interviewees blamed older local council members whose attitudes and behaviour, they believed, reflected the historical rural Welsh culture of “pits, chapel and tradition”.

³⁶ The Fawcett Society conducted an online consultation, expert panels and evidence sessions, in-depth interviews with 12 women council leaders and deputy leaders, and telephone interviews with prospective councillor candidates. They further analysed councils’ processes and structures in England using a Freedom of Information request.

In summation, feminist institutionalism enables the investigation of informal norms, cultures, and traditions within institutional context. As discussed, research into informal norms engenders researching the ‘micro-foundations’ of gendered institutions (Lowndes 2020), and focuses on small-scale encounters and daily interactions within political contexts, including political language or styles, the experiences of women regarding sexism and harassment, and other instances of informal norms and cultures which solidify women’s exclusion. This thesis centres the importance of the informal alongside the formal to contribute original empirical evidence from Welsh local government.

2.3.3: (How) Do Institutions Change?

Even critics of critical mass theory have conceded that the entry of women as “non-standard actors” or “unwelcome intruders” in political institutions can disrupt traditional, patriarchal norms: “the gendered coding of political norms as paradigmatically masculine may be rewritten” (Mackay 2008, p. 130). Previous research has suggested that a *re*-gendering and feminisation of political arenas and institutions, their working conditions, political cultures, styles, and conventions is possible under certain conditions (Childs 2004a; Beckwith 2005, p. 133; Lovenduski 2005; Childs and Kittilson 2016). Exploring inequalities and identifying improvements or alterations to legislatures over time enables feminist institutionalist researchers to identify the exact conditions required to “recalibrate the ‘rules of the game’” and cause institutional reorganisation. Therefore, it is pertinent to explore feminist institutionalist understandings of when, why and how change in political institutions does (or does not) occur.

Whilst a plethora of research finds negative examples of gendered political institutional rules and conventions, some institutions have been praised. In the UK, devolved political institutions have been identified as more progressive in their adoption of feminised and family-friendly working practices and policies. This has been attributed to ‘newness’ and the enshrining of gender equality approaches in institutional design and creation (Mackay 2014). Evidence suggests that it is easier to *establish* gender-sensitive parliaments from their inception through institutional engineering and the embedding of feminised working practices, than to retrospectively *alter* or re-gender older political institutions. As Mackay

(2014, p. 549) contends, “locking in” gender equal elements in institutional design can “counteract historic gender bias and gendered power imbalances”³⁷.

Scottish Parliament has been described as an institution which “prides itself on openness, inclusivity and on having progressive working practices” (Ken Mackintosh MSP cited in BBC News 2018, para. 11), such as an in-house crèche³⁸, a parenting room, maternity provision, and flexible working procedures including compressed hours and home working. Similarly, Senedd Cymru runs only during school terms, scheduled sessions normally finish by 17:30, and MSs are only required to be present three days a week³⁹. As an employer, Senedd Cymru was also named as one of Working Families charity’s ‘Top Ten Employers for Working Families’ in 2021 for its arrangements for those with caring responsibilities, and prioritises flexible working patterns, flexi-time, parental/maternity/paternity leave and pay, and its parents/carers network (Senedd Cymru 2021). Senedd Cymru further proscribes sexist language in its debate.

Notwithstanding their originally-enshrined ‘gender-neutral’ formal ‘rules-in-use’, both Senedd Cymru and Scottish Parliament have recently been criticised by women Members of Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and Senedd Members (MS) for “forgetting the new” (Mackay 2014). Women politicians have stated that their devolved legislatures are still not doing enough to be family-friendly. Kirsty Williams MS, who did not recontest the Brecon and Radnorshire seat she had held since 1999 in the May 2021 Senedd Cymru elections, reflected upon her time as an MS, as its first member to have a baby whilst in office, stating: “It was really challenging, so I would be in work all day, I was desperately trying to continue to breastfeed overnight, and I think those years really are an absolute blur”. She stated being a politician and mother was “an incredible juggle” (Williams MS cited in Bryan 2021). Similarly, four women MSPs⁴⁰ who stood down before their May 2021 elections cited

³⁷ Authors have highlighted the crucial role of women’s movements and third sector actors in ensuring that new gender rules were embedded in the devolved UK parliament. Nickie Charles’ (2014) research comparing Senedd Cymru with Welsh local councils found that feminist campaign groups played a key role in ensuring gender equality was ‘enshrined’ in Senedd Cymru’s constitution and that its working practices would be family- and women-friendly.

³⁸ This has not operated during Covid lockdowns and there are reports that it will not open again, however, which has been cited as disappointing for MSPs with children and an apt example of one of the limitations of new institutions within gendered institutional contexts.

³⁹ Except during the Covid-19 pandemic where political activity moved online or to hybrid methods which did not require ‘physical’ presence in Cardiff.

⁴⁰ Aileen Campbell, Ruth Davidson, Gail Ross, and Jenny Marra were all cited as mentioning a lack of family-friendly working practices as a core motivation for not standing for re-election in their seats.

balancing politics with family life as a key reason for giving up politics. Former leader of the Scottish Conservatives Ruth Davidson MSP stated that she felt “guilt all the time [...] guilt that I’m not spending enough time with my child, guilt that I’m not spending enough time with my job.” (Davidson 2021). This evidence suggests that, even when ‘gender-neutral’ rules are engineered into institutions from their inception, it is the interaction of these with wider societal gendered norms which create hostile environments for women.

Established older institutions are considered much less gender equal and are more resistant to gendered improvements. Difficultly re-gendering older institutions requires overcoming the “active maintenance” and resistance which are “virtually built into the very definition of an institution” (Mahoney and Thelen 2009). At the local level, working cultures and practices are significantly less progressive, and local councils remain characterised by institutional rules which suit the “grey men in grey suits” (Charles and Jones 2013). In these arenas, as with Senedd Cymru, even the formal ‘rules in use’ are inherently gendered, and infrastructural organisation is not women-friendly. Widely reported issues include: lengthy meetings at unsuitable times for those with employment or caring responsibilities (starting at 10am or 5pm, for example), a failure to provide crèche services, poor maternity leave provision at levels significantly lower than those afforded to employed women, and a lack of engagement with technological solutions to macho ‘presenteeist’ cultures (Maguire 2018; Hibbs 2022b).

Despite this, institutions *do* change, and it is necessary to build an understanding of the required conditions and circumstances behind this to identify why the exclusionary norms and practices of Welsh local government have continued. Streek and Thelen’s (2005a) work on this topic identified four types of institutional change: displacement, layering, drift, and conversion, which are each defined by their own locus of institutional transformation. Their key characteristics are outlined in Table 2.1, however, the most relevant for this thesis’ discussion about probability for change to improve experiences of minority or historically underrepresented groups constrained within existing, high-resistance institutions are layering and conversion. Where the creation of new institutions is implausible, actors must act below the radar and exploitation of “slack and leeway in existing rules and their implantation – finding soft spots [...] ignoring, reinterpreting, or breaking rules” is necessary for change to occur (Staab and Waylen 2020, p. 55).

Firstly, layering concerns the attachment of new rules to existing ones in a manner which changes the way that the original rule affects behaviour. Layering does not necessitate direct change or challenge to old institutional rules, an altering of the rules themselves, or active shifting of rule enactment. It is argued that changes through layering are “gradual and endogenous” (Waylen 2014, p. 216). Layering may take the form of amendments or additions to existing institutional practices or rules-in-use and occurs when institutional challengers – such as minority groups – lack the capacity or, perhaps, the critical mass to change the rules or overcome powerful veto players and must work within the bounds of an existing system.

Conversion denotes when rules formally remain the same yet become interpreted and enacted in new ways or are “redirected to new goals, functions or purposes”. Shifts in power relations (for example, through gaining senior positions as discussed in the next section) can be key to conversion as new actors not previously involved in the designs of the institution “take it over and turn it to new ends” to suit their own interests. Mahoney and Thelen (2009, p. 18) argue that in some cases “new elites come to power and orchestrate the shift from within” and that “even those who are disadvantaged by an institution can get traction out of conversion strategies”. Minority political representatives exploit ambiguity in the interpretation of institutional rules or redirect rules towards different and more favourable outcomes. This method for institutional change addresses the informal elements of gendered institutions, and denotes changes in norms, cultures, and conventions through shifting ideas and power relations. This is an important element of institutional change for older institutions given that informal convention often underpins the status quo and plays a significant part in resistance to institutional change.

Lowndes (2020, p. 559) contends that, whilst women contravening the gendered rules of political institutions can face sanctions, there is also space and limited freedom for individual actors within political institutions to “work creatively with rules and, in so doing, disrupt and loosen their hold”. Whilst displacement may not be a realistic goal, change through adaptation is considered a key avenue through which institutional rules of the game are regendered and feminised. Staab and Waylen’s (2020) study of Chile’s only female president – Michelle Bachelet – found that it was the small and incremental, subversive and ‘hidden’ forms of change which effected much positive gendered change in the policy areas of pensions, health, and childcare. Despite some research into institutional change, it remains an under-researched area in the field, especially at the local level where resistance to gendered change is particularly fierce. Chapters Five, Seven, and Nine of this thesis discuss

the limitations of layering and conversion methods of institutional change in Welsh local government, exposing how the reliance on change through subversion and small gaps in the fortified and well-defended walls of institutional rules means that institutions can only be altered at a glacial pace.

In summation, a feminist institutionalist analytical approach engenders a research project which centres the gendered nature of institutional contexts and gendered political workplaces. It recognises that, even if a critical mass is achieved or if formal practices are regendered, informal institutional conventions also remain important and are often operationalised as resistance to changes which would benefit political newcomers or established minority groups. Importantly, feminist institutionalist approaches enable an exploration of the intersections between formal institutional rules and practices and informal norms and conventions, and how these interact to create spaces which are hostile towards women with competing responsibilities or roles. This thesis extends the feminist institutionalist framework into the contexts of local government to examine whether this is the case in Welsh local government and identify the specific gendered political working practices which may fetter (or, indeed, facilitate) women's political participation and, subsequently, their descriptive and substantive representation.

Table 2.1: Key characteristics of Theelen and Streek's Four Types of Institutional Change (adapted from Streek and Thelen (2005) and Mahoney and Thelen (2009))

	Layering	Conversion	Drift	Displacement
Definition	New elements or rules are attached to existing ones to change way that original rule affects behaviour	Rules remain formally the same but become interpreted or enacted in new ways. Actors actively exploit inherent ambiguities within the institution.	Rules remain the same formally but impact changes as there has been a shift in external political, social, or economic environment	“Removal of existing rules and the introduction of new ones” (Mahoney and Thelen 2009, p.15)
Mechanism	Differential growth	Redirection, reinterpretation, redeployment.	Erosion/Atrophy	Defection
Elaboration & Conditions for occurrence	Not the introduction of new institutions or institutional rules, but change takes place through amendments, revisions or additions to existing organisational rules/practices. This can take place when actors lack capacity to change original rules (or set up new institution as per displacement). Resisters/defenders of status quo can preserve original rules but cannot prevent amendments. Changes may accumulate over time.	Actors convert the institution – creates new goals or functions. New elites come to power and are able to orchestrate changes or shifts from within. Even disadvantaged groups can gain with conversion – redirects the ambiguities of rules to be more favourable.	It is the inaction of actors which can cause changes in the institution.	May be an abrupt change or radical shift. Involves rapid or sudden breakdown of institution and their replacement. Can be slow-moving – new institutions may directly compete with older set of institutions. New institutions set up by actors who were in minority/lost out in the old system.
Level of discretion in Interpretation/Enforcement	Low	High	High	Low
Veto Possibilities	Strong (actors can block change)	Weak	Strong	Weak - Supporters of old system may be unable to prevent defection to new rules.

2.4: The Labyrinth to Leadership? – Women Political Leaders

The focus of this thesis on women’s experiences once they ‘get in’ to council chambers means that it is important to examine whether and how women progress through the ranks in local government: their experiences of getting and being in senior positions⁴¹ (see Chapter Eight). Once women are elected there is evidence (both statistical and empirical) to suggest that further barriers exist, which prevent them from gaining senior positions. As Putnam (1976, p. 36) contends, “within each strategic elite, the proportion of women declines as we move from lower to higher strata”. Political leadership and seniority is an area where masculinity and male-dominance remain well-entrenched, with men overrepresented and protective of their ‘final frontier’. Academic explanations for women’s presence (or lack thereof) in senior positions include work on the ‘labyrinth to leadership’ (Eagly and Carli 2007; Carli and Eagly 2016), Lovenduski’s (2005) lag hypothesis, research concerning the gendered nature of political leadership traits (Johnson 1976; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011), and whether women ‘at the top’ are critical actors and importantly substantively represent women (Bochel and Bochel 2008; Curtin 2008; Arendt 2018; Staab and Waylen 2020). These are now discussed in turn.

2.4.1: From Concrete Wall, to Glass Ceiling, to a Labyrinth?

Women’s presence in the higher echelons and senior positions of all fields has long been of concern for gender equality scholars and feminists. Whilst there is evidence of some improvements in sectors like business⁴², and some countries have used concrete measures to improve women’s representation⁴³, women continue to be underrepresented⁴³ at the top of most institutions and sectors – and particularly in politics. As of 2021, 26 women were elected Heads of State globally, meaning it will take 130 years to reach gender parity in the most senior political positions, and only 21 per cent of government ministers were women (UN Women 2021a). In the UK, only two women have ever been Prime Minister, and the highest proportion of women in the Cabinet was 36 per cent between 2006 and 2007. In February

⁴¹ For clarity here, and for the rest of this thesis, the term ‘senior’ refers to those positions on the executive of the local council: Leader, Deputy Leader, and Cabinet positions; as well as other positions which involve some additional power, such as Chairs of committees and Opposition spokespeople.

⁴² In business, for example, women constitute 40 per cent of FTSE 100 corporate boards (though only 13.5 per cent of executive directors).

⁴³ Norway, for example introduced a 40 per cent quota for women on all company boards following the Minister for Trade and Industry, Ansgar Gabrielsen, stating he was ‘shit tired’ of ‘boys’ clubs’ in business (Tutchell and Edmonds 2014, p. 3).

2022, only eight of the twenty-eight ministers attending Cabinet in UK Government were women (less than 30 per cent). In Welsh local government, during the electoral term within which this research took place, women held a maximum of six of the 22 local council Leader positions. One Welsh council further made headlines for having no women in its cabinet following the 2017 local elections.

The rhetoric and metaphors used to describe the gendered nature of routes to leadership in political institutions have, however, changed over time. We have seen a shift from discussions of ‘concrete walls’, which were broken down and replaced by more transparent ‘glass ceilings’ that have now been ‘smashed’ enough to be succeeded by what Eagly and Carli (Eagly and Carli 2007, pp. 1-13; Carli and Eagly 2016) term a ‘labyrinth to leadership’. This metaphor invokes an image of a path which is, for some, possible to transverse and successfully reach the goal of a senior position, but which is host to and littered with significant obstacles. The labyrinth metaphor symbolises the “more navigable but still challenging routes to leadership” that women face with “exclusionary laws and few clear-cut, widely endorsed norms of exclusion” replaced with numerous subtle barriers to progression (Eagly and Carli 2007, pp. 2-7). The barriers and obstacles experienced by women today are identified as translucent, dynamic, and less obtuse.

Academic explanations for women’s senior underrepresentation include two opposing perspectives outlined by Lovenduski. Firstly, dubbed the ‘iron law’, some have argued that the “decrease [in women’s presence] as the hierarchy of power is ascended [...] is a restatement of women’s exclusion” – as above, senior positions remain the final frontier for men to protect their dominance and so women are excluded (Lovenduski 2005, p. 8). Alternatively, Lovenduski identified a perhaps more optimistic explanation for women’s lack of presence at the top: the lag hypothesis. This contends that women will, eventually and after being present lower down on the political ladder, ‘catch up’ to men in terms of representation in senior positions. Curtin (2008, p. 490), for example, contends that “it takes time for any politician [...] to build a political career [to] become part of the leadership group”. Women, it is concluded, must therefore have an established presence (both individually and as a represented group) before they may hope for a senior position. However, given that women have now been present in most Western political legislatures for over half a century, there must be other factors constraining women’s journey through the labyrinth to leadership.

One factor constraining the ability of women to get into senior positions is political party membership. Political parties are key institutional gatekeepers to seniority, especially given that women must receive the support and recognition from fellow party members to be appointed or elected to seniority. Research internationally has found significant differences in the descriptive representation of women in government cabinets which can be attributed to the political positioning and affiliations of those in power (Matland and Studlar 1996; Htun 2005; Stockemer and Sundström 2017). Unsurprisingly, left-leaning governments, because of ties to feminist movements and their more “feminist programs” (Matland and Studlar 1996; Beckwith 2000), once again lead the way in having more “female-friendly opportunity structures” (Stockemer and Sundström 2017, p. 2). Moreover, the rate by which women become more represented in seniority is much quicker for leftist governments, whilst right-wing or conservative parties prefer slow-paced and gradual changing of the guard (Webb and Childs 2012). One explanation for this party political difference is the pressure that left-wing parties are understood “to be sensitive to groups traditionally excluded from the circles of power” (Matland and Studlar 1996, p. 726).

Other research has discussed the role of those at the top of political parties as important gatekeepers to women gaining senior positions (Dowding and Dumont 2007). Research into the role of individual leaders’ impacts on the presence of women in senior positions has found that, given most leaders choose their own cabinets, having a leader who is conscious of the gender balance and acts to rectify any underrepresentation of women is beneficial. Leaders pick those in their party who reflect their political priorities and are supportive of them during their time in charge which, as Goddard (2017, p. 649) finds, has a “disproportionately detrimental effect on women” as they are less likely to be part of “high-trust networks which promote and engender these trusting relationships”. Similarly, Niven (1998) found that male gatekeepers did not consider women’s individual unique strengths as they did with men candidates. Various studies have suggested that, at times, having a woman leader can result in the increased appointment of women to other senior positions in politics and other sectors (see Davis 1997; Jacob, Scherpereel, and Adams 2014; Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006; Gorman 2005), but others have found little evidence of this, and rather argue that senior women can “shut the door behind them” rather than “letting down the ladder” (Krook and O’Brien 2012; O’Brien et al. 2015). In summation, previous research indicates that women politicians clearly have a tougher route to seniority which, as with women’s initial ‘getting in’ to politics, is reliant on gatekeepers and being able to prove their worth.

2.4.2: Gendered Political Leadership Traits

Notions of masculinity clearly permeate our perceptions of political leadership, normalising it as a male territory “marked by male ancestry” (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011, pp. 24-26), with the “white, male body taken to be the somatic norm” (Puwar 2004, p. 67). Expectations of political leaders (what they look like and how they act) “remain tied to men” because, despite women’s gains on the lower rungs of political careers ladders, there have been few opportunities to see women in prominent senior political positions. Consequently, women who do successfully make it through the labyrinth consequently find their femininity being questioned, themselves having to work much harder than male counterparts, and often undergo extensive ‘proving periods’ as well as ‘re-proving’ for different audiences (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011).

Studies of gendered political leadership and the barriers to women gaining senior positions often centralise trait analysis to identify which political behaviours and personalities are traditionally associated with leadership. Writing about women’s style of leadership in employment, Johnson (1976) contended that, whilst previous work had found no common trait amongst leaders, they share one trait: leaders were uniformly male. With the slow increase of women breaking through glass ceilings or navigating the labyrinth to political senior or leadership positions, subsequent research has begun to discuss the gendered traits of leaders and the perceived contrasts between women’s and men’s leadership styles. Male leaders are often perceived as adopting more ‘agentic characteristics’ in their leadership approach (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001, p. 783). These include more assertive and controlling behaviours characterised by confidence, dominance, forcefulness, competitiveness, and ambition. Echoing the earlier discussion of ‘feminised’ political styles, women political leaders, on the other hand, are believed to portray more ‘communal characteristics’ – they are considered more affectionate, concerned with others’ welfare, sympathetic, kind, and supportive of others (Gebauer et al. 2013; Carli and Eagly 2016).

The importance of behaviour traits lies in how they are valued and how this valuing is gendered. Women and men can choose to adopt masculine or feminine traits or political styles – the styles themselves are transgendered – yet these will not be perceived in the same way by others. Patriarchal norms and hegemonic femininities mean that women are expected to perform politics in a more passive manner than men and, if they are too assertive, are

“likely to face unflattering labels” (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011, p. 28) because they are no longer adhering to gendered stereotypes of women, yet are also criticised for being too emotional. Men, conversely, are not punished or admonished for acting considerately, but are praised and rewarded whether they adopt agentic characteristics or communal approaches. One example is the treatment of female political leaders in the UK Government. Mavin et al. (2010, p. 560) discuss the media’s treatment of Harriet Harman, arguing that the constructions of her in the media were “not as one of the UK’s successful political leaders but as the leader of a feminist group [...] re-attached to communal feminine non-leadership behaviours”. Theresa May has also been the victim of similar treatment by the UK media, with headlines focusing on her legs, her shoes, her outfits, and, when she resigned, a small catch in her voice in her resignation speech led to accusations of her crying and being hysterical as per the Mirror’s headline (written by a female journalist): “Tories scramble to replace 'Crying Lady' Theresa May after teary resignation” (Crerar 2019). Gendered political leadership stereotypes negatively affect women regardless of which leadership approach or traits they display – women cannot win and face criticism from media sources, fellow politicians, and the general public if they display too much or too little emotion or aggression or decisiveness.

2.4.3: Committee Position Makes a Difference

Calls for increased presence of women in senior positions have been met by questions as to why women’s presence in the higher echelons of politics is important. As with other arguments for women’s representation, the role model effect is often cited as a crucial benefit for women’s senior presence – having women visible in senior political positions will encourage other prospective women politicians to stand and to contest election to seniority. In a submission to the Women and Equalities Select Committee, for example, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2016, p. 7) stated that:

“An absence of the right kind of role models can encourage women to deselect themselves from making a journey to top roles and fail to inspire them to aspire to reach for the top.”

Research has shown a positive correlation between having female political leaders and increases in the political participation of women and young girls in the “political socialisation stage” (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007). Women being visible

at the top advertises politics as a sphere in which women can succeed and can tackle wider issues of women's lower self-efficacy, the gendered political ambition gap, and low levels of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988; Zimmerman 1995; Rowlands 1997; Fox and Lawless 2004; Narayan 2005; Hibbs 2022a). Women's increased descriptive representation, especially in the most senior positions in any level of governance – national, regional, or local, therefore has the possibility of allowing other women “to see opportunities for success in political action” (Liang et al. 2002; Laukhuf and Malone 2015; Liu and Banaszak 2017, p. 134).

Moreover, calls for women's heightened senior presence echo wider justifications for improving women's political participation on the basis of their acting for and championing women, and in feminising politics. Some have argued that women political leaders are influenced by their personal lived and gendered experiences and subsequently prioritise different policy issues and a feminised institutional workplace (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001; Bratton 2005; Kittilson 2006; Bochel and Bochel 2008; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011; Staab and Waylen 2020). Evidence from the US Congress regarding reproductive rights laws, for example, found that having positions on committees was crucial to the passing and amendments of bills – as Norton (2011, p. 113) surmised: “Women, it's not enough to be elected: committee position makes a difference”. In the UK, women MP members of the Women In Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group were crucial in the establishing of the Women and Equalities Committee in 2015, spreading support and working with other key actors in the House and “with feminist friends outside” (Childs 2022, p. 15). In addition to changing the content of policy and promoting women's substantive representation, senior female politicians also have the opportunity to transform institutions, re-gendering them to make them more welcoming and accessible to women (Franceschet 2015; Childs and Smith 2022).

Being closer to decision-making has largely proven beneficial for women's substantive representation and, indeed, evidence shows that institutional position such as holding committee or cabinet positions makes a difference to substantive representation. The slight improvements in women's representation in senior positions enables analysis of which policy areas are overseen or held by women political leaders. Research has discussed the gendered nature of portfolio allocations as portfolios have been considered one of “the most important features of the government formation process”. Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (2011, p. 29) contend that women tend to “fit” into policy areas and agencies which align closely with

gendered stereotypes and that, the more feminine the area, the more likely a woman will advance to leadership positions. This means that senior female politicians are often allocated or, indeed, choose ‘pink, soft portfolios’ like health, welfare, social and child services, or education, rather than those which are considered ‘hard’, such as finance, transport, and regeneration (Curtin et al. 2014). It has been suggested that women’s preference for these portfolios reflects their interests (Bochel and Bochel 2008; Campbell 2016), as well as the overrepresentation of women within their corresponding sectors of employment – as nurses, teachers, social workers, and community workers. Portfolios are enmeshed within considerations of prestige which subsequently impacts their apportioned funding and budgets. Those portfolios coded as ‘masculine’ are often regarded as higher prestige (see Table 2.2), leading to perceptions that those who hold these (usually men) are more highly qualified, responsible for larger budgets, and subsequently are better suited or more readily considered for higher senior positions (like party leadership). As Curtin et al. (2022, p. 2) contend “not all portfolios are equally important”, and holding a less prestigious portfolio can prove a barrier to women politicians’ senior leadership.

Table 2.2: Distribution of Ministries across 117 countries (as of August 2009) by prestige and gender (Adapted from Krook and O’Brien (2012))

	High Prestige	Medium Prestige	Low Prestige
Masculine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defence • Finance/Economy • Foreign Affairs • Home Affairs <p style="text-align: center;">Total: 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and Information • Construction • Enterprise • Industry and Commerce • Labour • Religious Affairs • Transport <p style="text-align: center;">Total: 7</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Science and Technology <p style="text-align: center;">Total: 1</p>
Neutral	<p style="text-align: center;">Total: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil Service • Energy • Environment • Housing • Justice • Parliamentary Affairs • Public Works • Planning and Development <p style="text-align: center;">Total: 8</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Displaced Persons • Minority Affairs • Regional • Reform • Sports • Tourism <p style="text-align: center;">Total: 6</p>
Feminine	<p style="text-align: center;">Total: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Health and Social Welfare <p style="text-align: center;">Total: 2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ageing/Elderly • Children and Family • Culture • Heritage • Women’s Affairs • Youth <p style="text-align: center;">Total: 6</p>

Evidence for the trend of gendered portfolios is widespread at both national and local levels of governance. Goddard (2017, pp. 20-22), for example, analysed 7005 cabinet appointments across 29 European countries between the late 1980s and 2014, and found that women are less likely to be allocated the most important portfolios in European governments, and are often pigeonholed into ‘feminine’ portfolio or committee responsibility positions, less likely to be allocated ‘masculine’ or ‘neutral’ policy areas. Research by UN Women (2017) which depicts global rankings of women in parliaments showed that female ministers tended to hold portfolios in ‘caring’ or ‘soft’ areas like the environment, social services, education, and community or neighbourhood services, rather than ‘masculine’ fields in economic development, transport or regeneration (Bochel and Bochel 2000; Bochel and Bochel 2008; Farrell and Titcombe 2016; Fawcett Society 2017).

The underlying assumption of the literature around the gendered nature of portfolios has centred around how education or social services are not as important as defence or finance. At the local level, however, portfolios are slightly different, given first the absence of a ‘defence’ portfolio, yet the Centre for Women and Democracy (2011) recently found evidence for links between holding a masculine portfolio and the likelihood of becoming council leader. They discovered that the majority of council leaders had held corporate services, financial and economic development portfolios, meaning that women’s widespread absence from these portfolios acted as a barrier to their progression. Furthermore, the IPPR (McNeil et al. 2017, p. 18) found that female council cabinet members in English councils were unlikely to have the words “business, procurement, jobs, regeneration and finance” in their portfolios but much more likely to have portfolios mentioning “health, children, community, social care, and wellbeing’. Bochel and Bochel (2008) found that across English, Welsh and Scottish local councils in 2006, 40 per cent of social services portfolios were held by female cabinet members, whilst 13 per cent of corporate affairs portfolios were held by men.

Whilst women senior politicians who are responsible for ‘feminine’ portfolios may be limited by this, there is also a distinct likelihood that choosing or being allocated such a portfolio enables women to substantively represent women’s interests in policy areas in which the politician herself is interested and invested. The literature on gendered portfolios is included here as evidence from across Welsh councils suggests that Welsh local government reflects the usual gendered portfolio stereotypes, but it is further important to consider politicians’ agency, as well as leaders’ knowledge of their expertise, as crucial factors behind portfolio allocation. Furthermore, this research considers whether a woman councillor holding a portfolio and, imperatively, one in which she has a vested interest affects the substantive representation of women. It explores whether the gendered allocation of portfolios facilitates the substantive representation of women through evoking a personal sense of responsibility in senior women councillors, and enables them to use their gendered lived experiences and expertise to appropriately represent women’s interests.

2.5: Conclusion, Theoretical Mapping, and Research Questions

This chapter presented the relevant literature regarding representation theory, feminist institutionalism, and gendered political leadership to establish how this research into women’s representation in local government in Wales offers a novel contribution to the field of social policy and feminist political science. A brief justification of the use of gender and

‘woma/en’ as opposed to sex and ‘female’ was included to underline that this is a thesis centred on lived experience and reflect the premise that gender is embedded in micro-interactions and agency as well as wider structural organisation and institutions. The chapter then outlined the core concepts of political representation theory, focusing specifically on those relevant to this thesis – descriptive (looking like) and substantive (acting for) representation – and their related concepts of critical mass and critical actors. This discussion contended that feminist political science has shifted away from the assumed causal relationship between political presence and substantive representation, and that achieving critical mass or representation beyond Kanter’s (1977b) uniform or skewed ratios is no guarantee that institutions, their contexts, or content, will be feminised or re-gendered. Accordingly, this chapter foregrounded the general shift in feminist political science and theories of representation in acknowledging the role of agency, individual motivation, and propensity of ‘critical actors’ to substantively represent, and the influence of other constraining or facilitating structural factors on the substantive representation of women by political actors within gendered political institutions.

The chapter then turned to institutional theory addressing these structural elements, exploring feminist institutionalism, another core theoretical influence on this research and, indeed, in the field of politics and gender. Feminist institutionalism engenders research which intersects with representation scholarship and highlights the influence of both the formal institutional ‘rule of the game’ and the informal norms, conventions, and cultures of the institution. Exemplified by Dahlerup’s (2006b) ‘politics as a workplace’ perspective, feminist institutionalism considers how institutions are structured and organised on gendered terms to suit the historically dominant male, and fetter and constrain minority entrants into the political sphere through resistance to institutional re-gendering. This section detailed how some political institutions – such as Senedd Cymru and Scottish Parliament – because of their nested newness are characterised by institutional working practices which fit more with modern family- and women-friendly approaches. The chapter later considered the difficulties faced in changing institutions, outlining the concepts of layering and conversion as most relevant to discussion of local government, which (as chapters 4 to 8 will explore) appears resistant to gendered change and improvement.

A key benefit of incorporating a feminist institutionalist approach is that it further enables focus on smaller-scale structural factors which can constrain agency: the micro-interactions and relations between political actors and informal conventions or behaviours

which are privileged and expected within political arenas. Exemplifying these structure/agency interactions, political communication styles were discussed, including the assumed binary distinction between men and women's preferred approaches to doing politics (critiqued here for its essentialism). Consequently, this thesis later explores whether women can 'do politics differently' (if that is their preference), unfettered by institutional constraint and therefore enact agency. Moreover, section 2.3.2 explored other institutional factors influencing women politicians and considered the shift from overtly sexist treatment of women politicians towards subtler gender-based discrimination and microaggressions. Politics has recently gained media and public attention following the #WestminsterToo sexual harassment scandal yet, despite the attention to experiences of MPs and political staff in Westminster, women's gendered experiences in local government rarely attract media or research attention. This thesis therefore contributes to and extends research on the daily experiences of women local councillors, their perceptions of their gendered political workplaces, and the gender (in)equality issues at the local level.

Finally, this chapter outlined literature and key thinking around the gendered nature of political leadership and the argued existence of a 'labyrinth' that women must traverse to gain senior positions. Differing perspectives were outlined in section 2.4.1, including the iron law, the lag hypothesis, and the influence of gender coded political leadership traits. Leadership theory combines the elements of the analytical framework through its concern with institutional position (structure) and whether those holding positions are agents representing others (agency). Women face a "catch-22" situation regarding how they 'do' leadership, as with political styles more generally, which means that both adopting agentic leadership styles or communal styles is sometimes "punished" or ridiculed by political opposition and in the news media for being either 'too emotional' or 'robotic' (Yates 2019).

2.5.1: Theoretical Mapping – Agency and Structure as an Analytical Framework for Understanding Women's Political Representation

This research therefore brings together theory on feminist institutionalism, representation theory, and gendered political leadership as an analytical framework in order to provide new empirical work on how, in local government, having the *agency* to substantively represent women is enabled and constrained, particularly by institutional *structures*. Whilst the vast literature in the social and political sciences on structure and agency is not detailed here (for a fuller discussion, see Jessop 1996; Hay and Wincott 1998; Sibeon 1999; Dowding 2008), it is important to consider how this framework applies to the present topic and research context at

hand. The focus on agency here is threefold and is mapped onto the aforementioned three strands of theory considered in this chapter. Firstly, this research examines how and under what conditions individuals act to represent others, drawing on political representation theories (particularly regarding the importance of critical actors), and feminist institutionalism to assess how experience *in situ*, and institutional structures (through formal rules and informal norms) create and constrain this agency. Secondly, influenced further by the literature on critical mass (Chaney 2006; Dahlerup 2006b), this research explores how and whether groups act to enact substantive change, under what conditions this change occurs, and the nature of that change⁴⁴. Finally, this thesis specifically sought to understand the actions of individuals in leadership positions, influenced by gendered political leadership theory and whether seniority mitigates or exacerbates the structural constraints of institutions affecting all women politicians and the role of institutional position in shaping (enabling and constraining) the agency of women political actors.

In their leading article *Analyzing Women's Substantive Representation: From Critical Mass to Critical Actors*, Childs and Krook (2009) argued for two shifts in approaches to studying the substantive representation of women:

1. From 'when' to 'how' substantive representation occurs,
2. From what 'women' do to what specific actors do.

They recommended heightened focus on context, identity, and attitudes, but further positional power, and the necessity to consider how "all aspects of the legislative process" are constructed around interactions of structure and agency which either facilitate or limit the substantive representation of women (Childs and Krook 2009, p. 144). Importantly, Childs and Krook contend that "the broader context may limit or enhance opportunities" for substantive representation (Childs and Krook 2009, p. 129), citing other studies exploring the gendered nature of institutional or legislative rules and norms: recommending a feminist institutionalist analytical approach. They further draw attention to the importance of recognising how "these dynamics are often exacerbated for women due to a lack of positional power [and how women leaders] often face repeated challenges to their leadership as a result of gendered norms of power" (Childs and Krook 2009, p. 130) – calling for understanding of

⁴⁴ As discussed in section 2.3.3, theories of feminist institutional change suggest that layering or conversion are most realistic and common in established political arenas.

gendered political leadership. Following on from this, Ahrens et al. (2021, p. 107) contend that the gender and politics subfield has developed since the millennium, both in breadth and depth, but further in impact. Studies have shifted towards those which pay “relatively more attention to the study of gendered political processes, institutions, and interactions [...] towards exposing and questioning gender hierarchies and inequalities in a variety of political phenomena”, yet they also continue to give voice and make visible women’s subjective experiences. This thesis resonates with this view and therefore directly addresses Childs and Krook’s (2009) calls for a ‘joined-up’ approach to studying women in politics which combines political representation theories, including descriptive and substantive representation and critical mass and critical actors, alongside feminist institutionalist analysis of the political arena. Childs and Krook’s (2009, p. 144) recommended ‘third step’ encourages a delineation of features of legislative contexts to “establish how legislative institutions may be gendered in ways that affect the behaviour of individual representatives and legislative outcomes” which, as discussed in section 2.3, is the central tenet of feminist institutionalism. Moreover, this study provides an exploration of the unique ways in which these intersect within gendered leadership – applied in the present case to study an under-researched and relatively opaque legislative context – local government in Wales.

This thesis responds to these earlier works and is thus premised on the contention that neither political representation theory, feminist institutionalism, nor gendered political leadership *alone* can present a comprehensive or holistic picture of women’s political participation and representation. Consequently, these theories should not be operationalised in isolation. All three strands of theory, as they are understood and employed here, accept that politics and political acts do not take place within a vacuum, and that no political actor has complete agency free from constraining or facilitative influences within, and external to, structures within political institutions and contexts. These are, here, primarily found to be institutional or positional and specific to local government, but also include wider, societal factors, and those connected to the political and representative context. Figure 2.3 illustrates this relationship and interaction between agency and structure as overlapping and how having the ability or propensity to act needs to be ‘backed-up’ by facilitative conditions to achieve the substantive representation of women. Aspects detailed under agency include personal feminist motivations and ideology, including a politician’s propensity to be a critical actor with a low threshold for SRW, lived experience, individual political style, and participation in women’s caucuses. Structural elements which facilitate or constrain political agency to

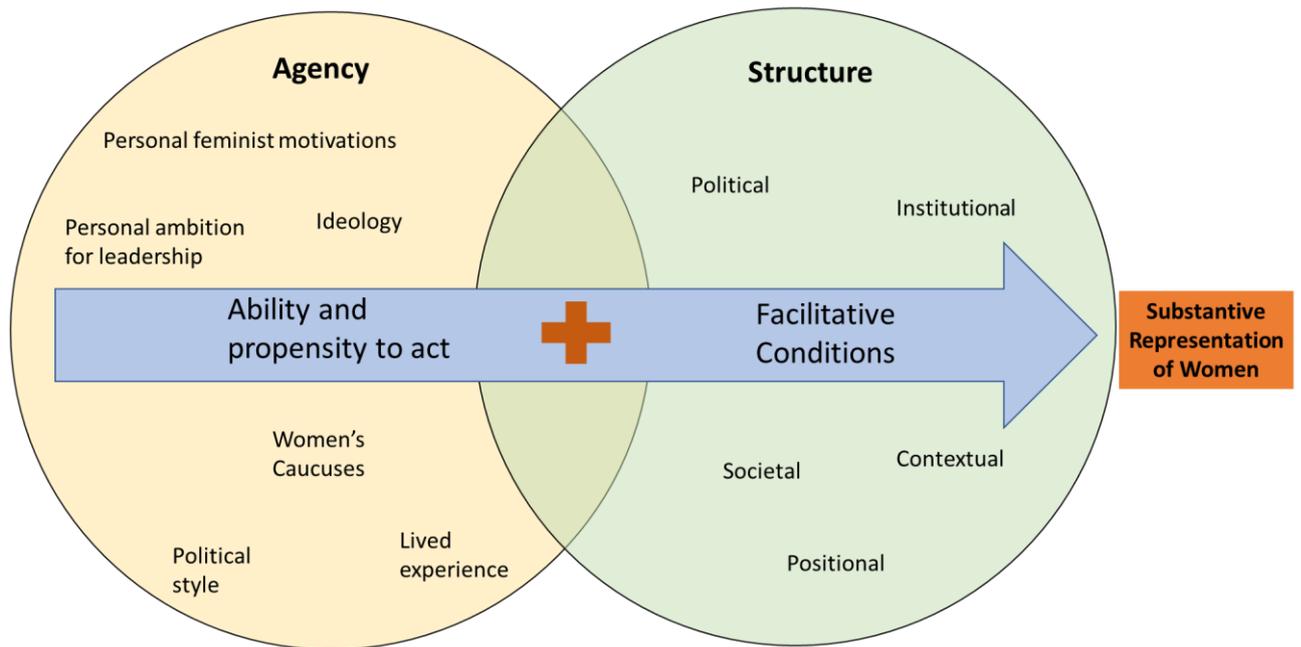
substantively represent women include institutional, political, and positional factors, as well as those which may be broader issues for example societal domains of social and religious attitudes towards gender and contextual aspects such as the history of gender relations in a given country.

Societal factors include those gendered societal norms and values which permeate all women's lives but interact with those other areas circles of influence to form specific gendered barriers to women's political participation. For example, the continued gendered nature of caring responsibilities will interact with gendered rules-in-use in political arenas such as meeting times in local government or, in national politics, time required away from home. As noted, structural factors further include contextual or historical political aspects of the country within which the political arena is situated – for example, considering Wales, there is a particularly rich history of industry and industrial turmoil which affects political tradition and party-political preferences which influence cultures within political institutions (Deacon and Denton 2018). Furthermore, in the present research context the gendered political landscape in Wales is characterised by juxtaposition of achievement and support for gender parity in Senedd Cymru, with other less positive reactions to women's political representation such as Welsh Labour's infamous resistance to positive action methods as seen in Blaenau Gwent in 2005⁴⁵.

The main theoretical contention here, therefore, is that those who do not employ an analytical approach which accepts the interconnectivity between agency and structure and their respective influential factors, will necessarily gain a holistic understanding of women's political representation and experiences in a political arena.

⁴⁵ At the 2005 general election and following the retirement of MP Llew Smith, the Welsh Labour Party opted to make the Blaenau Gwent constituency (at the time a Labour stronghold and the 5th 'safest seat' in the country, a seat previously held by Michael Foot and Aneurin Bevan), an all-women shortlist with Maggie Jones ultimately selected. This decision prompted much opposition and led to Labour losing the seat to former member Peter Law and, following his death, again to Dai Davies in a 2006 by-election. This opposition towards all-women shortlists re-emerged again in 2014 in the Cynon Valley when MP Ann Clwyd vacated her seat and the local party branch again resisted the use of the method, deciding to "go on strike" [...] not provide a procedures secretary, a selection committee or arrange the hustings meetings or correspondence to members for an all-women shortlist selection". Similar feeling arose in 2019 in Arfon which also became an all-women shortlist when Mary Griffiths-Clarke stood down and a local male councillor, Sion Jones, had wanted to stand – ultimately, Labour lost the seat to Plaid Cymru.

Figure 2.3: Diagram showing theoretical framework and relationship between agency and structure and the conditions needed to achieve the substantive representation of women



2.5.2: Research Questions as Related to the Conceptual Framework

This chapter's review of the current literature and evidence of political representation, feminist institutionalist studies, and gendered political leadership scholarship led to the creation of this study, which focuses on how these multitudinous findings play out at the local level – an under-researched political workplace. The following four research questions, and appropriate sub-questions, form the basis of the discussion and data analysis undertaken in this thesis, and are reflected in the focus of Chapters Four to Eight. These questions map onto the areas of literature and theoretical framework and are as follows:

1. What were women's first-hand initial and formative experiences of becoming and being local councillors in Welsh local government? And, how were these experiences shaped by gender (in)equality issues?
2. To what extent do participants perceive Welsh local councils as gendered institutions, and how does this affect women's political participation and representation?
3. What are the unique challenges faced by, and experiences of, female councillors holding and/or seeking senior positions within local government?

4. How do female councillors' experiences, the culture, and the context of Welsh local government shape the substantive political representation of women in Welsh councils?
 - a. What are women councillors' views on the role of 'critical mass' and 'critical actors' in shaping patterns and processes of substantive representation in local government?
 - b. How and to what extent do feminist motivations inform women councillors' commitments to substantively representing women?

As per the forgoing theoretical discussion, these questions similarly reflect the overlaps and interrelatedness of the agency/structure framework outlined throughout this chapter. RQ1 draws on both political representation and feminist institutionalist approaches, and wider feminist prioritisations of women's lived experience, and was designed to gain a sense of the overall experiences of women getting into and being in Welsh local government. Its focus on the *becoming* aspect, incorporating concepts of descriptive political representation and gendered equality issues which impact 'getting in' to politics. Yet the question was further crafted to ascertain the influence of structures within institutions outside of local councils on the initial stages of women's journeys – namely political parties and how these are gendered. Whilst this is not an in-depth feminist institutionalist analysis of political parties and their internal workings, as they are arguably institutions in their own right, this question engendered exploration of pre-election formal rules and informal norms and their gendered effects. This included an emphasis on formal rules around positive action techniques and whether adherence to these is strictly maintained, honoured, or breached, and also the influence of and role played by informal networks and gatekeepers. RQ1 thus sought to understand the impact of gatekeepers on participants' journeys into politics, drawing on understandings of gendered leadership and the propensity of those with positional power to champion women and be critical actors encouraging their participation. RQ1 foregrounds the theme of 'becoming' to discuss the initial experiences of women in local government, and their induction into the 'structure' of local government as a gendered political workplace with its unique rules and norms affecting their agency.

RQ2 continues the focus on the structural elements of the research site, drawing specifically on feminist institutionalism and its centring of the importance of understanding and uncovering the gendered nature of Welsh local councils as political workplaces. This

question further combines this feminist institutionalist approach with political representation theory to map, as Childs and Krook (2009) cogently advocated, exactly how the substantive representation of women occurs and how institutional (and broader) structures impact this substantive representation. Given that, as Chapter Three discusses, women in senior positions formed a key part of the purposeful sampling, this question also engendered exploration of senior women's perceptions of the gendered nature of institutions as political workplaces, as well as others' perception of the impact of 'local elites' with institutional positional power on institutional norms which shape organisational culture.

RQ3 again combines all three of the theoretical strands considered above as necessary for a holistic study of women's political experience and representation. It draws specifically on the gendered political leadership literature to understand the impact of positional power (institutional position) on experience, agency, and ability to substantively represent women, as well as whether it mitigates or exacerbates other forms of institutional and structural inequality. The specific focus on leadership reflects the literature discussed throughout this chapter regarding whether, for example, committee position makes a difference to substantive representation. It also extends this to ascertain the impact of positional power on lived experience and on institutional contexts – for example, by questioning whether women at the top cause institutional change through layering or conversion by challenging masculinised procedural tradition,

Finally, RQ4 draws together the theoretical strands to map how the substantive representation of women occurs and what specific 'critical' actors (or groups – critical masses) do to represent women's interests and under what conditions, both regarding ability and propensity to act and facilitative structural conditions, this occurs.

Table 2.3 illustrates how each of the three theoretical strands can be mapped across the research questions. Gendered political leadership is the only strand of theory which is not explicitly present within the wording and implications of all the questions. However, as senior women were purposefully sampled, their responses to interview questions developed to respond to RQ1 and RQ2 are relevant to discussions on gendered political leadership and the influence of positional power on political representation and their lived experience.

Table 2.3: Presence of each aspect of the theoretical framework within the operationalised research questions

Research Question	Political Representation	Feminist Institutionalism	Gendered Political Leadership	Agency	Structure
1	✓	✓	✓ (implicit)	✓	✓
2	✓	✓	✓ (implicit)	✓	✓
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The next chapter explores the epistemological and methodological approaches taken to best attend to these research questions and ensure a study which centres women councillors’ lived experiences, their perceptions of representation as well as understanding whether they felt motivated, empowered, and able to substantively represent women within or without the constraints of structural elements around gendered political workplaces, positional power and notions of gendered political leadership.

Chapter Three

Epistemology, Methodology, and Research Reflections

3.1: Introduction

This thesis adopts an in-depth qualitative methodological approach with a multiple case study research design whereby nineteen semi-structured interviews were carried out with women councillors across four Welsh local authorities. This chapter first explores the feminist interpretivist epistemological approach that foregrounded this research. It considers how debates within social and political science between quantitative and qualitative research, their respective values, and their appropriateness for researching social phenomena and groups influenced the design and implementation of the methodological choices. This approach was situated within the fields of feminist institutionalist political science and in feminist standpoint theory. Before illustrating the influence of these fields on the methodological choices made, this chapter considers their suitability for answering the central research questions outlined in Chapter 2.5.

The chapter then considers the specificities of the research design, namely: the nature of exemplifying case study designs, purposive sampling techniques, semi-structured interviewing, and the challenges of interviewing women ‘local elites’. The case study sites are summarised, and criteria for the choosing of the nineteen interviewees are explained. Following this, the chapter discusses the shift from physical, in-person interviews to online interviewing to virtual means because of the Coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19). Ethical considerations and issues around anonymity are then discussed as well as issues with access and delays to data collection during Covid-19. Transcription and analysis approaches are then outlined, with reference to thematic analysis and transcription-by-researcher. Lastly, researcher positionality is considered, with reflections on being a feminist researcher interviewing women with both feminist and non-feminist views and opinions.

3.2: Epistemological Influences: Feminist Interpretivism, Standpoint Theory, and Feminist Institutionalism

This section details the epistemological perspectives that influenced and shaped this research. Researchers making methodological decisions are often influenced by their academic training and background, the field within which their current project takes place, as well as the most appropriate methods for attending to research questions or researching the chosen bounded

social group. This presented methodological tensions and challenges given the distinctions between an academic background and training in social science, and the location of this research within political science. The creation of this thesis' research questions illustrates this tension, with the research questions both addressing women's experiences (often the focus of sociological research), and tackling questions of political institutions and representation. As noted in Chapter Two, a feminist institutionalist approach bridged the perceived gap between these disciplines theoretically and offered methodological solutions, given its prioritisation of both formal practices alongside informal, micro-level, gendered rules and norms.

Deciding on a suitable research design warranted some consolidation of the distinct methodological approaches traditionally attached to the social and the political academic fields. A qualitative, feminist interpretivist approach was taken, influenced by feminist standpoint theory with its prioritisation and centring of women's experiences and voices, and an understanding of women's political representation as contingent on micro-level interactions as much as larger-scale organisational practices as per feminist institutionalist theory.

Looking first at justifying an interpretivist epistemological approach, interpretivism prioritises the subjective meanings attached to participants' lived experiences. As evidenced by Max Weber's (1978) preference for *verstehen* or 'understanding' over *erklären* or 'explaining', interpretivism views social reality as fluid, dynamic, and emergent. Furthermore, it emphasises agency, seeing people as 'autonomous, active, goal-directed' social agents whose first-hand experiences researchers must seek to understand (Schwandt 1998, pp. 223-225). The contexts within which these agents act are part of an emergent and constant process through which knowledge-claims are constructed: 'any particular action is formed in the light in which it takes place' (Blumer 1969). Participants' responses, therefore, are accounts influenced by, and perceived within, spatially and temporally determined contexts (institutions) and environments (including the research interview itself), which form and shape their experiences. Interpretivism privileges qualitative methods to gain an understanding of contexts and constructed social realities, including ethnographic and observational techniques, participatory or visual methods, and dialogic methods like the semi or un-structured interview. In this study, the female councillors' experiences were understood as constructed within the political institutions and contexts of their council and Welsh politics more widely, meaning that their accounts were both influenced by context, and held subjective meanings.

The councillors' experiences were constructed through the social realities of their political institution and, as explored in Chapter Two, these institutions were embedded in and significantly affected by patriarchal, gendered social rules and norms. Many political institutions are organised and constructed around hegemonic masculinities. Accordingly, feminism played a key role in both the development of research methodologies to explore how these gendered rules affected interviewees, and the privileging of the voices of women - situating their experiences at the centre of the research. As Lather (1988) contends, gender is central in 'shaping our consciousness, skills and institutions, as well as in the distribution of power and privilege', as such it influences negotiations of daily life. Society remains hierarchically gendered, with societal contexts often constructed to privilege men and oppress women, and thus inclusion of women's voices in research, as a group historically silenced and excluded, is of particular importance. Whilst some have criticised feminist research as not being a unified or coherent methodology and, instead, relegated to a method (Clegg 1985), others (Harding 1987) have argued that feminist methodology through emphasising women's experiences, creates a new purpose for social science, and poses questions about objectivity and subjectivity – it is, therefore, clearly more than just a method.

The centring of women's voices was influenced by feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock 1983; Hekman 1997; Wood 2005) and the belief that women have a unique worldview derived from their differing and historically-subordinate position and roles in society, giving them a distinct claim to knowledge which should constitute the starting point of research. A standpoint is both socio-historically contingent, and is developed and cultivated by resistance and struggle against oppression; it is an achieved state. Standpoint theory has been criticised by postmodern feminists for being fundamentally essentialist and homogenising, trying 'to create a seeming community of opinion and views where there is usually none' (Benhabib 1996, p. 29). However, contemporary responses to this criticism contend that, by modernising the standpoint approach, we acknowledge the importance of situated knowledge, lived experience, and difference between women (Harding 2004; Hill Collins 2004). Grounding research in the experiences of participants is therefore largely considered axiomatic in feminist research, but there are questions that arise as to whether this alone is sufficient.

Firstly, Kelly et al. (1994) criticise situated knowledge as essentialist or deterministic, arguing that it assumes that those without the "lived experiences" of being oppressed are unable to empathise or share the awareness of those with the experience. It is often the case

that researchers do not share specific experiences with participants, or even their values and political viewpoints, but remain committed to true representations of the data in the process of analysis. Moreover, experience should be problematised as individuals, despite being experts in their own lives, cannot possess a monopoly of knowledge to explain everything about them or why they experience certain things. People also forget and retrospectively interpret their experiences meaning ‘there is no such thing as ‘raw’ or authentic experience [...] unmediated by interpretation’ (Maynard and Purvis 1994, p. 6). Indeed, when interviewing women about their experiences, the researcher must be aware that reflections on past experiences can be perceived differently in light of newer experiences; and individuals may have altered their perceptions of what scares, upsets and pleases them in relation to temporal and social context. For example, experiencing sexual harassment in a Welsh local council in the 1990s may retrospectively be underplayed or overplayed following further experience as a local councillor as the years progress.

Furthermore, there has been significant debate at the core of feminism around the suitability of quantitative methods (DuBois 1983; Jayaratne 1983; Mascia-Lees et al. 1989). Traditionally, feminists in the social sciences have commented on the inappropriateness of positivism in reducing an already marginalised and muted group to mere numbers, with the argument that the feminist social sciences need to embrace qualitative methodological innovation (Jayaratne 1983; Reinharz 1992). DuBois (1983) contends that the previously-dominant ‘androcentric perspective’ of social science research left women ‘virtually unknown’, and that quantitative, positivistic methods have historically ignored and excluded women as they are ‘context-stripping’ and ‘reduce women to the position of voiceless objects’. The research questions of this study are centred around women’s experiences and voices as being valued and subjective. Accordingly, feminist research design and methods were purposefully selected to ensure women participants were listened to, their voices prioritised, and their experiences valued at all stages of the research process. Moreover, aligning with feminist institutionalism, feminist methodologies forefront women’s agency in political institutional settings.

Feminist research should be undertaken with the aim of including and promoting emancipatory action to improve the status of women in society. Researchers should undertake research *for* women which has practical outcomes and policy implications for reducing women’s oppression and tackling inequality, and not just to satisfy academic or personal curiosity. The policy implications and impact of this study are considered in Chapter Ten.

These make a case for real-world changes to political institutions to remove structural barriers and normative cultures, which prevent the full representation of women in Welsh local government.

A feminist interpretivist approach, therefore, ensures that women's experiences and voices are central to data production and analysis, and that they are understood and presented within socially constructed realities and awareness of the embedded and embodied gendered rules and norms of institutions. Women's unique experiences, voices, motivations, thoughts, and meanings were prioritised and situated within specific political contexts. Consequently, an in-depth qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews (both face-to-face and online) was chosen as best suited to this research.

3.2.1: Methodology in Feminist Political Science

The above discussion has focused on social science research traditions and methodologies yet, these are being applied to a political context. Whilst not completely discrete academic categories, as a more traditionally-masculine field, which still is largely 'dominated by statistical and formal approaches' (Crasnow 2012, p. 655), political science remained relatively untouched by gender until the late 1990s and 2000s. This coincided with the popularisation of research on feminist institutionalism and global improvements in women's political representation. Engagement with feminist dialogues and methodologies outside of the sub-field of 'feminist political science' (FPS) and gender politics research however remains rare. Indeed, Liu and Wayland (2021) found that even gender and politics remains reluctant to engage with 'the F-word', with scholars mentioning feminism as 'an after-thought or a suggestion for future research', and quantitative researchers incorporating it at much lower rates than those adopting qualitative methods. Scepticism about feminist research and its value has meant that qualitative studies have been overshadowed by the large-scale, quantitative approaches dominating most political science journals – much research about gender, politics, and feminism, has been confined to those journals set up to accommodate it, such as: *European Journal on Politics and Gender*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Politics & Gender*, and *the Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy* (Childs and Krook 2006a; Liu and Wayland 2021).

The shift in focus within FPS from descriptive representation and critical mass – from numbers – to substantive representation and critical actors – to words, has also seen a shift in preferred or accepted methodologies for studying women in politics from large-scale

quantitative statistical modelling and surveys to small-scale qualitative studies with suitable dialogic methods. As Kenny (2014, p. 679) contends, traditional, large-scale comparative, cross-national studies were beneficial for uncovering patterns and the global context of political representation, but to map the ‘formal architecture and informal rules, norms and practices’ as explored through feminist institutionalism, and to assess women’s substantive representation, discursive, in-depth and detailed qualitative approaches are required. As institutional ethnographic studies can be time consuming and expensive, and rely on continued access to political institutions over a number of years, qualitative FPS researchers have preferred dialogic methods like interviewing which are ‘best-suited’ for understanding how gendered rules operate and are constructed and ‘sustained’ within political institutions and action arenas (Lowndes 2020).

Consequently, researchers ask ‘how are things done around here’ to assess whether and how gendered formal rules have a direct impact on individuals’ behaviours (Lowndes 2014). The assessment of the role of critical actors warrants an analysis of small-scale action and agency, which is arguably better achieved through qualitative approaches. Substantive representation, therefore, with its core concern with deliberation, debate and policy content, and the actions of specific political actors, is well suited to qualitative techniques as means of collecting or producing data. However, political processes within institutions often remain ‘hidden from view’, meaning that much of the representing may take place behind closed doors. Research must attempt to understand ‘the hidden life of institutions’ and prioritise political contexts, cultures, attitudes, and priorities, as well as the preferred political styles and tactics used by women politicians during the process of representing (or not) women (Childs 2001a, b; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001; Childs 2002, 2004a; Beckwith 2005; Eagly and Carli 2007; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011; Kelly 2011).

3.3: Research Design

3.3.1: Case Studies

Influenced by feminist institutionalist theory, a feminist interpretivist approach, and the importance of context in researching female politicians, substantive representation, and how gender plays out in political institutions (*in situ*), a multiple, comparative case-study research design was selected. A case-study is defined as ‘an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social

unit' (Merriam 1998, p. 13). Here, Welsh local government as an institution formed the bounded phenomenon, and four local councils the case study sites.

Case studies have been regarded by some with circumspection for a perceived lack of generalisability, rigour, precision, and objectivity which comprise the conventional expectations of research (Abercrombie et al. 1984). Flyvbjerg (2006) outlines five common misconceptions about case studies which are refuted in turn. (1) Firstly, context-independent data has traditionally been viewed as more valuable than that which is 'concrete' or embedded in social context. As discussed throughout this chapter, however, social research, particularly on historically excluded groups, does not require nor value predictive and universal theories, privileging instead, participant voice-in-context. (2) Case studies are often derided as being unsuitable for generalisation, a critique which can be refuted on the basis that, not only is generalisation overvalued as a source of scientific development, but case studies lend themselves to generalisation through *falsification* and their ability to identify 'black swans'⁴⁶ if cases are strategically selected as extreme or atypical. This same argument may also be used to explain why (3) case studies are not limited to hypothesis creation as some have levelled (Abercrombie et al. 1984, p. 34), and can actually test hypotheses successfully, especially if adopting the aforementioned sampling techniques as these will 'activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied' (Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 13).

Fourthly (4), case studies have been misunderstood as a methodological choice which 'maintains a bias towards verification' and confirmation of preconceived notions yet, whilst humans are usually most 'excited' by positive affirmations, careful and unbiased sampling can also debunk this myth. Finally (5), case studies are also, due to the researcher's proximity to the study, considered much more vulnerable to the researcher's 'subjective and arbitrary' reason. Yet this can be questioned as case studies are not, in reality, biased towards verification, and can achieve falsification of preconceived ideas.

In the specific context of women's political representation, single bounded case studies, according to Kenny (2014), continue to be necessary understanding the complex ways in which gender plays out across distinct institutional sites. Case studies make causal mechanisms of power, continuity, change, and resistance visible and enable researchers to

⁴⁶ Karl Popper famously contended that the common understanding that 'all swans are white' could be falsified by the observation of just one black swan.

‘see the ways in which the gendered rules of the game (formal and informal) play out on the ground’ (Kenny 2014, p. 682). Moreover, Kenny contends that feminist institutionalist case studies may “travel well” across to different political institutions. This is particularly the case in local government in the United Kingdom which, as an older institution, remains largely untouched by more progressive changes seen in devolved, newer political institutions. Generalising across local councils in Wales, therefore, is more valid than comparison of Senedd Cymru to Westminster’s House of Commons.

In summation, although case studies are often criticised for an apparent lack of rigor, precision, and objectivity (Yin 2003), they can achieve ‘holistic understandings of the complexities of social phenomenon’. Consequently, for this study, case studies were an appropriate method for examining the intricacies of the contexts and cultures of political institutions (Wambui 2013, p. 6). Therefore, a multiple case-study design, with councils chosen via purposive/exemplifying sampling, was decided the most appropriate approach as all factors which facilitate or fetter women’s political participation and representation in Welsh local government would not be apparent in a singular unit. Councils have differing levels of descriptive representation of women both overall and in senior positions (important here given the focus on the ‘labyrinth to leadership’ discussed in Chapter 2.4), they are led or controlled by different political parties, and are geographically and demographically distinct dependent on the nature of the city, borough or rural municipality.

3.3.2: The Four Local Councils

Four case study sites were selected based on levels of women’s overall descriptive representation, the political party control of the council, the gendered division of senior cabinet and leadership positions, the gendered nature of allocated portfolios, and the nature of the council constituency as either rural, urban, or post-industrial. Before data production could commence, there was a change in political party control of one chosen council from Conservative minority to Labour minority. Consequently, the primary factor for its inclusion – having no women present in any senior position – changed. This council was removed from the sample and another council, with only one woman in its senior positions, replaced it. The chosen councils have been anonymised and data about their levels of representation have been reduced to broad figures to uphold anonymity as much as possible.

Council A is an urban local authority which was under Welsh Labour Party control where women comprised between 30 and 35 (a critical mass of over 30%) per cent of seats in the council. This placed it within the ten best performing councils in Wales for overall levels of women's representation at the time. Council A was one of only five councils (later, six) in Wales to have a female council leader and had three other women in its Cabinet (37.5 per cent – a critical mass). The portfolios held by the women in the Cabinet included: education, housing, and leisure. Male councillors held the remaining portfolios including the more traditionally 'masculine' areas (see Chapter 2.4.3): assets and member development; complaints; licensing; community. This council was selected for its high overall level of descriptive representation, its juxtaposition of good descriptive representation of women in senior/leadership positions with highly gendered portfolio allocations, its party-political make-up, and its geographical location and demographic characteristics.

Council B was a post-industrial, Welsh Labour minority-led council where between 30 and 35 per cent of councillors were women. There was only a single woman in the Cabinet at the time of data production⁴⁷. Both the council Leader and Deputy were men, and the woman cabinet member held a portfolio with a focus on equalities, well-being, and 'future generations' – which has become characterised as a portfolio for women⁴⁸.

In direct contrast to Council B, **Council C** – a Welsh Labour majority-led, post-industrial council – had both a comparatively high level of descriptive representation of women in the council (over 35 per cent), *and* a critical mass of women in the Cabinet. The two senior leadership positions were gender balanced with a male Leader and female Deputy. This made Council C one of the best performing councils in Wales for women's descriptive representation both in the council as a whole and in senior positions. Despite this, the Cabinet portfolios here were divided between Cabinet members in line with the gendered stereotypes discussed in Chapter 2.4. The portfolios held by the four women included those on education, young people, and leisure. Men held the following portfolios: corporate services; development and housing; adult and children's community services; prosperity and wellbeing.

⁴⁷ There is now a second woman – Marie (interviewed when she did not hold this role) – in this council cabinet, who is responsible for the portfolio of social services and early help.

⁴⁸ Sophie Howe – the current Future Generations Commissioner for Wales – was previously the youngest elected local councillor in Wales for Whitchurch and Tongwynlais in Cardiff.

Council D was the only case study site to have low levels of women’s descriptive representation overall. It is a rural authority with one of the most sparsely distributed populations in Wales. Less than 15 per cent of its councillors were women, and it had fewer female councillors in 2017 than it did following the previous 2012 local elections. Council D, however, had a female leader, and two other women in its cabinet. This meant that 60 per cent of the women councillors in Council D held senior positions – the highest figure by far of any Welsh council. Women held gendered portfolios, including social services, family, education, and policy and language. The male cabinet members held masculine portfolios: technical/corporate services; finance and ICT; housing; lifestyle services; economic development; energy and transport. Table 3.1 summarises the key features of the four case study councils.

Table 3.1: Summary of key characteristics of the four case study sites

Council	Overall Descriptive Representation of Women (approx. %)	Number of women in Senior Cabinet positions/Total of senior cabinet positions (% in brackets)	Gender of Leader and Deputy (Leader/Deputy)	Political Party Control
A	30-35%	4/9	Female/Male	Labour (majority)
B	30-35%	1/6	Male/Male	Labour (minority)
C	Over 35%	4/9	Male/Female	Labour (majority)
D	<15%	3/8	Female/Male	Plaid/Independent Coalition

3.3.3: The Sample

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit a representative sample of interviewees from a pool of 71 women councillors across the four case study sites. Original plans were to interview 35 councillors. However, given temporal constraints and delays caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, 19 interviews were conducted between September 2019 and September 2020⁴⁹. Interviewees were purposefully selected for a number of factors

⁴⁹ Two of these interviews were pilot interviews with councillors from another council. Both were Welsh Labour women councillors with Cabinet positions. One was Deputy Leader of her council. One of these pilot interviewees – Lara – gave permission for her data to be used in this thesis and other

including political party affiliation, length of service, whether they held or had previously held a senior position, their involvement in any publicised policies targeted at women⁵⁰, and characteristics like age, ethnicity, and whether they had children.

Table 3.2 shows the political party spread of women across the four case study councils. Welsh Labour, given its success with electing women, had the most women present across Councils A, B, and C, with over 50 per cent of the interview pool being Welsh Labour women councillors – this was then reflected in the interviewee sampling framework with 57 per cent of interviewees being Welsh Labour councillors. Plaid Cymru had 13 councillors (18 per cent) across Councils C and D, and 4 Plaid Cymru councillors were interviewed within this study (21 per cent of those interviewed) – a similar percentage. Two councillors from the Welsh Conservatives were interviewed – one each from Councils A and B – which also matched their overall representation within the 71-strong pool of possible interviewees. The only underrepresented ‘party’ group amongst the interviewees were Independents with only 1 Independent councillor interviewed. This was due to a lack of response from Independent councillors during recruitment. Additionally, the single Welsh Liberal Democrat interviewed was a member of an Independent Alliance cross-party grouping in Council B. The sample was broadly representative of the political party make-up of the wider pool of 71 possible interviewees.

Senior positions – both currently held and previously held – were taken into consideration in the sampling frame given the focus on the labyrinth to leadership outlined in Chapter Two. As Table 3.3 illustrates, nine of the interviewed councillors from the four case study councils held a cabinet or Leader position⁵¹ at time of interview, two of whom were the Leader of their council (Council A and D). All senior women cabinet members in councils A, B, and D were interviewed in this study, and the woman Deputy Leader of Council C was also interviewed. Of these women, six were from Welsh Labour and three from Plaid Cymru.

Personal characteristics were further considered when sampling from the interviewee pool. Only two of the interviewed councillors were under 30 years old, and most were over 50. This reflects the age distribution of councillors more generally within Wales, where the

publications. The other pilot interviewee was contacted for permission to use her data in the thesis, but no response was received and therefore her data has not been analysed or quoted in this thesis or other publication as per ethical processes.

⁵⁰ This was identified through a media search for each possible councillor in the pool.

⁵¹ Both pilot interviewees also held senior positions, but these are not included in the tables here.

average age of councillors is 60. Indeed, only 12 of Wales' 22 local authorities had any elected councillors under the age of 30 following the 2017 local council elections. Eleri (Council C) and two councillors from Council D were Welsh language speakers and one ethnic minority woman was interviewed. This reflects the lack of ethnic minority councillors in Wales, which stood at 1.8% of elected representatives in 2017. None of the councillors interviewed had young children at time of interview, with only one having older, teenage children still living at home. A pilot interviewee had previously had young children whilst serving as an elected member. However, the lack of women with young children in the sample reflects the wider Welsh picture – discussions as to why this is the case can be found in Chapter Six. The interviewees' demographic characteristics are shown in Table 3.4.

Table 3.2: Political Party Membership of Councillors in the Sample

Council	Female Councillors Overall	Welsh Labour		Welsh Conservatives		Plaid Cymru		Independents		Liberal Democrats	
		Councillors	Interviewees	Councillors	Interviewees	Councillors	Interviewees	Councillors	Interviewees	Councillors	Interviewees
A	16	10	4	3	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
B	18	6	2	4	1	0	0	7	0	1	1
C	32	21	3	0	0	10	1	1	0	1	1
D	5	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	2	0
Total	71	37	9	7	2	13	4	9	1	6	2
% of Sample	26.8	52.1	57.8	9.8	10.5	18.3	21.0	12.6	5.2	7.0	5.2

Table 3.3: Number of women in senior positions in Councils A-D and percentage (%) of women in senior positions interviewed in each case study councils

Council	Number of Women in Senior Positions	Number of Senior Women Interviewed	Percentage of senior women interviewed
A	4	4	100
B	1	1	100
C	4	1	25
D	3	3	100
Total	12	9	75

Table 3.4: Interviewee details including pseudonym, year elected, political party, and whether she held a senior position at time of interview (or previously)

Council	Pseudonym	Year Elected	Political Party	Senior Position?
A	Ffion	2004	Welsh Labour	Council Leader
	Gwen	2012	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Rose	2012	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Mared	2004	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Sioned	2017	Independent	None
	Jacqueline	2017	Welsh Conservatives	Opposition Spokesperson (Education)
B	Theresa	2017	Welsh Conservatives	None
	Marie	2017	Welsh Labour	None*
	Tara	2015 (by-election)	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Mali	1999	Liberal Democrats	None**
C	Llinos	2012	Welsh Labour	None
	Ceri	1997ish	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Alys	2004	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Eleri	2017	Plaid Cymru	None
D	Samantha	1999	Plaid Cymru	Council Leader
	Angharad	2008	Plaid Cymru	Cabinet Member
	Nia	2004	Plaid Cymru	Cabinet Member
Pilot	Lara	2012	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Carys		Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member

* = has become a cabinet member since data collection

** = was previously Leader of Council B

3.3.4: Semi-Structured, Locally Elite Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as a dialogic method for examining ‘how things are done’ and the ‘rules of the game’ (Lowndes 2014, 2020) in Welsh local government. Given the focus on women’s first-hand experiences which were at times reflections on sexual harassment, this approach ensured a friendly and relaxed atmosphere with ‘more emotional closeness to the persons studied’ (Jayaratne 1983, p. 145). Semi-structured interviews can help to navigate the intangible, formal barriers and unequal power relations between interviewer and participant, allowing participants to come past the traditional ‘arm’s length’, and to speak about their experiences freely and in-depth. For Westmarland (2001, p. 8), creating a relaxed and enjoyable interview environment enables the gathering of ‘more fruitful and significant data’. Similarly, Puwar (1997, para. 2.2) contends that ‘a non-hierarchical friendly interview relationship’ is ‘conducive to hearing ‘herstory’’, facilitating women to ‘tell their own story as they see it’. As demonstrated in the findings chapters, there were large sections of uninterrupted speech from interviewees, suggesting that participants felt comfortable, in control of the interview environment, and able to tell their story.

Moreover, the feminist interpretivist epistemological approach taken allowed for reflections on who controlled the pace of interviews and engagement with the power dynamics and relations between researcher and participant (Oakley 1981). Finch (1984) argues that discussions of method and ethics are ‘commonly conducted within a framework [...] drawn from the public domain of men’ and that women interviewing women often produces rich data as women value the opportunity to talk to a ‘sympathetic listener’ who ‘shares a subordinate structural position by virtue of their gender – this allows for empathy and shared identity between interviewer and interviewee. In this research, however, the power dynamics upon which Oakley (1981) insists we must reflect were often skewed towards the participant as an ‘elite’ interviewee – something which is uncommon in feminist social science research which is traditionally heavily dominated by a ‘downwards’ or horizontal gaze on those ‘vulnerable, powerless, and ‘problem’ populations’ (Neal and McLaughlin 2009, p. 689). In the political sciences where this research is also situated, however, researching ‘up’ is more common.

‘Researching up’ in the political sciences engenders a focus on the actions, experiences and perceptions of ‘elite’ political representatives who can provide the researcher

with invaluable insight into environments which are often closed off to investigative research or ethnographic methods. A contested and arguably under-theorised term, elites are understood as those ‘with close proximity to power or policymaking’ (Lilleker 2003, p. 207), including politicians, lawyers, CEOs, policy-makers, and those in ‘high-powered’ industries such as finance, pharmaceuticals or technology. For the purposes of this study, ‘elite’ is defined as an individual who has influence and power, through their political position. This extends the definition to those who could be termed local experts or, as per Smart’s (1984) account, the ‘locally powerful’. However, power is understood here as more subjective and multifaceted than all political elites being endowed with the same power or control. Women politicians, having been historically excluded, are understood as having less power than their male counterparts. Power and considerations of elites, therefore, operate through modalities including dominance, authority and manipulation, and women councillors are situated in a complex web of power and vulnerability through their proximity to the policy-making process in contradiction to their being women. This thesis was premised on the belief that women remain largely *powerless* within Welsh local politics, but it is also undeniably the case that the women councillors interviewed were *less* powerless than other Welsh women as a result of their proximity to, and degree of influence over, the policymaking process. Moreover, within the interview pool, some had more power than others – senior councillors in power (Cabinet Members and Council Leaders), for example, were a more powerful elite group than their backbench and opposition counterparts because of their position and being closer to the policy-making process.

Research with politically elite participants enables the researcher to ‘learn more about the inner workings of the political process’ (Lilleker 2003, p. 208) and ‘shed light on the hidden elements of political action that are not clear from an analysis of political outcomes’ (Tansey 2007, p. 767). This was achieved in this research by an interview schedule which was broadly based on the themes embedded in the research questions and which asked women about their experiences throughout their political journeys, how institutional and wider structures affected their participation, any experiences in seniority, and whether they believed themselves to be critical actors who substantively represented women (see Appendix A for the full interview schedule). It was crucial that a research project influenced by feminist institutionalist theory, and in the field of feminist political science, involved engagement with ‘elite’ women actors present within the institution in question, to ascertain how their (claims to) represent women work in *practice* and in *context*. Interviewing ‘elites’

has a significant impact on the research process and the interview environment, as well as the approach taken to research design and methodology, and the organisation of, preparation for, and delivery of interviews (Puwar 1997; Harvey 2011). Feminist interviewing has traditionally prioritised a power shift away from researcher towards participant (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984; Thwaites 2017) and interviews with elite women are perhaps the most successful in achieving this redistribution of power. Whilst the participants may not have considered themselves to fit traditional definitions of ‘elite’, their statuses as locally powerful had a tangible impact on preparation for and conduct of the interviews, as well as other interactions during the interview process. These are reflected upon in section 3.

3.3.5: Ethical Concerns: To Anonymise or Not to Anonymise?

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee under approval number SREC/2775 (see Appendix B). When beginning the ethical approval process, concerns regarding anonymity and the key question of whether or not to anonymise participants were paramount. Given that women’s descriptive representation in Welsh local government is low, especially in senior positions, there were concerns around whether complete anonymity could be guaranteed. Moreover, the purposive sampling of case study councils for unique or atypical factors increased identifiability which could have further jeopardised participants’ anonymity. It was entirely possible that an interviewee could be easily identified if, hypothetically, she was the only council leader from a particular political party in Wales or was the only women on a council cabinet in a council with ‘x’ per cent of women overall, or held a unique cabinet portfolio⁵².

Tensions between social and political science research were exposed, as political science is often less concerned with anonymity given the position of politicians as public figures who should, arguably, be publicly accountable. Social science, however, given its traditions of researching vulnerable groups, often places high value on the protection of participant identities to ensure that they are not exposed to any risk from our research. As Lancaster (2017) explains, qualitative researchers often balance ‘potentially exposing respondents’ identities’ with ‘withholding information to reduce the risk of harm’. Given the

⁵² Portfolios are not uniform across local councils in Wales unlike other levels of governance (most countries’ national parliaments have ministerial portfolios for defence, chancellor/treasury, education etc.). Whilst there is some overlap – most councils have a social services or an education portfolio, The wording or grouping of portfolios is often different. For example, one council may have a Cabinet portfolio called ‘Adult and Community Services’ whilst another will have a portfolio covering the same remit called ‘Social and People Services’.

interest in participants' experiences, which included harassment or poor treatment by colleagues, anonymisation was upheld as much as possible and primacy was given to maintaining participant anonymity in decisions about what information was included or excluded from the thesis.

The primary concerns were that participants could be easily identified through data regarding women's descriptive representation in their council (easily accessible online) combined with their political party membership or any held position. This, alongside their interview comments, could lead to identification by fellow councillors. This could cause serious reputational harm with fellow political party members, amongst fellow councillors, and even wider within their constituency or the general public. Additionally, when asking women councillors about their experiences of sexual harassment or discrimination, there is the risk of psychological harm if they were identified, and had participants not been anonymised, it is unlikely that discussions of such instances would have been offered. Alongside this, however, there were competing concerns as to whether anonymous responses could inhibit attending to the research questions, for example without information on descriptive presence and portfolio allocations. Yet the purposive sampling frame enabled these to be discussed without necessitating attributing identifiable factors to individual participants. Participants were made aware of the risk of identifiability through the Participant Information Sheet presented in Appendix C. They signed (physically or digitally) a consent form which detailed that they understood that anonymity would be upheld as much as possible and that they had the right to withdraw at any time from the research (Appendix D).

To anonymise case study councils and participants, as much identifiable data as possible was removed. For example, all numerical descriptors of women's descriptive representation in councils were approximated and defined within certain parameters – such as 'a critical mass' or 'less than 15 per cent'. Moreover, information regarding portfolios or specific positions held was not attributed to specific participants alongside their Council in ensuing chapters – '(Labour Cabinet Member, Council 'X')' replaces '(Labour Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Council X)'.

3.3.6: The Shift Online

It was anticipated that all interviews would take place in a ‘face-to-face’ physical format⁵³, however the Coronavirus Pandemic, which halted all in-person research from March 2020, necessitated a shift to online interviewing through virtual meeting software. Eight interviews were conducted via Zoom, Skype for Business, or Microsoft Teams. Whilst interviews conducted online did not produce any less fruitful data – in fact, it could be argued that they produced unprompted, new content with interesting and diverse discussions (particularly on remote meeting attendance – see Chapter Six) – the use of virtual software and its instability did affect the interview process and sometimes produced a ‘disembodied experience’ (Illingworth 2001). For example, Tara’s and Marie’s internet connections were not secure enough to allow their cameras to be on during our interview, which meant body language or gestures could not be seen or understood. Even for participants who could use their camera, usually this was limited to a head shot or lacked visual clarity which, as Cater (2011) argues, limits the ability to observe body language and hand gestures and, as You (2021) contends, ‘cannot convey the subtleties of eye contact’ of in-person research. Moreover, there were instances of asking interviewees to repeat themselves due to poor audio quality or a drop in bandwidth. This sometimes interrupted the flow of the interview or shortened participants’ stories. Interviews were also sometimes interrupted by ringing phones or by family members – as in these excerpts from interviews with Marie and Jaqueline:

Marie: [...] And uh, sorry that's my son, he's actually putting his dish in the dishwasher!

Leah: Oh!

Marie: Wow, he's showing off.

Jacqueline: Gosh I'm really sorry. My phone is ringing. Can I just see who it is?

Leah: Yeah, yeah, carry on.

Jacqueline: That was my sister, who I love dearly, she lives in [TOWN] in [COUNTY] so we're on telephone contact almost daily. But she is a very strong socialist, so we have to avoid the subject of politics when we're together. It's a bit of a thing, really, because my brother-in-law, her husband, is of the same Conservative opinion as me. So, we just have to keep off politics.

⁵³ Although there was a caveat included in the submitted Ethics form for phone or online interviews in case of difficulties with funding or organising travel to/from councils farther away. This then allowed for a seamless transfer to online methods without the need for re-submission of ethical approval.

Leah: But it seems like you might agree with her on some things like women's representation?

Jacqueline: Oh yeah! Yes, probably. But we don't talk about it full-stop because it just becomes too big an issue.

Leah: [...] Ok. So I was just, you know, thinking about you were talking earlier about...

The excerpt from Jacqueline's interview shows how some interruptions can lead to interesting content and discussion, but still require the interview being brought back on-track. Although similar instances can happen in face-to-face interviews – for example, the interview with Llinos, which took place in a café at a further education college, was interrupted by students asking to borrow chairs from our table – interruptions in online interviews, where the participant was in their home but was not *physically* sharing that space with the researcher, felt more uncomfortable and, as a researcher, I often felt an invasive presence in their personal lives.

Interviewing during a global pandemic, however, presented opportunities for establishing a common ground – interviewer and interviewee could relate through shared experiences of social distancing, isolation, and difficulties faced with the shift to virtual working as illustrated in my interaction with Tara at the start of our interview:

Tara: Sorry I live in a full family household so I may be moving around a little bit but I'll try and put my mic on mute when I do that

Leah: Oh, it's no problem. I understand that working from home is full of trials and tribulations, isn't it?

Tara: Yes, lots to learn

This helped to establish rapport with the interviewee and often initiated discussion of their experiences of being a councillor during the pandemic.

The shift online caused some delays in data production as councillors' duties were heightened by the pandemic⁵⁴. Additionally, given the technological familiarity that online interviewing necessitates – many councillors were unfamiliar with virtual meeting spaces and felt more comfortable with an online interview after they had used remote software for council business or other meetings. Data were produced over the course of an academic year, however, between September 2019 and September 2020, within the same electoral term.

⁵⁴ Councillors spoke of organising facilities so that elderly constituents could receive essential shopping, for example.

Online interviewing, despite its technological difficulties, enabled timely and rich data production even whilst in-person research was impossible.

3.3.7: Transcription and Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded via a digital audio-recording device before being transferred to a password-encrypted folder and subsequently transcribed, mostly verbatim, by the researcher. The interviews produced a rich data set as illustrated in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5: Length of interview and number of words transcribed per participant

Council	Pseudonym	Length of Interview	Words transcribed
A	Ffion	45 minutes	6220
	Gwen	50 minutes	8447
	Rose	1 hour	7860
	Mared	1 hour 15 minutes	10,570
	Sioned	35 minutes	4560
	Jacqueline	1 hour	7367
B	Theresa	50 minutes	9796
	Marie	1 hour 10 minutes	8073
	Tara	1 hour 15 minutes	11,069
	Mali	1 hour	7187
C	Llinos	1 hour 40 minutes	12,681
	Ceri	1 hour	7815
	Alys	1 hour	8987
	Eleri	1 hour 10 minutes	10,862
D	Samantha	50 minutes	6712
	Angharad	1 hour	7698
	Nia	1 hour	7601
Pilot	Lara	1 hour 9 minutes	8747
	Carys	50 minutes	7548
Totals		16 hours 15 minutes	159,800 words

Researcher-transcription has been positioned as the ‘bedrock for the rest of the analysis’ (Braun and Clarke 2008, p. 87) as it allows for closeness to the data and immersion. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to nearly 2 hours and often included irrelevant discussion outside the parameters of the interview schedule – as is often the case with interviews with good rapport. Thus, as transcription is a lengthy process and given the delays because of Covid, some longer interviews were selectively transcribed. Evidently transcription necessitates some ‘re-presentation’ of interviewee’s voices and experiences, can never achieve the authentic content of the interview itself. Therefore, it is pertinent for the

researcher to situate themselves ‘within the context of their own assumptions about language, culture and discourse’ (Bird 2005, p. 228).

Transcribed interviews were then coded manually (without analysis software) to enable researcher immersion in data and then analysed using thematic analysis to search ‘across [the] data set to find repeated patterns of meaning’ and draw out latent patterns and organise these into coherent themes (Braun and Clarke 2008). Basit (2003, p. 143) contends that coding is a “dynamic, intuitive, and creative process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorizing” and that it involves the allocation of units of meaning (codes or categories or labels) to information compiled during a study. This then creates a conceptual scheme which suits our data and allows the researcher to scrutinise, compare, and change categories to decided which top the hierarchical order. Others have termed the coding process “data condensation” or “distilling” (Tesch 1990) – data become more manageable as a result of interpretation and organisation by the researcher. Whilst technological options for coding have been available for decades, manual coding⁵⁵ has been argued to create a closeness to and researcher immersion in data which cannot be achieved using computerised methods. Maher et al. (2018, pp. 11-12) contend that, whilst digital analysis software allows for ‘excellent data management’, manual coding “encourages a slower and more meaningful interaction with the data”. Furthermore, the authors found that using digital analysis meant that “the data views become fragmented [...] there were less “serendipitous encounters” and creative exploration of ideas and interpretations” (Maher et al. 2018, pp. 11-12).

Thematic analysis allows for ‘thick’ descriptions of data and highlights comparisons and distinctions between participants. Braun and Clarke (2008) contend that there are six phases to undertaking thematic analysis:

⁵⁵ Here, manual coding involved using printed interview transcripts, coloured pens and highlighters, large mind-maps of recurring concepts and initial headings, and, in later stages, separate Microsoft Word documents with copied and pasted quotes and their relevance for each category heading.

Figure 3.1: Braun and Clarke's six stages of thematic analysis



Following these six phases, manual coding was undertaken to generate initial ideas of repeating patterns across data (see Appendix E for a scanned copy of the colour-coded codes). These initial codes were then divided into separate word processing documents which were then populated with quotes from across the data set and reviewed to ensure enough evidence existed to warrant a salient theme. These themes were then grouped under appropriate thematic headings seen in the findings chapters of this thesis. For example, the initial code of ‘work-life balance’ became a significant part of Chapter Five on the formal aspects of gendered institutions and the triple duty, whilst ‘political language’ is discussed in Chapter Six along with other forms of informal cultures and norms in Welsh local government political institutions.

Thematic analysis enables accessible discussions of findings appropriate for academic and wider audiences and allows for clarity in similarities and distinctions across sets of data. Thematic analysis can lead to presentation of data findings which does not allow for continuity or the sense of individuals’ unique accounts. However, given the commitment to retaining women’s voices, this is partly addressed here by the manner of how interview quotations are included and presented in the ensuing findings chapters as they are kept in as

full a manner as possible⁵⁶ to ensure a commitment to highlighting women's individual experiences and voices.

3.4: Reflections on the Interviewing Process

This section offers reflections on the interview process and being a woman researcher interviewing elite women. Given that these reflections are specific and personal, embedded in researcher positionality, first person narrative will be used.

Feminist methodology prioritises recognition of the researcher as a 'real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests' (Harding 1987, p. 32) whose background shapes data production and analysis. Gender, alongside other characteristics and contexts affects interview power relationships (Buford May 2014; Boucher 2017), and I was situated as a twenty-five year old woman feminist researcher from England⁵⁷. Furthermore, as this is a study of *political* elites, it is apt to disclose that I am a member of the Welsh Labour Party. I made the conscious decision to not be an *active* member of Welsh Labour⁵⁸ for the duration of this study given the focus of this research, and I was careful to remove and refrain from mentioning my political affiliations/opinions on any public social media pages like Twitter and during the interviews. This masking of political affiliation was undertaken through concerns that public political statements may affect recruitment and interactions during the interview process, given my successful sampling of women from all political parties.

Reflecting on data production with elite women participants, targeted recruitment was important as elites often receive multiple requests for interviews from researchers and journalists (Puwar 1997). Although local councillors are comparatively less high-profile than MPs or MSs, the importance of making prospective participants feel as if their experiences would be valued was paramount. I therefore researched each participant carefully as this not only shaped the recruitment process, but also the email invitation. I directly mentioned my interest in their experiences in a (currently or previously) held position or in their

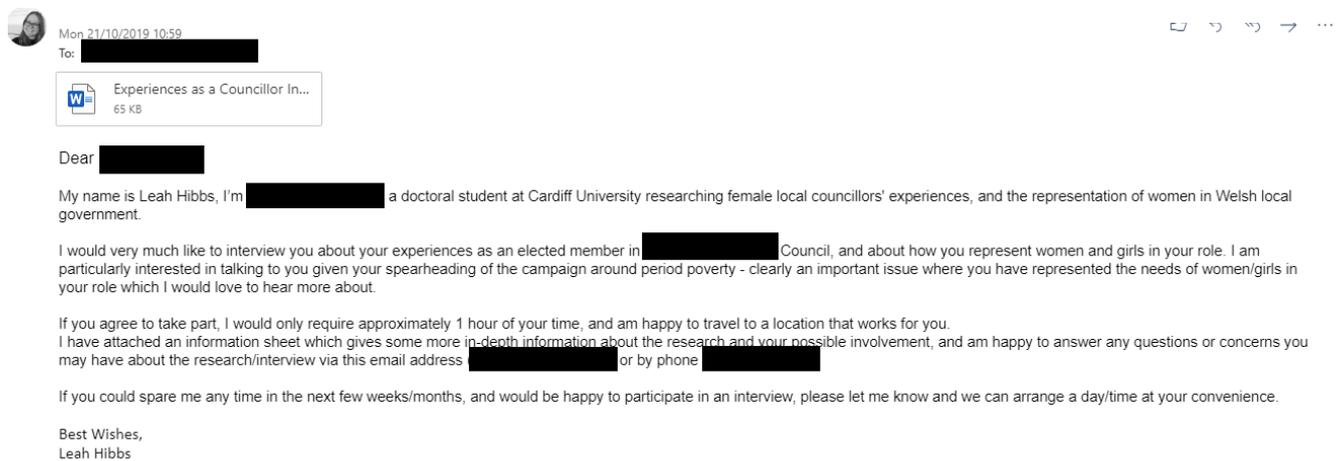
⁵⁶ There is little editing of quotes or cutting out of detail

⁵⁷ Being an English researcher, researching in a Welsh context is noted as this has been an important aspect of positionality in previous research (see, for example, Folkes 2019). However, my nationality did not seem to engender any significant issues in this study beyond the participants providing more detailed explanations of locations within Wales.

⁵⁸ I did not attend any political party branch meetings, or engage with any campaigning or other party activity.

involvement with a gender equality campaign. For example, the screenshot below (Figure 3.1) shows an email to Eleri, who, according to my pre-interview research, had been involved with a ‘Periods in Poverty campaign’⁵⁹.

Figure 3.2: Screenshot of recruitment email to Eleri (Plaid Cymru councillor, Council C)



Elite interviewees receive high volumes of communications and I usually sent two to three emails before eliciting a response. Three interviews were also re-scheduled at the last minute due to emerging issues arising in councillors' communities and some interviewees ran late (although this was only an issue for online interviews suggesting it is perhaps easier to ignore non-physical presence). As Fitz et al. (1994) conclude: 'one attribute of the powerful is that they are able to make you wait'.

In elite interviewing it is important to prove that you have 'done your research' (Harvey 2011). I ran background searches on interviewees, both through council websites and through wider internet and media searches. Information pertaining to interviewees' length of service, their attendance record at council meetings⁶⁰, and current or previously-held positions within the council at the time were often available on council websites, although, at times, this was not the case due to poor record keeping and information was found elsewhere, such as in electoral result reports.

⁵⁹ 'Periods in Poverty' campaigns (discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight) are a response to the recognition that period products – such as sanitary towels or pads and tampons – can be unaffordable and financially inaccessible for individuals who menstruate. These campaigns aim to provide free access to period products in schools and other public buildings to address this issue.

⁶⁰ This information was sought given literature suggestions that women find meeting times inaccessible.

Organising the interviews highlighted interesting distinctions between councillors, and also with my previous experiences of interviewing women (Hibbs 2018; Hibbs 2022a). The organisation of interviews with senior councillors (Cabinet Members and Council Leaders) showed similarities with Puwar's (1997) elite interviews with Members of Parliament, whilst interviews with back-bench or non-senior councillors were more akin to relaxed, informal interviews I had carried out with women in previous research with a friendly, non-hierarchical, and comfortable interview atmosphere (Hibbs 2022a). For example, it was common that interview requests sent directly to Cabinet Members and Council Leaders were responded to, and subsequently arranged, by an administrator or personal assistant whilst back-bench councillors themselves would respond. Locations of interviews also differed: the seven in-person interviews with senior councillors took place in the councillor's private office within the council buildings (Carys, Lara, Ffion, Gwen, Rose, Mared, and Ceri), whilst the in-person interviews with non-senior members took place in less formal locations: their home (Eleri), at a convenient public location (Llinos and Sioned), or a meeting room at Cardiff University (Theresa). Arguably, all virtual interviews took place 'in' the participant's home, but virtual interviews with senior members were still organised through secretaries and, for one participant – Samantha – the secretary was present at the start of the meeting to ensure the meeting technology (Skype for Business) was running smoothly.

Moreover, when scheduling and carrying out interviews, senior members were more time-conscious and stuck to the suggested minimum one-hour time limit. Indeed, my interviews with Gwen, Rose, and Mared in Council C were scheduled by the secretary to happen concurrently over three hours, and thus interview time was realistically limited to 45-50 minutes to allow for pleasantries, an overview of the project and the signing of consent forms, other meetings running over, and for finding the next interviewee's office. As in Puwar's (1997) reflections, this meant prioritizing questions in these shorter interviews to make full use of the time available.

My interview with Ffion – Leader of Council A – provides an interesting case study of the nature of interviewing elites. Firstly, upon initial contact with Ffion, her personal secretary made it clear that she wished to be interviewed first before any other cabinet members, and my interviews with the other Cabinet Members were arranged for a week later. The skewing of the power balance towards the interviewee meant I felt pressured to agree to the interview on her terms – as one of only five female council Leaders in Wales, interviewing Ffion was crucial. All communication was subsequently made through Ffion's

assistant who scheduled the interview time and location. On arriving at Council A, security measures meant I had to wait in reception to be collected and brought to the ante-chamber of Ffion's office by her assistant. I was then informed that Ffion's previous meeting was over-running and, by the time that was finished, our interview was limited to forty-five minutes as she had another commitment afterwards. At the end of our interview, Ffion also presented me with a council-branded, boxed ball-point pen which, whilst a thoughtful gift, further cemented her as the one controlling the interaction.

The interviews with the two council leaders – Ffion and Samantha – also, at times, felt like a rehearsed speech of their political party's values or their personal leadership manifestos. Lengthy monologues are a common feature of elite interviews which 'heavily privilege the participation rights of the speaker over the listener' (Boucher 2017, p. 102). The power dynamics at play, general British politeness, and my personal feminist commitment to centring women's voices, meant that I often did not interrupt women's speeches mid-flow, preferring to let them finish and then pick out points for follow-up questions and 'insights into the issues under consideration' (Boucher 2017, p. 102). This resulted in back-channelling on my behalf, a facilitative function of with a heavy use of 'yeah' and 'hmm', as well as nods of agreement, to indicate active listening (Boucher 2017). Consequently, these interviews required more effort to re-focus the participant on their *own* experiences and understandings, rather than the 'party line'.

In contrast, most non-leader interviews were primarily focused on the participants' personal experiences and understandings of being a woman councillor. It was only my interview with Sioned (Independent councillor, Council A) which was shorter than the others (35 minutes) and felt less successful as her responses were often short sound bites with no elaboration even after probing questions. I felt slightly demoralized after this interview particularly as my other interviews to this point had been longer, but, upon transcription, there was still interesting data to be analysed.

Reflecting now on how my positionality affected the interview process, I explore how my gender, age, and nationality, as well as my philosophical and political affiliations as a feminist Labour Party member affected the interview environment. Firstly, at twenty-five, I was younger than all my participants with only Theresa, Eleri, and Tara being within ten years of my age. Whilst this was not a barrier to establishing a good rapport with my older interviewees, interviews with my younger participants were cemented in shared experiences –

we shared common stories of being a young woman in the 21st Century. Moreover, older, long-serving councillors were often reflecting on past experiences within councils which took place when I was very young or even not yet born. They would often comment on this and then assume a role of ‘teacher’ to explain how things were different ‘back then’ and to outline how they perceived women’s experiences or society’s norms today had or had not changed. This facilitated some interesting discussions, however, with older interviewees interested in how my experiences as a young woman in 2019/2020 contrasted with their own. Mahoney (2018, pp. 69-70) similarly found ‘generational differences’ between herself as a young feminist researcher and her participants, and she explained that ‘the interactions between historians and their research participants can reinforce the generational model enacted in histories of feminist activism’ – similarly the generational positioning of myself versus older councillors created some interesting exchanges.

My position as an English woman researching women’s political experiences in Wales also had some impact on the interview process. Whilst I had lived in Wales for eight years, I retained an English accent. Most of my interviewees were born in Wales, some in the same ward they represented, and they were proud of the heritage of their local areas. This meant that often the history or demographics of certain areas were explained to me by participants:

I come from [WARD], it's a mixed community - there are affluent areas, there are less affluent areas - I was brought up in the less affluent area.

This positioning as a geographical ‘outsider’ was beneficial however as it meant my knowledge of the area and its political history was never assumed (see also Folkes 2019). Participants provided rich, thick descriptions of place without prompting. For example, I had never visited Council D’s borough (due to the change to online interviewing), and so Samantha described the locality and its politics to me throughout the interview, commenting on the unique political challenges of the rural council:

in rural areas like around here we find it's very personality based, if somebody isn't um, known in the community, it's not like in a town setting [...] It's different from being in a city or being in a bigger town where you get more party political clear boundaries.

However, although I was not an ‘insider researcher’ (Mannay and Creaghan 2016) there were aspects of familiarity such as Samantha’s area and my village both experiencing flooding in recent years positioning me a ‘transient insider’ (Roberts 2018):

Samantha: But I was thrown in at the deep end here because I'd just become Leader uh and then the floods hit us here.

Leah: I live in [village] and we've recently had the flooding with Storm Dennis.

Samantha: Oh god, have you?

Leah: Yeah the basement flat below mine was under 6ft of water.

Samantha: Oh god, were they okay?

Leah: Yeah, they got out at 4am.

Samantha: It's horrendous, we had people getting out through windows here!

Leah: Yeah she had to climb through a window and over a wall.

Being English researching Welsh politics, therefore, did not negatively affect the interview process and actually led to participants elaborating on aspects of their community and political landscape which otherwise they may have left unsaid.

Gender was the most influential aspect of my positionality. Being a woman and feminist researcher researching women influenced the interview relationship and shaped the interview landscape. Sedysheva (2020, p. 78) contends that feminist women researchers 'may find it hard to limit her sympathy to the surface level, especially when respondents strike chords that resonate with the researcher's own personal experiences' and thus interviews can be 'emotionally heavy and challenging'. This resonates with my experience of interviewing women in this study – at times, our interviews were emotional as this exert from Rose's interview illustrates:

Rose: I might even get so emotional I'll cry when I tell you this. [...] I would say, and I will definitely cry when I tell you this [...] I know I'm really emotional about it...

Leah: Oh, you've set me off now as well!

Having empathy and shared experiences with the women interviewed often meant interviews were littered with tears, laughter, and expressions of solidarity or shared emotional labour. Women shared personal and emotional stories with me about their lives and relationships, as well as sexual harassment and other negative experiences of being a local councillor. Gender was an enabling factor because interviewees felt comfortable to share these difficult stories because I was a woman and had similar stories. Experiences of gender inequality and sexism

were often shared – being talked over in meetings, for example, or having your ideas stolen by a man:

Mared: So, it's subtle stuff all day long, which I'm sure you suffer from and other women, it's exactly the same.

Leah: Yep, men repeating things in meetings that you've already said

Mared: Ahhhh yes, when they take your ideas! I had exactly that the other day! I said, "That's exactly what I said just now!" He said "Oh yeah yeah," he said, "that's right."

Leah: Yeah, I know!

These shared experiences of micro-aggressions and small instances of sexism and the common experience of being a woman in similar environments established good rapport and a trusting interview environment.

Almost all women interviewed were passionate about improving the representation of women in politics and so shared feminist values was a further site for rapport with participants as we puzzled over solutions to the dearth of women in politics. I did not feel that my political affiliations had an impact on the interview process as, whilst I sensed that most interviewees guessed my left-wing political stance, my interviews with the Conservative participants did not feel any less comfortable and we still had common ground based on gender and, for Theresa, age as well. There was perhaps a more felt impact of political stance during my reflections on interviews with Welsh Labour participants who held views which did not match the party stance. Llinos, Marie, and Gwen, for example were all, as discussed in Chapter Four, unconvinced by the merits of positive action tactics previously employed by Welsh Labour to improve women's representation, and Gwen held traditional gendered views that women with children should not become councillors. At times, it felt as if these participants consciously apologised for their contrasting views and would defend these in a practiced manner as if they knew I was a fellow party member. I then undertook repair work, reassuring them that their views were not to be dismissed. However, I left these interviews feeling disheartened and affronted by these unexpected admissions of non-feminist or less progressive views from women within my own political party.

Overall, being a feminist, young, left-wing English woman, seemed to accrue benefit in the interview process, despite the skewed power dynamics with some senior members.

Women openly shared negative experiences and controversial views, women's voices and stories were paramount and prioritised, and the interviews produced a nuanced data set.

3.5: Conclusion

This chapter has presented and justified the epistemological and methodological approach taken for this research. Methodological choices were influenced by feminist political science and social science research. Feminist interpretivism and standpoint theory (Hekman 1997) were adopted centre of women's voices and journeys, whilst feminist political science and institutionalism situated these accounts within the contexts of Welsh local government. Whilst an in-depth ethnographic study was not achievable due to temporal, financial, and pandemic constraints, the interviews were effective tools in examining women's experiences, gendered rules in political institutions, as well as women's claims for substantive political representation, which hinges on micro-scale 'critical acts' and individual politicians' agency. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to 'tease out the specific context, process and agency involved' in claims to represent women in debate and deliberation (Mackay 2008, p. 7).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen women local councillors from four case-study councils across Wales as not all facilitating or fettering contexts or factors were apparent in any one given council in Welsh local government. Councils were chosen based on levels of descriptive representation of women (ranging from 10 to over 40 per cent), geographic characteristics, political party make-up, and representation of women at senior levels within the councils. Whilst case study approaches are sometimes criticised for lacking generalisability, these feminist institutionalist case studies are able to 'travel well' across political arenas and institutions, and a purposive sample here allowed for councils representing typical and atypical cases. Interviews took place both in-person and, subsequently, online during the global Covid-19 pandemic. This methodological shift, whilst causing delays, enriched data through enabling comparison between those interviewed pre-pandemic and those who could reflect on changes in organisational practices caused by the pandemic. This chapter reflected on the unique features of interviewing elites and the impact of researcher positionality on the research process.

The next five chapters present the findings drawn from the analysis of the interview data. They attend to the core research questions:

- 1) What were women's first-hand initial and formative experiences of becoming and being local councillors in Welsh local government?
 - a. How were these experiences shaped by gender (in)equality issues?
- 2) To what extent do participants perceive Welsh local councils as gendered institutions, and how does this affect women's political participation and representation?
- 3) What are the unique challenges faced by, and experiences of, female councillors holding and/or seeking senior positions within local government?
- 4) How do female councillors' experiences, the culture, and the context of Welsh local government shape the substantive political representation of women in Welsh councils?
 - a. What are women councillors' views on the role of 'critical mass' and 'critical actors' in shaping patterns and processes of substantive representation in local government?
 - b. How and to what extent do feminist motivations inform women councillors' commitments to substantively representing women?

These questions were designed to address the overarching research aim of the thesis. Namely, "drawing on a feminist institutionalist perspective, to explore first-hand accounts of women's experiences of gender equality issues and representation in their journey as councillors in Welsh local government".

As noted, the data were explored through the lens of feminist institutionalism and cognate theories including the concepts of descriptive and substantive representation, critical mass and critical actor theory, and the 'labyrinth to leadership'. The structure of these chapters follows the 'journey' of a successful woman councillor from pre-election and their initial political socialisation, to the day-to-day experiences of being a local councillor and, finally, to senior leadership, illustrating the barriers and frustrations experienced and their impact on women's ability to participate in politics (descriptive representation) and their propensity or claims to act for women (substantive representation).

Chapter Four

Gendered (S)elections, Expectations, and Political Socialisation

4.1: Introduction

This chapter addresses the first research question by considering women local councillors' initial and formative experiences of becoming and beginning their terms in elected office in Welsh local government. It explores the motivations of women who stand for office and their views on whether selection processes are gendered. The chapter discusses the extent to which women's journeys to holding office, and their initial experiences whilst as councillors, are shaped by gender (in)equality issues which, in turn, facilitate or fetter women's political participation and representation. The chapter is structured chronologically, first discussing women's motivations for standing and their experiences in the selection process, before examining their expectations of becoming a councillor, and their first impressions and initial weeks in their elected role.

The chapter documents participants' journeys towards becoming a local councillor, exploring their previous community and civic activism, political party membership, as well as participants' key motivators and critical moments in deciding to stand for election, including the influence of role models and supporters (see also Ledgerwood 2018; Maguire 2018). It also reflects on participants' views on positive action techniques to improve the descriptive representation of women in local government. As will be discussed, the Welsh Labour Party's use of positive action tactics in local government elections is less consistent than for Senedd Cymru and Westminster selection processes, something that was perceived as a positive factor by some interviewees. The "myths of quotas", as identified by Nugent and Krook (2016), were maintained by some Welsh Labour councillors who criticised all-women shortlists as obscuring women's merits in an over-privileging of gender, and label beneficiaries of such mechanisms as 'token' women.

The chapter then charts women's initial expectations of their roles, exploring predictions and preconceptions about what being a local councillor would entail. Participants' 'political socialisation' (Rush and Giddings 2011) during their first months in office are examined in relation to learning and discerning the gendered rules-in-use of the local government political setting – the 'dos and don'ts that one learns on the ground' (Ostrom 1999, p.38). Previous experience in other political institutions and in careers engaging with local authorities were seen as a 'training ground' for women entering local politics. However,

these experiences did not fully prepare women for City or County Borough roles, and participants called for more training opportunities to equip new women councillors with the skills and ability to fully participate in the political arena. Echoing feminist institutionalist findings in other political arenas, Welsh local government was therefore characterised by ‘gendered rules of the game’ and women councillors often underwent a learning process of ‘how things work around here’ (Lowndes 2014, 2020).

4.2: Deciding to Stand for Election – Gendered Motivations

As discussed in Chapter One, this thesis is not primarily a feminist institutionalist analysis of political parties, or a thesis extrapolating the supply and demand model of women’s candidate selection. However, interviewees did discuss the ‘formal regulations’ and ‘informal practices’ of gendered political party opportunity structures explored in other feminist institutionalist studies (Mackay et al. 2010; Kenny 2014). Therefore, this thesis is not concerned with delving into the undergrowth of the ‘secret garden’ of political party opportunity structures (Gallagher and Marsh 1988) or the gendered and institutional dimensions of party selection and recruitment processes, these aspects are considered briefly to contextualise women’s journeys.

To understand why these women had become local councillors, I asked about their motivations, experiences of selections, and their initial expectations in their journeys to standing and being elected to office. Accordingly, this chapter addresses how women’s experiences before or whilst seeking elected office shaped their experiences of gendered institutions (see Chapters Five and Six), their cultures and contexts, of gendered political opportunity structures towards leadership, and of representing women. To put participants at ease, I initially asked them about why and how they became a local councillor. This elicited oral histories about previous civic and political participation, gendered experiences of political party selection process, reflections on their personal motivations for seeking political office, as well as any key *influences* or *influencers* behind their decisions to stand.

Previous research has found that low political ambition, engagement, and knowledge can be ‘supply’ barriers to women’s political participation and cause their low descriptive representation in representative institutions (see Fox and Lawless 2004; Fox and Lawless 2014; Allen and Cutts 2018). There is a persistent, gendered gap in political ambition recorded around the world, including the United Kingdom, with women found to be less

politically ambitious than men (Hansard Society 2019). This socio-political landscape can influence women's self-perception, meaning that they do not see themselves as viable candidates for elected office. Indeed, whilst local government is often argued to be the most accessible political sphere and is the level of governance which most who do report some political ambition would consider standing for (see Allen and Cutts 2018 for a full discussion), only 29.8 per cent of candidates in the 2017 Welsh local government elections were women, compared to 33.8 per cent of candidates in the 2019 General Election. Moreover, in the Welsh local elections no female candidates were fielded in a third of all electoral wards (Stirbu et al. 2017). Women are discouraged from standing for political office in local government, despite claims that it is easier to balance and merge councillors' duties with family and professional life due to its perceived lesser time commitment (see Chapter Six).

Women's motivations to run for elected office relied significantly on their previous experience of civic engagement, as well as involvement with a local political party branch (if applicable)⁶¹. As reported in earlier studies (see, for example: Wilford et al. 1993; Cowell-Meyers 2001), deep-seated *political* ideology⁶² or a desire to develop a political career, with local government as a stepping-stone to subnational or national political office, were not motivators behind interviewees' decisions to run for office. Moreover, whilst two councillors interviewed – Ceri and Llinos - had held formal political positions before on their town or community council, with the exception of Eleri⁶³, Theresa⁶⁴ and Marie⁶⁵, no other participants had previously sought or held other political positions at any other level of governance. Two interviewees had held equivalent positions previously – Jacqueline, in the South of England, and Lara who was then serving again for the same ward after regaining her Labour seat after losing it to the Liberal Democrats for several terms. Twelve interviewees had never previously held any political office before their current local authority position. Interviewees also did not openly discuss their current councillor position as a precursor to a future political career at a higher political level⁶⁶. Lara, who was first elected in 1995, perceived that a trend of local councils being a political 'stepping stone' had been prevalent

⁶¹ One interviewee – Sioned – was an Independent Councillor

⁶² Feminist ideology was mentioned, however, and is discussed later in section 4.2

⁶³ Who had been involved with Youth Parliament

⁶⁴ Who had run in Parliamentary (Westminster), and Assembly/Senedd elections

⁶⁵ Who had run for party candidate selection for Senedd elections

⁶⁶ Despite the lack of direct references to ambitions of future political careers, one interviewee has since gained a position at Westminster (details withheld to preserve anonymity).

in the late nineties, but becoming an MP in 2019 was no longer as contingent on ‘being a councillor first’ because ‘people are becoming MPs at a younger age’, thus becoming a councillor was no longer viewed as a careerist move.

This suggests that, whilst some politicians may, previously, have used local government as a stepping-stone to political roles in higher levels of governance, being a local councillor was the sole objective for most interviewees, with community-based political arenas acting as prior training grounds for being elected to seats on City or County Borough Councils. There were interviewees who had been involved in the non-electoral, organisational side of formal politics such as working for a local MP or in a MEP’s office and this did have some influence on being asked to stand (see Section 4.3).

Participants’ motivations were primarily a desire to represent their local, immediate community or ward, and to extend previous, informal civic activism and participation into a formal sphere of political influence. This echoes earlier studies’ findings that women politicians are predominantly motivated by a desire to ‘do more’ for their communities, rather than ideological or careerist concerns (Cowell-Meyers 2001; Prindeville 2002; Fawcett Society 2017). Accordingly, the prioritised activities of women local councillors are often primarily community-focused casework with residents (see Rao 1998; Stokes 2005). Farrell and Titcombe’s research with 18 female and male Welsh local councillors between 2014 and 2016 found, as did this research, that women who were eventually ‘approached by someone else to stand for office’ were community activists first, political party members second, and then legitimate candidates for selection – this chapter explores that familiar pathway to becoming a local councillor.

Commitment to improving the local area or community was a priority for participants, who often identified specific local issues which prompted them to stand including: an unnamed road in the local area (Ceri), calls for the reopening of a train tunnel connecting two valleys (Eleri), opposing the opening of a chicken factory (Mali), the closure of a local library (Llinos), and a firm closure which caused local financial hardship (Gwen). There were more general concerns about the community’s representation which motivated others. For example, Llinos was conscious that her ward was ‘so close to the border, the border village to [city]’ that often her community ‘seemed as if [it] got forgotten’ by the previous ‘useless county councillor in the seat’ – an incumbent of thirteen years who she referred to as ‘the invisible man’. Therefore, Llinos decided to stand to counteract this perceived injustice in her

community. A desire to provide more representation for their local area was significant for interviewees, with Rose also commenting that ‘it really is a privilege to represent her community’ and become ‘their go-to person’ or ‘poster girl’ especially as she identified her ward as ‘mixed’ with ‘affluent areas [and] less affluent areas’. Tara similarly explained that her ward residents felt they lived in ‘the Forgotten Valley’ and she wanted to stand on behalf of a more diverse range of residents:

Tara: It was the same people in every single like forum, sounding board, third sector charity, trustee board [...] no wonder the rest of the residents think that there's nothing happening, because they're not included if they're not within the same friendship circles as these people.

Community and ward representation was a crucial motivator for interviewees. Previous research has also discussed the ‘politics of local presence’ in the UK with political parties often emphasising residency of candidates in the constituency on campaign materials (Childs and Cowley 2011; Milazzo and Trumm 2021). Eleri (Plaid Cymru, Council ‘C’) was the only councillor interviewed who did not live in the ward she was elected to represent, although her ward was ‘not a million miles away’ and she had family who were well-known in the constituency. Eleri was conscious that making the decision to stand there had been ‘a bit of a big risk and a bit out of the ordinary’ because candidates’ addresses are listed on ballot papers. Eleri believed this was the reason why she won her seat with ‘the lowest majority of [the borough]’ – less than ten votes. Locality and living in the ward that they stood to represent was prioritised by interviewees who openly criticised previous councillors or candidates who were either ‘invisible’ or ‘parachuted in’ by parties, a tactic identified by Sioned as characteristic of Welsh Labour:

The councillor for [another ward] who lives up [area], doesn't even live in her ward. This is what Labour do, they parachute people into different places. We don't believe in that, you know, if you're being a councillor you should live in the area.

Commitment to solving local community issues and being a local representative were particularly salient motivations for women considering running for office, and continued to be their most enjoyed aspects of being a councillor (see Chapter 7).

Civic participation and activism were also precursors to political participation, and often feelings of not being able to do enough in informal, civic spaces was a motivation to contest a formal political seat (Fawcett Society 2017). Samantha, for example, had ‘been a

school governor ever since parents were able to become school governors'⁶⁷ and she felt becoming a councillor was a 'natural progression' of her community activity and desire to 'take part and to represent'. Wanting to 'do more' and, crucially, do more in a formal political setting was a key inducement for participants, with Ceri explaining she was propelled by a sense of frustrated reflection on her civic participation, asking herself 'could I do more, or should I be looking to do more?' before deciding 'the avenue and the way to do it would be through getting involved in local politics'. Consequently, community activism and grassroots civic participation were popular routes in for women standing for local political office, with volunteering, setting up community schemes, running community groups, and being visible in the community crucial for women becoming local councillors. Participants felt that being visible and involved in community life was often vital for women's electoral success insofar as it can provide women with established networks of community and electorate support, even if they have not always lived in the communities they represent:

Marie: I wouldn't say I was *politically* active⁶⁸, but I was a Labour Party member and I was very hands-on in the community. [...] I had a child in the local primary school. I hadn't been living in the area very long, but I'm from [nearby town] and came back. I think being a mum particularly helped me to get elected, the Mummy network is particularly useful if you're hands on in the school. So, I was the chair of the PTA⁶⁹ in school, you're sort of well-known - people know your intentions and they know what you do. That was definitely a positive for me and helped me to get elected.

Community activism and involvement provided women seeking office with visibility and alternative networks beneficial in securing electoral support and allowed them to build constituencies (Cornwall and Goetz 2005). This often means that women councillors are more visible to constituents and their communities once in elected office (Briggs 2000).

Interviewees were also asked whether there were any 'specific gender inequality issues' which motivated them to stand. This prompted a variety of responses, with some interviewees choosing to offer their opinions on positive action or quota mechanisms of political parties (see section 4.3), some responding more generally about women's representation, and others interpreting the question as whether they had feminist motivations. Theresa was the clearest in her motivation by feminist values:

⁶⁷ School governors are volunteers who oversee a school usually in their community. They contribute to a school's visions and ethos, hold the headteacher to account regarding the school's educational performance, and scrutinise the school's financial performance, ensuring value for money.

⁶⁸ Italics denote interviewee's emphasis on words

⁶⁹ Parent-Teacher association

Leah: So, when you were sort of thinking about standing were any of your kind of motivations motivated by gender inequality issues?

Theresa: I would certainly say that I am a feminist. I have no problem saying that word. I don't think it's a dirty word. I think that isn't always the overarching sentiment in my party. And I know a lot of women that kind of steer clear of using words like that in kind of, you know, environments where it might not necessarily be a welcome thing to hear. But I've got no problem saying it and standing up for it, really. So, for me, that was a big factor.

As a Welsh Conservative councillor, whilst Theresa was aware of negative issues and sentiments about 'feminism' as a 'dirty word' within her own party, she identified her personal feminist commitments as influencing her decision and was the only interviewee to openly state this. The intersection of age and gender could be significant as Theresa was the youngest study participant (aged 26) and, throughout her interview, expressed progressive views that seemed at odds with the ideologies often associated with the Conservative Party. Theresa was aware of this and talked about the abuse she received for an unrelated comment made by a female MP and not by herself, stating that she knew that 'if that person was to meet [her], they would be like "oh, this is the most liberal Conservative I've ever met in my life", you know?'.

Ceri (Welsh Labour), also discussed gender (in)equality issues but said that these had not been 'on her radar' before entering politics, and that it was becoming a councillor which made her more critically aware and conscious of gender inequalities:

Leah: Were there any concerns that were centred around gender or centred around women that inspired you?

Ceri: At that time, I didn't perceive gender to be an issue. When I got into the wider field of politics, and when I got elected as a county borough councillor, I was very mindful and aware of the fact that at that time, twenty-three years ago, there was very much – I call them the old boys' club.

Although feminist or gender inequality concerns were not their main motivation, many participants aligned themselves with feminism and with gender-based political inequalities later in their interviews. This contrasts with previous research which has found that women often cite the promotion of women's equality or women's representation as key motivators (Kamlongera 2008; Fawcett Society 2018). However, the omission does suggest that local issues rather than personal feminist values took precedence as motivations, and that it was, perhaps, their time *in* office, rather than prior awareness or personal gender values, which solidified their commitment to representing women and considerations of gender inequality.

4.3: Political Parties, Gatekeepers, and Gendered Selection Processes

Whilst women's civic participation was a significant precursor to women's decisions to stand and did shape their participation in politics, the role of political parties' mechanisms for selection and recruitment were crucial to women's descriptive representation. All councillors here, with the exception of Sioned who was an Independent, belonged to either Welsh Labour (10), Welsh Conservatives (2), Plaid Cymru (4), or the Welsh Liberal Democrats (1), meaning that party membership and activism must be considered another influential factor in women's journeys to elected positions. Using a feminist institutionalist analytical approach, political parties are significant in either facilitating or fettering women's selections as candidates through the interaction of formal regulations, such as the use of positive action techniques, with informal practices like networks of political patronage and encouragement. Being asked to stand was the primary motivator for participants' decisions to run for office and, as the data illustrate, party branches and other party members often took up this mantle to encourage interviewees to stand.

As seen in previous research (Fawcett Society 2018) and in campaigns like '#AskHerToStand' by 50:50 Parliament⁷⁰, women's gateways into elected political positions are often opened by informal networks of encouragement (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016; Hibbs 2022a), usually involving a mentor or a fellow political party member asking a woman to consider running for elected office. Fawcett Society's (2018) research amongst MPs found that 'encouragement from party members or recruitment by party gatekeepers was crucial for women who decided to seek selection' and was key for overcoming doubts. Other evidence further concludes that women's political networks 'support women's decision to run for office, influence their success in being elected' (Di Meco 2017). These conclusions were supported in this study as interviewees positioned being asked to stand as a key deciding factor in them standing for election.

As Table 4.1 illustrates, only three councillors did not mention being asked to stand as an influence on their decision to run for office, while the other sixteen participants were asked by a range of actors to consider standing. Fellow political party branch members and other local councillors were frequently highlighted by women in this study, with eleven

⁷⁰ See <https://5050parliament.co.uk/ask-her-to-stand/> for more information

interviewees mentioning these individuals or groups as key informal networks of encouragement:

Rose: It was more by chance than by design if I'm truly honest. I'd been involved with the Labour Party for quite some time, I'm the secretary of my local branch within my ward and a long-serving and highly-respected councillor decided to retire and the branch just talked me into it really.

Jacqueline: I offered my support [to the Conservative Party] in terms of telephone canvassing etcetera and, in no time at all, I was asked to stand...I didn't go seeking it out.

External validity through being asked to stand, rather than personal political ambition, was a crucial turning point in decisions to become a local election candidate echoing research elsewhere (Fox and Lawless 2004; Lawless and Fox 2005; Crowder-Meyer 2013; Dittmar 2015) .

Table 4.1: Participants' responses regarding whether they were asked to stand and by whom

Participant	Year elected	Asked to stand (Y/N)	Who asked them to stand?
Ffion	2004	Y	Labour Party members
Gwen	2012	N	
Rose	2012	Y	Labour Party branch/members (All Women Shortlist position)
Mared	2004	Y	Female Senedd Member
Sioned	2017	Y	Local Councillor
Jacqueline	(First elected elsewhere 2007) 2017	Y (both times)	Conservative Party branch members both times
Theresa	2017	N	
Marie	2017	Y	Fellow ward councillor (needed special dispensation to stand from Welsh Labour Party)
Tara	2015 (by-election)	Y	Local MP
Mali	1999	Y	Mutual decision with Ward running mate
Llinos	2012	Y	Labour Party members and the local community
Ceri	1997 ⁷¹	N	
Eleri	2017	Y	Plaid Cymru members and female MEP
Alys	2004	Y	Outgoing councillor
Samantha	1999	N	
Angharad	2008	Y	Plaid Cymru branch members and other councillors
Nia	2004	Y	Plaid Cymru branch
Lara	(First elected 1995) 2012	Y	Labour Party branch/members

⁷¹ Participant was unsure whether this was the year they were elected, but thought this was an accurate guess.

Political parties often played a key role, with seven interviewees directly mentioning being asked by their local branch or by wider party members. Active political party membership was a precursor to being encouraged and selected to stand, meaning that interviewees were often long-standing, committed members of their local political party branches, and had held positions within the party branch hierarchy. It was only Marie, who had been involved with her Welsh Labour Party branch for only nine months who, as such, required ‘special dispensation from the party’ to stand when asked to by her fellow ward councillor or ‘running mate’.

To be asked to run, however, there must be an open seat for a woman to contest and candidate selection was primarily the result of the incumbent councillor standing down or retiring on ill-health grounds. Gwen, for example, was elected after a councillor died in office. This supports previous findings that women fill vacancies when they become available, but do not challenge incumbents (Maguire 2018). Incumbency is a well-documented gendered issue and barrier for women’s descriptive representation in politics (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Schwindt-Bayer 2005; Kittilson 2006; Maguire 2018). This is particularly problematic in local government with incumbency rates of 80 per cent limiting opportunities to enter the selection process and improving women’s descriptive representation as men are ‘1.6 times more likely to be long-term incumbent’ (Fawcett Society 2017, p. 5). The impact of political patronage is also problematic with gendered recruitment to local election candidacy, with media reports of retiring councillors picking their own replacement or party branches offering the position to a younger family member as sons and grandsons ‘take over’ their father or grandfather’s seat (see Phillips 2013; Hughes 2017; Randall 2021)⁷². This suggests that the selection process in political parties remains opaque, gendered systems based on male party networks and political ‘tradition’. Closed networks and gendered party-political selection structures mean candidate slates are only opened to women once the current (usually male) councillor decides not to re-stand. Being selected to stand and endorsed to do so by her political party is therefore contingent on a woman living in a constituency or ward where an incumbent male councillor will no longer contest his winnable seat, and on the party membership or hierarchy asking her to run.

⁷² Headlines from these sources: ‘Son of Flintshire councillor who died from Covid-19 vows to continue father’s legacy’; ‘New councillor follows in dad’s footsteps’; ‘Councillor wins back his late grandfather’s seat: ‘If he could see me now he’d be grinning’.

As illustrated in Table 4.1, three councillors – Eleri, Tara, and Mared – mentioned the influence and encouragement received from politicians from other levels of governance including their Member for European Parliament (MEP), Member of Parliament (MP), or Member of the Senedd (MS):

Mared: As happens [Female MS] said "well why don't you stand for council?". And I said, "Oh alright then".

Tara: I was between jobs and [man MP] contacted me and was like, "oh, we think the councillor for your ward is going to step down and would you be interested in standing?" And I was, first of all I was really flattered that he remembered me from the office. And I kind of thought about it and I guess for me, the worst thing that could happen is you lose.

Eleri: So, I got to know [Woman MEP], and then the elections came round then so we're talking 2016. And I thought, well I'm doing all of this anyway so I might as well stand and see if it comes in.

Two of the three figures mentioned here were women and, as is discussed further in Chapters Seven and Eight, women often take time to encourage fellow women to stand. Having women present, not just as local politicians but in other levels of politics, was important to improving women's descriptive representation through their dispensation to ask other women to consider running for office. Tara was clear that being asked to stand was important for her, and that she now consciously asked other women:

Leah: So, you said you were asked to consider standing, was that sort of the real turning point for you and your decision to stand as a councillor?

Tara: Absolutely. I don't think I would have considered it if I hadn't been asked to do it. And I also make a point of asking people around me. Because I think I know that feeling, and, you know, to have someone not like endorse you, but you know, pick you out of a crowd, and say we think you'll be good at it [...] And I think it just speaks to people. And that's why I make a point of whenever I see someone that's potentially interested, I always ask them, you know, "have you thought about standing as a community councillor? Have you thought about standing in local government?". And then, probably about seven out of eight people shoot me down. But it's still worth asking cause you never know who you're going to come across.

The role of women as critical actors is discussed later (see Chapter 8.2) but this suggests a shared sense of responsibility and awareness amongst female politicians and interviewees that women being asked to stand is vital to improving women's descriptive representation. There was also evidence of a role-model effect here *without* direct contact, with Eleri stating that the presence of visible, 'forward-thinking' women in Plaid Cymru, and in direct opposition to what she could see in the local Welsh Labour Party, was a key influence and

encouragement for her to stand and see politics, and Plaid Cymru itself, as a legitimate space for her:

Whereas if I looked at my party, you've got [woman MEP], you got Leanne Wood, you got [woman] who was standing for the general election at the time. So, I could see all these forward-thinking women which was a stark contrast to me then from the men locally who still did their politics in the pub and, and didn't see a) the pub as a space for women, maybe decades ago and b) politics as a place for women as well. [...] I think that [women being present] comes because of like an unofficial mentoring thing. I think people who've come before me have felt a duty to nurture women, so women mentoring women and there are exceptions, but I think this is just a general sense of duty

Women being visible in politics is of great importance (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007; Ladam et al. 2018), alongside a felt duty by those women to reach out to others and pull them into politics.

Theresa, although she had not been directly asked to stand as a councillor, also mentioned the influence of a key, albeit-male political figure – David Cameron – in her decision to become politically involved from a young age, after seeing him talk in ‘a town hall meeting’ near her which she was given tickets to by her school. Her involvement with the Conservative Party started from there and then she:

‘got a little bug for it then and then I stood in a local election and won when I was 18 in [Council ‘B’], and then I stood for [the] Assembly and I've stood for parliamentary twice’.

As previously discussed, Theresa was also the only interviewee to state feminist motivations and also decided to stand because of an awareness of women’s lack of descriptive representation and lack of visible, female role-models within both her party and the local area, speaking of how her political role-models and heroes were exclusively male:

Looking at the way that I felt like women were represented. Obviously, the tide has turned a lot with that over the last couple of years [...] So obviously, I didn't think I was going to come in and change the world. [...] But you have this kind of idealistic view and you think, you know, I'm a woman and I could do anything that a man can do. And it wasn't that I hadn't seen other people do that. But it was almost like I hadn't seen enough of it, you know.

Leah: Yes. Having those people...

Theresa: Yeah. But my personal heroes were all men, which I didn't think was a problem. I wasn't like it's problematic that there aren't any women that I personally look up to. But I was like it would be nice if you could do that for somebody else, you know, and have people be like, “I wasn't sure whether it was something for me and then I saw somebody from a normal background”.

The visibility and *invisibility* of women in politics can have impact, therefore with visibility having a role-model effect, and invisibility mobilising through highlighting a lack of women in politics which prospective female councillors may consciously stand to counteract. Women's political presence, and other key informal networks of encouragement can counteract longstanding male networks (Kantola 2019), and overcome the 'secret garden' of selection processes, offering a counterbalance to political parties as 'major distributors of traditional masculinity' (Gallagher and Marsh 1988).

Amongst interviewees there was also discussion of the implementation of positive action rules to combat issues of limited descriptive representation, particularly within the Welsh Labour Party. Whilst the gendered nature of both descriptive and substantive representation is discussed fully in Chapter Eight, it is pertinent to note here whilst discussing gendered party selection processes, in order to explore perceptions and experiences of these party mechanisms. Positive action mechanisms have been employed with varying levels of commitment by political parties in Wales. Welsh Labour Party branches in local elections have used some techniques to tackle issues of women's poor descriptive political representation (such as all-women shortlists and women prioritised for winnable seats), whilst other political parties, like the Liberal Democrats who have used such tactics at other levels of electoral politics, have chosen not to implement them at the local level.

For the Labour Party, the formal institutional rules outlined in Figure 4.2 are often adopted, but devolution and the decentralisation of candidate selection processes to branches for Welsh local elections has, as research in Britain and Scotland similarly found, led to formal rules often being 'soft', 'weak or ineffectual' with high incidences of unsanctioned non-compliance and a reluctance for intervention from the central party (Denver 1988; Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016). This is a clear example of how conversion tactics for feminising politics can be easily vetoed by strong resistance.

Figure 4.1: UK Labour Party rules on candidate selections and gender (Labour Party Rule Book 2020, pp. 96-97)

For authorities with all-out elections	For authorities with elections where one third or one half of seats are up for election	For each local authority area the RD(GS) will:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The Regional Director (or General Secretary in Scotland and Wales) will agree a list of winnable wards with the LCF •b. In winnable wards with two or three members, at least one candidate must be a woman •c. For selection in a winnable ward, the ballot will take place in two parts. The first ballot will select a woman from the shortlist and the second ballot will select the remaining candidates from the entire shortlist. •d. If the ward fails to implement these positive action procedures then the selection will be invalid and the RD(GS) will require the ward to re-run its selection procedures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •In all winnable wards/divisions where a sitting councillor is retiring, at least one other councillor or candidate must be a woman. •b. If there are more women retirees than men then the current proportion of women candidates must be maintained. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •agree a list of winnable seats with the LCF; and •b. determine which winnable seats will be selected from an all-woman shortlist and which from an open shortlist. •c. If a ward fails to implement the agreed positive action procedure then the selection will be invalid and the RD(GS) will require that the ward to re-run its selection process.

In Rose’s experience, these ‘soft’ party rules on open seats after councillor retirement had benefited her as ‘a long-serving and highly-respected councillor decided to retire’ and thus ‘the requirements of the Labour Party [...] require[d] a female candidate’. Rose benefitted from the rule in Figure 4.1 which states: ‘in all winnable wards/divisions where a sitting councillor is retiring, at least one other councillor or candidate must be a woman’. As Rose identified, however, getting the opportunity to stand is usually ‘more by chance than by design’ and relies on the decisions of incumbent men to retire, but the detailed measures can act to increase women’s descriptive representation. Formal practices and institutionalised political party structures can succeed in increasing women’s descriptive representation, however, where these rules or mechanisms are softer or non-compliance remains unsanctioned, political access and opportunities can rely more on networks of political patronage and encouragement (Matland and Studlar 1996; Beck 2003; Dahlerup 2006a; Sater 2012; Kenny and Verge 2016; Kantola 2019). Political parties’ gendered selection structures therefore correspond with feminist institutionalist findings of political action arenas as ‘saturated with gender’ (Kenny and Verge 2016), and employ gendered formal and informal norms and practices which interact to prevent and fetter women’s progression to political positions.

Discussion of why positive action selection techniques are not employed would be speculation, as this was not a study of the ‘secret garden’ (Gallagher and Marsh 1988) or inner workings and party mechanisms of the Welsh Labour Party and its individual branches. Nevertheless, data from interviewees suggest that perceptions of positive action techniques and, primarily, of all-women shortlists, were varied, with some disparaging comments from Welsh Labour interviewees suggesting a wider distrust and dislike of such mechanisms. Perceptions expressed by dissenting interviewees here can be mapped onto the ‘myths’ previously dispelled by Nugent and Krook (2016). Gwen was particularly forceful about her negative views of all-women shortlists, and thought that increasing women’s descriptive representation was unnecessary as it should be ‘the right person that can do the job the best way possible’:

I'm very much against all-women shortlists - I *know* that's going to go down like a lead balloon. But I wanna be where I am based on my work ethos and my capabilities, *not* just because I'm the right gender - I find it insulting to be honest which upsets a lot of women but, I am what I am. I just feel, I couldn't care less whether this council was filled with fifty women or one woman if the right person that can do the job the best way possible *that's* the person that should be in the position. Not just based on gender. ⁷³

Criticisms of all-women shortlists as unmeritocratic, based on gender not capabilities or ability, were also shared by other Labour women. Gwen’s argument that she wanted to be in elected office ‘based on [her] work ethos and [her] capabilities’ suggests that the widespread, albeit inaccurate, stigma that ‘women elected via all-women shortlists ‘underachieve’ in office (Nugent and Krook 2016) is still being attached to women elected under these tactics. This was a label that Gwen and other dissenters wished to avoid. Welsh Labour Party interviewees Marie and Llinos were critical of positive action mechanisms. Marie was in agreement with the first of Nugent and Krook’s (2016) ‘claim’ or ‘myth’ that ‘all-women shortlists lead to the selection of ‘unqualified’ women’. Marie thought this had led to ‘incapable’ women standing and being elected because of their gender:

Marie: Labour Party's policy is for all women shortlists, I disagree. I've seen too many women standing who I feel are incapable of a political position, but because of their gender, they're able to be elected. I think positive discrimination is not necessarily helpful because we have to be fair to our electorate. And I see a lot of men and women who are elected members who shouldn't be there, literally don't put in any effort, are incapable, can't contribute. It's, it's quite difficult, really, because that puts me at odds with my with my own party. But you've got, irrelevant of sex, you've got to have the capabilities to do the job.

⁷³ Italics denote participant’s emphasis

There was a perpetuated stigma corresponding with Nugent and Krook's (2016) 'Claim 8' that AWS lead to the election of underachieving women politicians, and these three councillors were acutely aware that they did not wish to be labelled as shortlist women. Llinos, for example, explained how, whilst she was sympathetic to addressing low levels of women's descriptive representation, she had actively resisted a move to make her ward an all-women shortlist because she perceived AWS as contesting a seat based only on gender, rather than her merit:

Llinos: ...they were going to make [my ward] an All-Woman Shortlist when the selection was going on and I rang up the county secretary at the time and I said "No you don't need to do that, if I fight this seat, I'm fighting on my merit and not on my gender. So don't go down that road, please, because I'm either good enough to do the job or I'm not, not just because I'm a woman".

Leah: Do you think that was because of other people's perceptions of AWSs, because there's obviously quite a history of them?

Llinos: A lot of them um, I can sympathise with it a lot because obviously I think we've had good women that have come forward and have not been selected and you know I certainly wouldn't be derogative to that.

Even when women can see some merit to AWS, as Llinos does, there remains resistance to all-women shortlists as tactics for improving women's descriptive representation. Whilst there is pressure on Welsh Labour branches from UK Labour rules to employ positive action techniques at the local level, these moves are often met with resistance from party branches and, interestingly, from some female candidates themselves. Participants were acutely aware that their disparaging comments on all-women shortlists were in opposition to the majority stance of their party, an affront to fellow women members, and also perceived that they might 'go down like a lead balloon' with me (Gwen). Their speeches about this issue felt practised and were confidently delivered, suggesting they had previously had to justify their opinions to their party peers. Their views were shared by members of other political parties including Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Conservatives:

Theresa: Like, I honestly I don't like All-Female Shortlists for things. I don't like imposing numbers on them either, because it would make me feel like I didn't get it through my own merit. [...] But I understand people that do want them because the argument is like it needs a kickstart, you know, once it's happening. People won't question it anymore, it's just such a bedded-in thing, you know? But I'm just I'm personally uncomfortable with it. I think it's probably, you know, a political thing more than anything else for me, like I guess probably ties in with general, like, you know, the right-wing thinking that I have in some instances.

Samantha, a Plaid Cymru councillor, was also unsure about AWS as a tactic but was more nuanced in her view that they may be harder to implement in rural councils with single-member wards, and she recognised the intra-party tensions which these approaches can create.

Leah: So, what do you think about more sort of prescriptive measures like All-Women Shortlists and quotas?

Samantha: Well, they've tried that and it didn't turn out particularly well, at least in the Labour Party it didn't, but it does create tensions, we found that when we, within Plaid, when we've had these debates and there's a huge tension there. But, uh, it's worked to a certain extent, especially at the Assembly elections because we haven't got that type of structure at the county council level because it's usually one member, one seat - in more urban areas you do get multi-member wards where it's more likely that perhaps you would get a better mix.

Mali, a Liberal Democrat, reported that her party engaged with the positive action tactics of twinning and zipping, but she saw these as ineffective:

Well, there was a time when they were employing what they called the zipping method for candidates, where they, for every one man there had to be one woman. Which is great if you got the women to do it, but if you haven't, you've got to, I think, you know, it's something you got to engender over a number of years to make sure that it's coming through all the time.

Views on positive action techniques were mixed. Welsh Labour dissenting voices were in direct opposition to other Welsh Labour interviewees who held more positive views on AWS and mechanisms to improve women's descriptive representation. This included Ffion and Mared who were both elected before Welsh Labour began implementing such tactics, and could reflect on the subsequent impact of these processes during their electoral terms:

Mared: I mean all-women shortlists I agree with, it's been the only way that we've got women in and I think we just have to continue [...] But I know men who've resigned from the Labour Party over it, and councillors on this sort of thing. And I mean there are plenty of women out there who don't support women.

Ffion: Then suddenly things began to change a bit in the late 90s and, there wasn't a gender issue when I first stood in 2004 insofar as it was, um, it was just an open selection. But now that's changed, for example a three-seat ward, one of which must be a woman but that has only come in in later years. It was an issue but I'm glad that we have gender quotas and all-women shortlists because that's made a difference to the representation of women in public life.

Mared, who was a councillor in the same council as Gwen, was clear that women who do not support AWS also 'don't support women'. Opinions, even within the same party and council, therefore, were divided. Ceri (council 'C') spoke about the merits and limitations of all-women shortlists. Taken from discussions throughout her interview, the extract from Ceri

illustrates her struggles with the topic, summarising the common debates for and against positive action measures (see also Dahlerup 2007; Nugent and Krook 2016). Ceri expresses her regret and sadness that such measures are still necessary because there ‘is a failing and a lack’ but she also felt that ‘there shouldn’t be a need’:

Ceri: I just find it sad that we've got to have all women shortlists. We shouldn't need them because women, I find it, still find that disparaging that we need that. You know, I think that there should be a more automatic right that that woman or those women should be able to come forward on their capability rather than because there is a failing and a lack of, you know, to get that balance. [...] You know, we should, I hope the day will come, and I don't think is far off where we don't need all women shortlists, you know, we just go through on a normal list and when we'd come out on top anyway. [...] I do feel that, as I said, the all women shortlists is now that every position that becomes available - Assembly Member, MP, there will be an all women shortlist, I think it is sad to a degree, I find it sad that there is a need to do that. But until we get that parity and that equality, I suppose it has to be done. But I would like to see the day when we don't have to do that and where we have this equality and the ability to go forward on our merits and our capability, not purely because of our gender.

There is still some mention of meritocracy here, with Ceri discussing how she ‘would like to see the day [where women have] the ability to go forward on our merits and our capability, not purely because of our gender’. The framing is slightly different from Gwen’s, Llinos’ and Marie’s criticisms, with the suggestion being that gender *is* currently a structural barrier in the way of meritocratic opportunity, and that women *with* merits and capabilities do *not* have equal opportunities to go forward and are thus forced to rely on these tactics whilst there remains an imbalance. Ceri was concerned that there could be a case to argue that ‘we are discriminating against men’ now, explaining how she knew some ‘very capable young men who’re now being denied the rights to go for it [and] the opportunity to progress’ because of all-women shortlists. Ceri was internally conflicted about the use of AWS and was worried about whether the Labour Party’s continued employment of such tactics could lead to legal challenges as had been seen around their introduction. As she aptly summarised – ‘it’s a fine line’.

Looking at the internal workings of political parties through this feminist institutionalist lens highlights the interaction between formal selection processes and any employment of positive action tactics with the informal networks of encouragement and being asked to stand. As with local government as a gendered institution, the ‘black box’ or ‘secret garden’ of political party selection processes and mechanisms can either prioritise and reproduce a male-dominated candidate selection structure, or can open opportunities up for women. Rather than being solely shaped by discrete formal or informal institutional factors,

interviewees' comments suggest that women's recruitment to, and success in obtaining, political office is multi-faceted. It is contingent on their levels of civic participation, party-political involvement, the availability of an open, winnable seat following a man retiring, the employment of any positive action tactics by the political party, and the propensity of party branch members or other politicians (usually fellow women) to encourage them to stand.

4.4: "Learning the Ropes" – Expectations, Initial Experiences, and Political Socialisation

Following discussion of interviewees' journeys to their elected roles, participants recalled their expectations, and initial experiences, of being a local councillor. Whilst narratives of women's experiences of institutional norms are the primary focus of Chapters Five and Six, it is pertinent here to explore women's *initial* experiences and inductions into Welsh local councils directly after election when councillors undergo a learning process of the gendered 'rules in use' and 'how things are done' in the political arena (Lowndes 2014, 2020). This frames ensuing discussions which are scaffolded around a feminist institutionalist approach to explore the intricacies of, and interplay between the spoken and unspoken, formal and informal, rules, practices, norms, and cultures of Welsh local government councils as gendered political institutions. This section considers the initial processes by which councillors are socialised into and learn formal and informal gendered 'rules-in-use', and how the now-implicit gendered rules and bureaucratic 'red tape' of local councils were perceived as initially daunting, intimidating, and exclusionary by some interviewees, leaving them a choice of assimilation or resistance were they to substantively represent women.

Whilst two interviewees (Ceri and Llinos) had been councillors in Town or Community council settings, and all except Sioned were active members of political parties, the majority of interviewees entered City and County Borough politics with no prior formal, elected political experience. The exceptions (see Table 4.1) were Lara and Jacqueline who had held equivalent county/city councillor roles before, either in the same council (Lara), or elsewhere within the United Kingdom (Jacqueline). Although other interviewees had engaged, as external partners, with local councils either through their prior civic activism or through their professional careers and backgrounds, most were complete novices and had no prior knowledge or experience of local councils as political action arenas.

Of the two women who had previously been councillors at the Town or Community level, Ceri was the most positive about the success of that involvement in providing an

‘apprenticeship’ and ‘insight’ into the ‘wider political field’. Llinos, however, whilst she recommended being a Community Councillor as a training ground for learning about issues in the local area, and encouraged women to take that initial step, stated that she still felt daunted and overwhelmed by the shift to County Borough Council ‘C’ as it involved a learning of new protocols. Both women mentioned the learning of the workings and politics of party groupings within the chamber – distinct from town or community councils where political ideology does not come to the fore to the same extent:

Llinos: I think because I was a Community Councillor um that helped me, and if anybody says to me that they're thinking of being a councillor, I will always advise that, before you go straight into a County Council, try and, if there is a Community Council in your area, be a Community Councillor. Get some idea of your area and some idea of how it works. Then at least when you go into council, believe you me, even though I'd been a Community councillor for four years, moving into County was a totally different game, to some extent. When they say it's a step up to the next level, it certainly is. And it's a level that you sort of have to learn because you become part of the group and everything. So sometimes your decision isn't what the rest of the group might feel. So, you have to learn protocol. And that goes for all groups, the opposition groups as well, and you can always tell that they've all got together and they're going to go against us with that.

Ceri: So, my first dipping my toe in the water was with [Area] Town Council. Don't have a large remit of services, but it gave me a sort of apprenticeship into the wider political field.

Leah: Did you feel that, that so having that sort of previous experience in the town council, did that help you?

Ceri: I absolutely thought it was a really good insight into what would be expected of me if I chose to go further. It also learnt me the basic rules. If you're assigned to a political party, you need to be aware of those rules and how everything works. So, it did give me a really good grounding.

Becoming a local councillor was a new experience for most and, even for those with some prior knowledge, one which interviewees characterised as ‘daunting’ (Llinos), a learning curve, a ‘baptism of fire’ into ‘antiquated’ (Nia) systems, and left them ‘running around headless’ (Angharad) or felt like being ‘thrown into the deep end’ (Eleri). Lara explained that she ‘spent that first term in office slightly stunned’ and that ‘the juggling of it is all a bit of a blur looking back’. Rose discussed the ‘shock’ of her initial weeks in office and argued that learning the ‘local authority processes, the politics with a small ‘p’, the structures and the hierarchies’ was ‘quite a challenge’. Although Rose was an academic in her professional career – a field with its own highly gendered rules-in-use (see Mihăilă 2018; Brara 2021; Casad et al. 2021 for full discussions) – local government was ‘a completely different environment’, a viewpoint that was shared with a fellow new female councillor (not

interviewed here) from a journalist background who reportedly ‘found it a bit of a shock as well’.

Rose: So initially it's like 'you can come along, join our club, but we're not going to tell you what any of the rules are'.

This was echoed by other interviewees who also discussed struggling to navigate the intricacies of local government bureaucratic systems and ‘red tape’ (Tara) of their council as well as the informal rules-in-use, with very little prior experience or training. As Mared discussed, ‘you come up to the [Council Offices] the following morning [after being elected], you have to sign all the official forms and you’re in this position of responsibility and authority’. Eleri also felt that there was not enough training on basic aspects of the local council, despite her asking for such provisions in her development meetings:

So, and they were going on and on in this meeting and I was like, I've had enough of this. So, raise my hand, speaking and, you know, I said 'Right, it's all very well that, you know, you want us to contribute. And that is fair enough, but I got elected at 25, I have got no idea about this kind of stuff. I have asked repeatedly in my personal development interviews for this kind of training. It's one thing to ask us to contribute but you've got to provide the training'.

All institutions, political or otherwise, have written and unwritten rules and norms which affect the behaviour and conduct of their members and, upon entering any new institution, there is likely to be an adjustment period where one learns ‘how things work around here’. However, in local government, these systems are embedded in gendered obfuscated and accepted traditions and practices which, unless one has access to a mentor or guide with prior knowledge, are often left to the councillor to navigate and figure out ‘on the ground’ (Ostrom 1999). Tara explained how she had benefitted from the mentorship and advice of a fellow councillor during her first years in office when she was elected mid-term in a by-election, as she ‘didn’t have a lot of confidence’ with ‘the papers’ and ‘didn’t think [she’d] read things properly’.

The accounts offered by participants in this study echo those MPs interviewed by Rush and Giddings (2011, pp. 59-60), who described their first weeks in office variously as ‘a recipe for a nervous breakdown’ which ‘pass in a confusion of doors, corridors and lobbies’ whilst engaging in ‘a desperate attempt to avoid breaking unwritten rules or offending unknown precedents’. This led Rush and Giddings to describe the political socialisation of MPs as a ‘steep learning curve’ and, whilst local councillors do not need to find accommodation or appoint staff, the learning of political rules and unwritten expectations is

the same for all political institutions. Mentoring and training programmes have been highlighted as crucial for women's participation in civic life and politics, and to helping women navigate and understand political systems and develop political knowledge (Maguire 2018; Hibbs 2022a). Without training or available advice, evidence from interviewees suggests that the first term of office can leave women feeling overwhelmed, daunted, and can, in extreme circumstances, lead to decisions to not contest re-election.

Interviewees recounted that learning how to navigate the bureaucratic red tape of Welsh local government often took more than a single term, necessitated training and mentoring, and, if this was not available, could lead to feelings of frustration and diminishing confidence and self-belief:

Rose: And also mentoring and support, I think particularly of one person who was with us in my first time of office who didn't stand again, really capable people coming on and they need mentoring and support [...] Because I've seen people go when they've lost that confidence and self-belief so I think that that's really important [...] nobody tells you how to manage your feelings of frustration when you cannot get the results that you want for the people in the community. I think more mentoring and support around that, helping people maintain that confidence and self-belief that they come in with is quite important.

Rose suggested that the rules-in-use can hinder councillors' abilities to represent their communities and achieve desired results for residents which, given the evidence discussed earlier in this chapter that women stand because of a desire to represent their community, is a worrying phenomenon. The limitations put on councillors by these rules are likely to be more keenly felt by women as it compromises their ability to achieve their primary motivations for becoming elected politicians.

Whilst councillors can access training and development support from the Welsh Local Government Association⁷⁴, it is not just the written rules and procedural traditions that councillors must learn, but the unwritten expectations and traditions which cannot be found in any members' handbook, and must be 'passed down' from those more experienced to newly-elected councillors. We can consider the induction and political socialisation of newly-elected councillors as another key site of resistance to the feminisation of institutions and a barrier to women's full political participation – women are reliant on mentors, advice from councillor peers, and on training and learning on the ground how to navigate local councils and are inducted into androcentric norms and opaque, unwritten traditions. Moreover, there is also a

⁷⁴ A description of the development and support services offered to councillors can be found on their website: <https://www.wlga.wales/member-development-and-support>

suggestion of institutionally-embedded sexism here, with the established formal and informal norms created during the androcentric past acting as barriers for women alongside failures of councils to train and help women understand their norms and rules (Lowndes 2014). This interacts to exclude women and fetter their ability to participate and substantively represent women.

Tara was aware that ‘red tape’-induced frustrations affect new councillors, stating that ‘they think they’re going to come in and [...] rewrite the rules and get things done’ but their efforts can be curtailed by ‘systems and processes’ which she had internalised and justified as ‘in place to keep everybody safe’. Tara’s perception of rules-in-use and bureaucratic barriers as implemented for councillors’ benefit and safety shows the pervasiveness of learnt obligatory rules in shaping political behaviour (Lowndes 2020) and how political institutions legitimise gendered political outcomes. Through a justification of systems as functioning to keep councillors safe, the hidden, gendered agenda of rules-in-use acts to mould councillors into ‘a gendered logic of appropriateness’ (Chappell 2006), establishes women as ‘rule-takers’ rather than ‘rule-makers’ (Lowndes 2020), and can compromise the efforts of feminist actors whilst remaining unchallenged.

Feminist institutionalist research has shown that political institutions have ‘prescribed, prohibited, and permitted actions’ upheld by formal and informal mechanisms specific to the political setting, which comprise the ‘dos and don’ts that one learns on the ground’ (Ostrom 1999, p. 38). Lowndes (2020) discusses the interplay of regulatory, obligatory, and persuasive rules used by institutions to shape behaviour. The feminist institutionalist theoretical framework employed traces interactions between formal and informal institutional practices and norms, uncovering how the relationship between them can be recognised as maintaining the entrenchment of masculine political actors, which fetter the political representation and participation of women. For women, the rules-in-use that they learn upon entering office have, whilst they may not specifically be *about* gender, gendered effects and outcomes which interact to limit and curtail their full representation and participation (Lowndes 2014). As was illustrated in Table 3.4, this study purposefully included a mixture of newly-elected councillors, as well as those who had served multiple terms, some even since the late 1990s and early 2000s. This enabled comparison and contrast of gendered political socialisation into local government over time. Rules can and do alter over time however and, through including councillors with varying lengths of service, this research allows for tracing of longitudinal changes in initial gendered experiences and expectations

between the women and across the case study councils. Longer-serving councillors had been inducted into the gendered rules-in-use typical of the late 1990s and early 2000s which they reflected on as overtly regulatory and obligatory.

There were differences between the initial experiences as reflected on by longer-serving councillors who began their terms in office in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and newer councillors elected since 2010. Longer-serving councillors' initial years in office were constructed through the traditional 'old boys' club' culture notions of overt rules about gender which 'ruled out' women:

Ffion: It was the old guys, the 70-plus club who'd been here for forever and a day, and the women that had been here had been very traditional also, they were much older women who wanted that tradition.

Mali: I think basically it seemed to me that the whole system was geared around male[s]. [...] But you know how sometimes you look at something and because it's been there forever. It was like coming in from the outside [...] The women were almost regarded as there just as the token gestures, you know what I mean?

Councils A and C, at that time, were characterised by low levels of descriptive representation for women with Mali identifying that 'women were almost regarded as there just as the token gestures'. Being 'token' has been shown in critical mass theory (see Chapter 2.2) to curtail the likelihood that the minority group will challenge the dominant culture (Kanter 1977b; Bratton 2005). It is unsurprising, therefore, that these women's initial political socialisations as councillors were characterised by being 'ruled out', whilst those initiated more recently would have benefitted from a slight renegotiation of the 'rules of the game' as more women entered the political action arena (Lowndes 2020).

Lara, who had served one term during the late 1990s and then re-entered local politics in 2012 offered some interesting reflections on this shift from formal to informal mechanisms. She identified it as corresponding with a change in the demographics of the male councillors in her City Council from 'the typical Welsh councillor in their 70s and 80s', to 'mainly men in their 20s and their 30s' which she identified as leading to a sense of 'dislocation' and being 'outside the circle', but who were less paternalistic. This suggests that local councils may largely reflect generational attitudes to gender equality found elsewhere (Taylor and Scott 2018; Elder et al. 2021) and, as with society generally, younger councillors are rejecting the more traditional, at times overtly sexist, attitudes of their predecessors.

Younger councillors Eleri and Theresa – both under 30 – reflected on how their initial experiences as councillors in 2017 were very much in contrast to their expectations of being a councillor and that, whilst they admittedly did not know how the council chamber and systems worked, they felt a sense of initial shock about how much there was a ‘hangover’ of ‘pomp’ or ‘old union guys’ (Theresa) who Eleri said ‘still did their politics in the pub’ (Eleri). Theresa, contrasted this with the experiences of her friends who were ‘councillors in places that are like cities like [...] in London and stuff’ which she perceived as being ‘fundamentally different’. This further highlights some distinction between councils B (Theresa) and C (Eleri) which were traditional, Labour heartlands in ex-industrial ‘Valleys’ areas, and council ‘A’ and the pilot council as City Councils that were still Labour-led but were perceived as having seen a shift from ‘old union guys... that are like 60-plus’ (Theresa) towards the younger male councillors ‘in their 20s and 30s’ that Lara was elected alongside. Whilst council ‘C’ had the highest proportion of women, it was perhaps the demographics of the men as older, union-background, traditional Welsh Labour that characterized the gendered rules-in-use and affected the initial experiences of the younger women interviewed. Lowndes (2005) contends that whilst ‘new rules’ may be ‘hijacked by powerful actors and adapted to preserve their interests’ through conversion tactics for institutional change (see Chapter 2.3.3), they can also ‘exist in name only while the old rules retain their hold at an informal, but no less effective, level’ to achieve stability and constrain action for new entrants into the political institution.

4.5: Conclusion

This chapter has explored the gendered pre-election and initial experiences of women candidates and, subsequently, new councillors. Interviewees’ accounts underline how they saw themselves as community activists first. They were asked to stand but only if a suitable seat becomes available, often after the retirement of a male incumbent. A notable exception was one interviewee who identified her feminist standpoint as a major motivational factor. Party selection processes remain ‘black boxes’ (Kenny and Verge 2016), whilst councillors’ varying perceptions and opinions of positive action techniques and all-women shortlists illustrate that there are no simple answers to improving women’s descriptive representation through ‘soft’ political party rules in decentralised selection processes. As with evidence in other political arenas and elections (Dahlerup 2006a; Kenny and Verge 2016; Kantola 2019), this study’s interviewees spoke of how political parties remain key institutional gatekeepers to

women's descriptive representation in politics with gendered networks, rules, and norms which interact to maintain prioritisation of men in candidate selection processes.

The feminist institutionalist analysis of initial political socialisation in this chapter has extended previous research in the field by exploring the experiences of entering into local government institutional settings with their specific, gendered 'rules of the game'. Moreover, study participants discussed the generational and longitudinal changes which influenced their experiences of this process – improvements in the level of women's descriptive representation as the 2000s progressed to levels which qualify as 'critical mass' did not necessarily correspond with younger councillors feeling there had been a significant re-gendering of the institutional rules-in-use. This suggests that, whilst generational changes to gender (in)equality issues have occurred outside of local government, there remained traditional gendered 'do's and 'don'ts', 'rules-in-use', norms, and embedded informal, institutional legacies in these councils (Ostrom 1999; Lowndes 2014, 2020). Newer and younger councillors still keenly felt a hangover of trade union, traditionalist male-centred and androcentric institutional norms and practices. The next two chapters continue this feminist institutionalist analysis and discuss the formal and informal mechanisms through which gendered political behaviours are maintained and reproduced, exploring organisational practices or formal 'rules with gendered effects' and informal conventions or norms in Welsh local government.

Chapter Five **Gendered Institutions I – Formal Organisational Practices**

5.1: Introduction

This chapter and Chapter Six both address the second research question and examine the gendered aspects of local councils as political institutions and, as per this thesis' second research question, they explore participants' perspectives on how the institutional *context* of local government in Wales facilitates or fetters women's political participation and representation. This responds to the rejoinder in the feminist institutionalist literature for research on how institutional configurations can both promote or foreclose gender equality (Mackay 2011, p. 194). Accordingly, these next two chapters shine a feminist institutionalist (see Chapter 2.3) light upon Welsh local government as a bounded political institution, charting women's experiences once they are 'in' local government in Wales. This chapter

focuses on the *formal* institutional organisational practices and processes, whilst Chapter Six shifts to a consideration of the *informal* norms and cultures within Welsh local government which impact women's political presence and experiences and, indeed, lead to them 'falling off the ladder' after fewer terms (Allen 2012a, b). Whilst the previous chapter considered the common motivations of women to stand as well as institutional barriers to their being elected, this chapter elaborates on overlapping practical barriers in the institutional structures and practices of local councils which affect women councillors' political presence, experiences, and participation whilst in office.

Interviewees' perceptions of the impact of formal institutional practices, organisational rules, and structures on women's political participation and representation is assessed, as well as the gendered 'processes, practices [...] and ideologies' (Acker 1992, p. 567) and 'rules of the game' of Welsh local councils (Lowndes 2014). With reference to councils' organisational practices, this chapter discusses the concept of the 'triple duty' that female councillors often face, balancing personal and professional commitments with the 'political' – their elected role and its associated responsibilities. Mothers and women who work remain underrepresented in Welsh local government and specific attention is paid to formal structures which contribute to this lack of representation. These include inadequate councillor remuneration and allowances, organisational practices that are employment and family unfriendly (potentially, indirect institutional sex discrimination), and wider issues surrounding the time costs of being a local councillor. Antiquated institutional structures and organisational practices are argued to have directly caused the 'male, pale, and stale' nature of the 'average' councillor in Wales⁷⁵ but, in a self-reinforcing logic, the analysis reveals that gendered institutional rules also remain in place *because* of this.

Interviewees' thoughts on solutions or means to alleviate these issues are then presented, discussing the implementation of measures to increase women's ability to participate and the importance of support networks from partners/family, employers, and political spheres. There is specific discussion of the impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on the institutional practices of local government through considering how the implementation

⁷⁵ The Local Government Candidates Survey (Murphy and Jones 2018) following the most recent (2017) Local Elections in Wales found that 34 per cent of all county councillors were males aged over 60 years old. Moreover, 31 per cent of county councillors were retired, and only 1.8 percent of county councillors were from non-white ethnic groups.

of remote attendance at council meetings could be a key solution to increasing women's political representation and participation (see Hibbs 2022b for a full discussion).

5.2: “The Triple Duty” – Balancing the Political, Professional, and Personal

As discussed in Chapter Four, local politics has been cited as a ‘stepping stone’ or ‘training ground’ for politicians wanting to eventually participate at a national Welsh or UK Parliament level (Newton and van Deth 2009). Whilst participants were not motivated by a desire for higher office or a political career, local government is often considered the easiest and most convenient level of governance (Gidengil and Vengroff 1997; Drage 2001; Bitušíková 2005), particularly for mothers seeking political positions as it can be ‘easier to combine [with] family life’ (Briggs 2000, p. 76) and professional employment. It is argued that less travelling is required thus meaning less time spent away from home (Hollis 1987), meetings are more infrequent than parliamentary politics, and workloads are assumed to be lighter than in national politics (Gidengil and Vengroff 1997).

However, whilst the poor levels of descriptive representation of women in local politics could be considered sufficient evidence that local government is not women-friendly, the data presented here illustrate how formal local government structures and organisational practices create gendered barriers to women's involvement. As feminist institutionalism explains, political institutions are constructed and influenced by institutional elements, both formal and informal, which operate to advantage or disadvantage women (Mackay et al. 2010; Krook and Mackay 2011). Institutions built upon patriarchal, masculine social norms with embedded dominant masculinities have their own gendered prescribed, prohibited, and permitted actions (Lowndes 2014). Moreover, institutional formal rules with gendered effects further lead to indirect discrimination as they have a different, often negative effect on women (Ostrom 1999; Farrell and Titcombe 2016; Lowndes 2020). Local councils remain organised around assumptions that councillors will be job-less, child-less, with few domestic responsibilities – that is to say, they are set up for, and privilege the participation of, retired men without caring or domestic responsibilities and, indeed, these are the people who dominate Welsh local government (see footnote 73 on previous page).

Thomas (2002) study of female state legislators in 15 US states found that women experienced a ‘double duty’ of combining politics with domestic responsibilities. However, data from this study suggests that female local councillors now experience a ‘triple duty’ –

the reality of balancing political, private, and professional spheres. As McNeil et al. (2017) contend, because of this, female councillors face time pressures which deters their participation. The following section presents interviewees' perceptions about the formal organisational structures and gendered rules in use which fetter women's political presence.

5.2.1: Political and Professional (and poorly paid)

Mared: The pay's rubbish really [...] As a cabinet member, what am I on? £28-29,000? £13000 for a backbencher? It's not women at home that are going to be doing this anymore [...] women have got careers [...] it's a big ask, isn't it?

Remuneration of local councillors has long been a target for media scrutiny, with reports about 'brown envelopes' being passed across council chamber desks, and the pay of councillors publicised soon after each election cycle. Remuneration being insufficient was discussed by five participants in this study. Although participants did not mention remuneration as a motivating factor in becoming a local councillor, they argued that it can interact with other factors – like time costs and impact on careers – creating a barrier for women. This echoed findings from Allen (2012a, p. 712) that women councillors struggle 'to fulfil their elected duties and simultaneously make time for their family, their work, or both'. Interviewees explained the pressure on younger women to balance at least two of the identified 'triple' shifts – political and professional commitments – as living on basic council remuneration alone is difficult and described as "not enough" (Tara).

Levels of basic remuneration for councillors in Wales are set nationally by the Independent Remuneration Panel Wales (IRPW) and are universal across councils, although there are differences in pay of senior council members (Leaders, Deputy Leaders, Cabinet Members) dependent on 'band' of council (see Table 5.1). In 2019-20, the standardised basic salary for 'backbench' Welsh local councillors (with no additional responsibilities) was £13,868 per annum. This figure is unchanged from 2010 as increasing scrutiny of public expenditure meant that previous plans to align the amount with median gross earnings of full-time employees in Wales were abandoned. Had those plans been retained, the basic allowance would have been approximately £16,000 p/a by 2019/20. Over the same period, elected members in higher echelons of Welsh politics have seen their salaries increase⁷⁶.

⁷⁶ For example, Members of the Senedd (MSs) have seen a 25.6 per cent increase in their basic salary between 2009 and 2020 when they received a basic salary of £67,649p/a, and their earnings *are* currently linked to the gross Median Earnings for full-time employees. Additionally, Members of Parliament (MPs) received a salary of £81,932 in 2020 (an increase of 24.6 per cent since 2010), and their 2020 annual increase of 3.1 per cent was almost double the CPI rate of inflation.

Indeed, even the IRPW (2019, p. 9) admits that council ‘backbench member’s salaries have remained relatively static over the last 9 years and [...] have fallen significantly behind by any reasonable measure’.

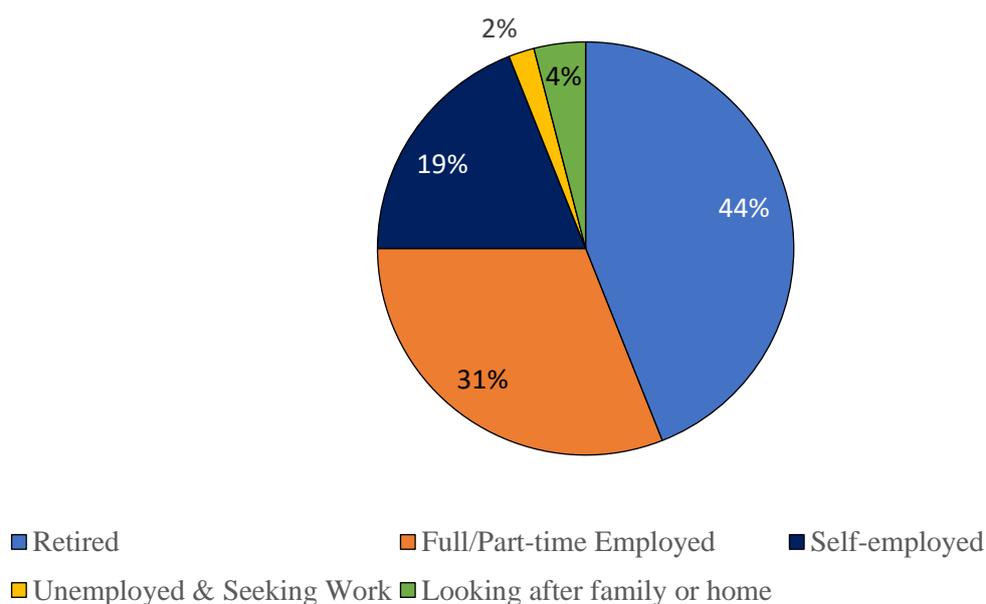
Comparing remuneration in Welsh local government in other nations and regions of the UK, Scotland also adopts a universal, banded framework but, unlike Wales, this remains linked to the pay of Scottish public sector workers and thus Scottish councillors’ basic rate of remuneration in 2019/20 was £17,854. In England, councils can set their own remuneration rates so there is wider variation – for example, Birmingham City Council pays £17,227, whilst North Somerset Council pays much less than Welsh councils (£8,542). Northern Ireland allows its councils to determine the amount of basic allowance – for example, Belfast City Council paid councillors a basic rate of £14,200 whilst Antrim and Newtonabbey Borough Council paid £15,071. Therefore, whilst there is fairness and comparability in basic member allowance across the 22 local authorities within Wales, there is variation in councillors’ allowances across the United Kingdom.

McAllister et al. (Expert Group on Diversity in Local Government 2014) contend that these levels of councillor remuneration are “not sufficient to attract people to give up employment” and therefore non-retired, non-senior councillors often must also be in some form of employment. Comparing Welsh employment statistics to the employment status of Welsh local councillors, the employment rate for Wales in 2020 was 74.7 per cent, however in 2014 only 50 per cent of local councillors were in full-time, part-time, or self-employment. As Graph 5.1 illustrates, 44 per cent of Welsh local councillors were retired, and the average age of councillors was approximately 60 years according to the ‘Diversity in local government’ report (Equalities Local Government and Communities Committee 2019), whilst the national Wales median age was 41 years. This over-representation of retired and older people suggests that being a councillor does not mesh well with professional employment and requires employers’ support.

Table 5.1: Remuneration Rates for Welsh Local Councillors (IRPW 2019) where 'Band' is based on population of the council city or borough (Band A = >200,000; Band B = 100,000-200,000; Band 'C' = <100,000)

Position	Remuneration Rates 2019 (Band A)	Remuneration Rates 2019 (Band B)	Remuneration Rates (Band C)
Basic	£13,868	£13,868	£13,868
Civic Leader	£22,586	£22,586	£22,586
Group Leader	£17,568	£17,568	£17,568
Chair/Opposition Leader	£22,568	£22,568	£22,568
Executive Member	£33,100	£30,100	£27,100
Deputy Leader	£38,100	£34,600	£31,100
Leader	£54,100	£49,100	£44,100

Graph 5.1: Employment status of local councillors in Wales (Expert Group on Diversity in Local Government 2014)



Whilst remuneration is only one aspect of institutionalist organisational practices and, indeed, it is its interaction with other gendered ‘rules-in-use’ and external societal, gender norms which are of concern here, remuneration does not compensate for insecurity or relieve the triple duty. Balancing the professional and the political also entails requesting time off for councillor civic duties which can jeopardise councillors’ future professional careers and ‘conflict with promotion prospects’ (Hills 1983, p. 46). The poor financial prospects of being a local councillor can act as a barrier to women and negatively impact occupational goals and career prospects, and can lead to them dropping out of politics earlier (Barron et al. 1991; Allen 2012a, b). Barron et al. (1991), for example, concluded that there were ‘particular difficulties for women in combining full-time employment with council work’ because of the additional impact of family commitments. For women who are combining councillor duties with employment, this is understood, and experienced, as a tricky balance:

Theresa: And I'm like, because I have a job like sometimes, you know, sometimes I'm in work and I can't get out of that or, you know, by the time I get back to [Borough] because I work quite far away.

Lara: I do wonder whether, cause I *had* to give up work, you know I had the children, slightly different time then and I found it worked very well with young families. But I think as more women go back to work after having had their families, it could be harder getting young women with families to go on the council. Cause it's one thing doing it if it's, in effect, your job. It's another combining a family, working, and children.

These quotes suggest that balancing councillor duties with professional careers is a challenge given that, as Lara identifies, being a councillor is also a ‘job’ but, as seen through Chapter Four, women also primarily motivated by a sense of responsibility for the local community and those they represent. The pressure of doing justice to the role and representing constituents well was an underlying theme across all interviews.

5.2.2: Political and the Personal

Combining public duty with private and personal responsibility is an issue for all politicians, but the socialisation patterns of women cause unique challenges in combining politics and professional employment, with their private sphere of domestic and care responsibilities. This means that the ‘personal’ element of the ‘triple shift’ is particularly gendered. The gendered ‘second shift’ (Hochschild and Machung 1990) of unpaid domestic labour still exists with women globally performing 75 per cent of unpaid care and domestic work (Dhar 2019). In

the UK, these extra duties are worth an estimated £140bn to the UK economy (Anderson 2020).

As Mannay (2014, p. 65) contends, ‘in contemporary Wales, the domestic sphere remains a site of inequality’ with residual expectations of women achieving the ‘Welsh mam’ ideology now in competition with being a ‘bread-winning Mam’. She concludes that Welsh women face ‘negotiating the impossibility of being both in full-time employment and meeting the ideology of the ‘Welsh Mam’ (Mannay 2014, pp. 65-66). For young female councillors in Wales, therefore, their task of balancing the Welsh Mam with employment *and* their role in political office presents an often-insurmountable challenge.

Being a parent or carer is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, however, those who experience unfair treatment at work because of childcare or caring responsibilities are protected by means of the Act’s discussions of sex discrimination. The Equality Act clearly states that women ‘still tend to bear the primary responsibility of childcare’ and can experience sex discrimination in relation to these responsibilities – employers insisting that women must work long or inflexible hours is an example of indirect sex discrimination. Data in this study reflects Lowndes’ (2014, p. 546) variable of ‘rules with gendered effects’, suggesting that Welsh local government does, at times, fall foul of institutional indirect sex discrimination because its gendered rules “have a different and negative effect upon women” and further their prescribed, expected, and required activities exclude women with caring responsibilities and prevent women’s full political participation.

Samantha, a council leader, explained how prospective female local councillors she spoke to were more likely to seek positions as community or town councillors because “a lot of them feel that, because they're working full-time and they've got home or children or possibly parental responsibilities with their own parents, that they just feel it's too much”. The encroachment of politics into personal lives was experienced by many participants and had caused significant changes such as divorce, relationship issues, and one councillor stating she only managed balancing the political with her childcare responsibilities because she ‘*had* to give up work’ as a council employee to become a councillor. Previous research by Emery et al. (2018) into how local politicians managed the demands of ‘three life spheres’ – work, family, and politics – found that local politics ‘can be considered quite ‘greedy’ with political commitments often intruding into other spheres, and that ‘time is a scarce item’.

Interviewees shared perceptions that male councillors were often supported in their roles by a wife or partner at home to carry out domestic tasks, whilst women councillors are expected to do both:

Rose: But I do remember, in the discussion with that, an experienced male colleague saying, 'Well I can't do that, I have my tea at 5 o'clock'. I mean... you know, some people here have gotta go home and cook the tea as well.

Rose's comment echoes the findings of Farrell and Titcombe (2016, p. 877) whose female interviewees explained that they had to 'both 'run their homes' and work on the council', whilst male members could rely on their wives and partners to have food on the table. This view of male councillors expressed by interviewees was generally relevant to older, retired male members in this study, however, and participants were aware that domestic responsibilities are not entirely unique to women. With changing norms around domestic life, there was some acceptance by participants that younger male councillors also have some domestic responsibilities because their partners/wives work. Participants' views suggest that progress towards gender-balanced domestic responsibilities remains slow however and the unequal share faced by women was discussed as a barrier to increasing women's participation as, without ample support from partners, balancing the triple shift was extremely difficult. For Jacqueline, whilst there has been some gender re-balancing of domestic responsibilities, women still bear the brunt of most of these tasks:

Jacqueline: I mean, there are situations where men and women, man and wife, partners do share those responsibilities, But I think generally a lot of that still falls on the woman in a partnership, don't you? [...] it's my son [in London] who does all the things that normally a woman would do [...] But in the main, I'm pretty sure that it's women who do most of the domestic stuff. [...] And I think that's a barrier for women coming into politics.

Rose similarly discussed how she was 'lucky' that her relationship had a 'more equal balance' of domestic responsibilities as her husband cooks and that this enabled her in her role as a local councillor. Hills' (1983) research in the late 1970s found issues regarding the traditionally gendered division of domestic tasks and childcare, with 84 per cent of electoral candidates and elected councillors stating that their 'husbands shared the chores equally or helped [with] some', compared with only 49 per cent of non-councillors. The ability to 'downsize the family sphere' through delegation of care or domestic tasks to other members of the household was similarly found to be a key coping mechanism for local politicians in Emery et al.'s (2018) research – though one also more common amongst male politicians – female politicians 'still remained the manager of the household'. Further to this, the work of

Johansson Sevä and Öun (2019, pp. 375-376) in Sweden found that ‘a common denominator among local politicians [...] is that they generally experience somewhat support from their partners’, but that there was a ‘general tendency for women, in particular young women, to take on a considerably larger responsibility for housework than their male counterparts’. They concluded that ‘men tend to have a partner who does most of the housework, while female politicians do most of the housework themselves’ – echoing the quotes from Rose above about women having to ‘cook the tea’ as well.

Theresa, who was young but unmarried, believed that there were challenges balancing personal life with political duties because of increased pressures on women to ‘do it all’ in contemporary society – echoing the pressures of being a Welsh working ‘Mam’ (Mannay 2014). Theresa spoke about conversations with her own mother who was concerned she was doing too much:

Theresa: My mum always says wouldn't you just be happy just being a wife with kids? And I'm like, no, absolutely not. But she, her concern is that she thinks women put too much pressure on themselves to do everything. It's like, great, we're out the house now, we have jobs. But also, we still have to be in the house and do the house stuff. You know, we're having careers, but we still need to come home, cook food and make sure the floor is hoovered. And like, she's like, you're going to burn yourself out. And, you know, maybe she's right. But I'm not willing to give up any aspect do you know what I mean?

This suggests that women councillors must balance different identities and thus societal progress in terms of women’s equality outside of the home, whilst positive, this has caused more guilt for women politicians who fail to ‘do it all’ or who choose politics over their family (Grami 2019; Paxton et al. 2021).

Another key element of the personal ‘shift’ is child and other caring responsibilities which, similar to domestic/housework tasks, also remain significantly gendered with women in couples in the UK covering, on average, 70 per cent of childcare and women with young children always ‘more likely than men to be caring for a child’ at any point during the day (Bangham and Gustafsson 2020, pp. 19-24). Previous studies have highlighted that having children can have a significant impact on the likelihood that a woman will stand for election, and once holding office, childcare has been proven to add to female politicians’ burdens in maintaining a work-life balance, and is often a factor cited as a reason not to stand for re-election (McKay 2011; Farrell and Titcombe 2016). Motherhood, and lack thereof, has been heavily politicised, as seen through the criticisms of childless Theresa May during her contest for leader of the Conservative Party and, consequently, Prime Minister (PM), and media

treatment of New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern after she became a working, political mother (Smith et al. 2018). Combining politics with parenting adds to the pressures on women politicians and can constitute a significant barrier to women entering and staying in politics given that political institutions are often not child-friendly (Childs 2016), and when they are it often makes international news (Roy 2019; Childs 2020). Campbell and Childs (2014) found that women MPs are more likely to be older with no dependent children suggesting that women both delay their political careers until children are older, and that mothers are less likely to become politicians with 45 per cent of women MPs being childless compared to 28 per cent of male MPs and 20 per cent of the wider population.

Childcare can be a significant barrier to political participation and only one participant, Lara, had young children (aged 5 and under) when they entered their political roles. No other interviewees currently or previously had young children when they became councillors or were in office. Additionally, Rose and Gwen, viewed being a councillor as entirely incompatible with being a young, working woman with a family:

Gwen: If, like one of the girls who used to be a councillor she had little dots, that would have been difficult. But in all honesty, I wouldn't have gone on to be a councillor with a young family.

Rose: The key point that I would like to make, though, is that, if they were still dependent children, it would be extremely difficult, because the structure, the systems and the processes do not enable that access for women who've got dependent children.

For Lara, whilst being a councillor had left her with feelings of guilt after having to juggle childcare and caring for her parents, she had found it often to be 'a good excuse to get away from things' – an opportunity which she identified as always having been available to men:

Lara: I mean, you know, don't get me wrong, it was a huge pressure and I feel quite a lot of guilt at times, sometimes looking back, but yeah, it does get you away from things too, which, let's be blunt, men have always done haven't they?

There is also a further financial cost for women councillors with children as, given the often-inconvenient timings of council meetings, finding and funding childcare if family or partner support is unavailable can be expensive. Local councillors in Wales are formally entitled to remuneration for care duties of up to £403 per month⁷⁷ to ensure that 'additional costs of care required to carry out approved duties should not deter any individual' councillor from

⁷⁷ This cap has been lifted by the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales since time of interviews and councillors can now claim for full costs of formal care and for up to the Living Wage for informal care (see page 211 a full discussion of this shift).

carrying out their role – this includes provision for informal or formal carers and for personal assistance needs. Marie argued, however, that she was deterred from making claims from these allowances as spending is publicised, often attributed to individual councillors and used as political ammunition by opposition, by the public, and in the media. This suggests the presence of an institutional informal or unwritten rule which has gained traction in Welsh local government whereby councillors should not claim childcare expenses, reportedly because of wider cultural and societal concerns around expenses and, if they transgress here, will be subject to ‘informal displays of disapproval’ within the political arena (Lowndes 2020, pp.549).

Marie: You can put expenses claims to cover for childcare, but very few councillors will because it's used as political ammunition against you [...] any expenses, even if it's for childcare [with] the expenses scandal, the public, they think that we claim for everything, there's brown envelopes going back and forth everywhere. So, I tend not to claim anything at all [...] because I don't want to be put in that position, and I'm sure that others feel the same as well.

Consequently, uptake of this allowance was low and, between 2016 and 2019, across all of the four case study councils, the total amount claimed of the care allowance was £45.00 – one single claim. In comparison, a total of £115,330.32 was claimed for travel expenses over the same period across the same four councils (see Table 5.2). This suggests a stigma is attached to claims for childcare. These figures also highlight the distinct lack of mothers in these four case study councils – women with young children simply were not local councillors – or mothers only become politicians when they have sufficient familial and partner support.

Table 5.2: Travel and Care expenses claimed across four case study councils 2016-2019 (Source: data obtained from websites of each council)

Year	Expense	Council A	Council 'B'	Council 'C'	Council 'D'	Overall Totals
2018-19	Travel	£1,084.05	£355.30	£10,298.16	£31,319.82	£43,057.33
	Care	£0.00	£0.00	£45.00	£0.00	£45.00
2017-18	Travel	£490.95	£666.00	£11,365.00	£29,859.19	£42,381.14
	Care	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
2016-17	Travel	£801.00	£2,219.85	N/A ⁷⁸	£26,841.00	£29,861.85
	Care	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Totals:	Travel	£2,376.00	£3,241.15	£21,663.16	£88,020.01	£115,300.32
	Care	£0.00	£0.00	£45.00	£0.00	£45.00

⁷⁸ No data available for Council 'C' in year 2016-17

The time ‘cost’ or commitment required to be a local councillor – even for backbench councillors with no additional responsibilities – was a further perceived barrier for women, especially those who work and have caring responsibilities alongside their elected role. Indeed, the Expert Panel on Reform recently found that ‘time commitment is clearly seen as a major issue [...] because of domestic responsibilities or employment’. These sentiments were echoed in this study and Samantha perceived that the time cost of being a local councillor meant that “most of the members tend to be [aged] 60+ or 50+ anyway”. The basic remuneration rate received by backbench councillors assumes a weekly time commitment of three working days a week. However, interviewees said that engaging *properly* with, and doing justice to, one’s role is a full-time job:

Gwen: It's okay going and getting a part-time job but, when you're a councillor, you're 24/7.

Rose: It can be what you want it to be, but if you want to be a good councillor, you have to be committed

‘Properly’ or being a ‘good councillor’ is emphasised here as interviewees explained re-election is dependent upon being (at the very least) accountable to constituents, visible in the community, and engaging responsively with constituents. For example, Jacqueline emphasised that being available to her community was important as she ‘would want everybody to see and [...] to feel that I am value for that money’, and Samantha explained that in her borough, evening commitments are commonplace because ‘people expect the local councillor to be [there]’. The informal ‘rules with gendered effects’ within political arenas set expectations for time spent on one’s role required to be identified as a ‘good’ politician. This has a gendered effect as it ‘interacts with institutions outside the political domain’ such as the gendered domestic division of household labour and caring responsibilities (Lowndes 2014, pp. 545-546). The data presented illustrate how informal institutional norms in Welsh local government shape women’s agency and political participation, specifically through stigmatising, and encouraging the rejection of mechanisms, such as carers’ allowance, which could alleviate gender equality issues.

Jacqueline – a retired, older councillor – argued that being a councillor allowed for some flexibility in time management which could be more suitable than a strict ‘9 to 5 job’, yet she remained empathetic towards those who have to juggle politics, work, and domestic responsibility. Interviewees’ accounts suggest that the time commitment to be a councillor exceeds the three days remunerated for by the IRPW. The Panel itself recently found that ‘particularly in the context of austerity, [...] the basic workload discharged by all elected

members is substantial and significantly exceeds 3 days per week' (2019, p. 11). Offering further evidence to this assertion, the *Exit Survey of Members Standing Down* (WLGGA 2017) found that, on average, councillors not seeking re-election claimed to have spent 'at least 21-30 hours per week' on their council duties, a reported increase in comparison to those who stood down in 2012, and 15 per cent said they spent more than 41 hours a week.

Taking a feminist institutionalist lens to Welsh local government finds that externally-set formal "gender-neutral" institutional rules around remuneration and required time commitment have been subverted by informal expectations of councillors to spend more than their remunerated time on their council duties which has an 'unintended' gendered impact on women, exposing as others have the insecurity and vulnerable nature of institutional change which relies on conversion and layering (Lowndes 2020). For those women councillors also balancing full-time employment⁷⁹ and personal/caring responsibilities, this often became perceived as a tightrope to navigate. As has been discussed, women councillors have 'more responsibilities outside the council in terms of their jobs and in the home' (Farrell and Titcombe 2016) yet are also found to invest *more* time in being councillors than men. It is the combination of these factors which means that women are more likely to drop out of politics quicker because they feel they cannot dedicate sufficient time to their role (Rao 2000; Allen 2012a, b). The findings here support the notion within feminist institutionalism that political institutions and their rules differentially impact upon women and men, even when they may not be explicitly gendered (for example, the expected time commitment), and that women experience increased pressures to commit time to be seen as a 'good' councillor as non-attendance is heavily scrutinised as an 'inability to demonstrate the amount of 'presence' required' (McKay 2011, p. 723).

Being a councillor means constituency engagement at times outside of the normal 9-5 working day and at times incompatible with family life is also expected. Interviewees spoke of receiving phone calls and house visits⁸⁰ from constituents in the evenings and at weekends. These findings align with McKay's (2011, p. 723) study of female politicians in Germany and the UK which found that 'out-of-hours commitments [...] add a large number of hours to the working week'. Local government is often assumed to require less time away from home

⁷⁹ As might be expected, the *Exit Survey* (WLGGA 2017, p. 9) mentioned above showed that councillors in employment claimed to spend less time per week in their role than those who were retired, however 57 per cent of employed respondents still reported spending over 21 hours a week.

⁸⁰ Councillors' personal home addresses are currently published on council websites.

or at events (Silbermann 2015), but the out-of-hours nature of the councillor's role was experienced by interviewees as encroaching on personal lives. This was a source of stress, and made female councillors and their families feel vulnerable:

Marie: And so, yeah, it's... you cannot have a normal nine to five evenings off family environment or weekends off [...] it meant an awful lot of evenings, so a lot of events

Mali: [It's] a Saturday night and you've got people over for dinner and your phone rings and you think 'oh, no!'

Lara: So, first time [being a councillor], with new babies, I used to have people turning up at the house, you'd have just got them to bed, about to eat your evening meal and you'd have someone ringing the door-bell.

Mared: It encroaches, and the hours vary, so you can be out morning, noon, night, weekends for somethings. So, it's not really a good work-life balance.

As is further discussed in Chapter Six, the publication of councillors' personal addresses and, in the past, home telephone numbers⁸¹, can place councillors in vulnerable situations and directly leads to instances like those outlined by Lara below who received a phone call from a resident on the morning of her father's funeral:

I shouldn't have picked up the phone, but I got a phone call about waste on the morning of my Dad's funeral [...] I did try to explain, and he said 'oh yeah, I very sorry to hear that', and then he just carried on talking, and I just felt like saying 'I've just told you I've got to go! I don't care about your rubbish at this particular moment in time'.

The pressure to deal with constituents' issues, and to attend evening community events, was something felt keenly by interviewees – and there was a general sense that, to prove one's worth or accountability, you must be visible and ready to work at all hours. Whilst interviewees felt that serving their community was a natural and important part of the job, and had been their motivation to stand for election (see Chapter Four, section 4.2), they identified a blurring of boundaries between the political and the personal at the local level. Ffion argued that 'local politicians are the nearest level, we're the most familiar [...] with the greatest respect, [the public] probably wouldn't spot their MP or their [MS]', suggesting that local councillors are more visible and experience these pressures more keenly than MPs or MSs. There remains a presenteeism in local government which means that female councillors feel pressured to take calls, answer doors, and engage with constituents at inappropriate and inconvenient times or else fear the consequences at the ballot box.

⁸¹ Most councils now provide councillors with mobile phones specifically for council business, instead.

Political institutions' family-friendly (FF) working practices, or lack thereof, have been a limited focus of feminist institutionalist literature (largely due to their rarity), despite their contribution to political arenas as institutionally sexist. Allen et al. (2016, pp. 551 - 552) contend that scholarship has focused on 'broader difficulties, perceived and actual, of combining the duties' of politician with personal commitments and duties and, whilst this chapter has discussed these broader issues, it is now pertinent to closely examine whether Welsh local government is 'family friendly' or 'gender sensitive'. Local government does not require the lengthy 'sitting hours' seen in Westminster or the devolved parliaments, which means the timings of its less regular meetings are, perhaps, more important – missing a monthly full council meeting which may be the only opportunity to participate in council business for backbench councillors is clearly more crucial than missing a parliamentary session in an institution which meets multiple times a week.

As McNeil et al. (2017, p. 30) attest, local councils are infamous for having 'longstanding expectations of evening meetings and late finishes' and 'macho presenteeism' where women (again, particularly those with young children and/or other employment) may be unable to compete. As Drage (2001) contends, local government would become more women or family friendly if it had 'meetings at times that fit into the other responsibilities that women have'. Unlike new institutions where FF working practices can be firmly at the core of institutional design and built 'in with the bricks' as at Senedd Cymru (Chaney et al. 2007, p. 53), local government in Wales is an older, traditional bounded political institution with long-standing gendered 'rules of the game' which currently lead to indirect discrimination and contravention of the Equality Act 2010.

Examining family unfriendly meeting times through a feminist historical institutionalist lens, these formal institutional working practices have persisted over time and become accepted compromises despite attempts to alter the 'rules of the game' through surveys of members. Meeting times are arranged to please the majority of councillors surveyed who, as data suggests, are usually retired councillors with few to no caring commitments (Centre for Women and Democracy 2011; Maguire 2018). Theresa (Council 'B') was clear that meeting times remain organised around 'people who don't have jobs because they have retired [who] just like to meet at half past nine in the morning just because it's just nice for them [to] go to Council, have their meeting, and then they go home' because 'they've got one vote, I've got one vote'. Introducing gender sensitive and family-friendly organisational practices would require implementing FF meeting times through universal

legislation from the Welsh Local Government Association. This may be unwelcomed by many retired councillors who wish to protect their morning meetings and ‘get home for tea’ and who will not face much resistance to this given the overall lack of mothers present in Welsh local councils. This is an example of how resistance tactics are used by those in support of the status quo in political institutions (namely: those who benefit from its current practices and structures) to frustrate and subvert layered interventions aimed at promoting change and improving gender equality (Chappell and Waylen 2013).

When asked whether council meetings were at convenient or accessible times, for most interviewees, responses were dependent on the councillors’ other commitments – councillors who were balancing the triple duty found meeting times difficult. This echoes findings elsewhere, with Denbighshire council branded a ‘retirement club’ by a councillor in 2018 when members voted for morning meetings unsuitable for those in employment (BBC Wales News 2018). Table 5.3 shows the meeting times for each of the case study councils at the time of data collection, for the most common and regular meetings: Full Council, Cabinet, and crucial Committees. For councils A, B, and C, full council meetings take place during or directly after normal nine-to-five working hours – a problem for any councillor who works, and, in the case of Council ‘B’ where, as Marie states: ‘our full council meeting is on Wednesdays and they start at three o’clock’, attendance at council meetings can further be affected by women’s personal responsibilities. For example, three o’clock is the finishing time for most schools so female councillors with younger children “have to arrange for somebody to pick up and drop off” (Marie), and five o’clock may be ‘dinner time’ for younger children.

Table 5.3: Timings of key council meetings across the four case study councils (circa. 2021/22) [data gathered from councils’ websites].

Council	Full Council Meeting Time	Cabinet Meeting Time	Regular Committee Meeting Times
A	Tuesdays – 5pm	Wednesdays – 4pm	Planning – 10am Wednesday Performance – 4pm Mondays and 10am Tuesday Licensing – 10am Monday
B	Wednesdays – 3pm	Tuesdays – 2.30pm	Overview and Scrutiny – 2pm Audit – 2pm Licensing – 10am
C	Wednesdays – 5pm	Tuesdays – 10.30am OR 1.30pm OR 2.30pm	Mostly at 10am or 5pm
D	All meetings take place at 10am		

The similarities here with Hills’ (1983) work with data from the late 1970s suggests that there has been little re-structuring and re-gendering of local councils as political institutions – Hills similarly found that the majority of local councils met in the daytime which was inconvenient for councillors in full-time employment or education. Rurality further intersects with the triple duty to compound time costs for women councillors. In Council D, for example, because of its rural nature and lack of motorways, travel times to/from the council offices can reach an hour either way which means that meetings are scheduled for 10am – a clear issue for those who work and possibly for those who have to drop children at school in the morning and then travel to council offices. This constituted a barrier for many prospective women who Samantha, the council leader, would try to encourage into politics with many of them preferring to join town or community councils instead:

Samantha: I've found trying to persuade women to stand it's the family commitments, the time and the travelling in, especially, depending where which ward you represent. But those are elements [...] it's much easier to get them to work and become community councillors or town councillors because they're

closer to their communities there, and they tend to gather in the evening whereas we usually work during, have meetings during the day.”

Time demands caused by travelling in Council D constituted a significant barrier for women politicians and can be considered a key factor in its low level of descriptive representation of women. Being a councillor, regardless of rurality, requires a flexible time budget above and beyond that remunerated for, at times of day or the week which are unsuitable for combining with other work, domestic and childcare responsibilities.

5.3: Alleviating the Triple Duty

The organisational practices and formal rules-in-use in local councils create a gendered political arena which excludes women. Interviewees also discussed resources which personally assisted them in their balancing of the triple shifts, however they argued that formal solutions and institutional change is required to alleviate organisational barriers to women’s political participation and improve levels of women’s descriptive representation in the council Chambers. Many of these suggested improvements are not ‘new’ solutions, but local councils have remained more resistant to changes and moves towards gender sensitive and family-friendly working practices than other institutions – even Westminster.

Interviewees emphasised the necessity for a comprehensive support system. Having support from a variety of sources across the three shifts (partners/wider family, employers, and political peers), was an enabling resource for female councillors across all four case study councils, and the absence of support was perceived and experienced as a significant barrier to women becoming councillors. Support systems helped Rose overcome barriers that otherwise may be perceived as insurmountable for women seeking or holding political positions:

Leah: So, have you faced any barriers that have prevented you from taking part in being a local councillor and local council activities?

Rose: Um, not really, but I understand that, and I can't emphasise strongly enough, that's because my personal support networks and my professional support networks are the way that they are.

Primarily, family and/or partner support was identified as crucial to balancing the political and the personal, with interviewees mentioning the support of their significant other, or their wider family in helping them to carry out their role:

Ffion: It also helps, for me, I have my partner, no children [...] so I was just very lucky that I have a very supportive home life.

Tara: I'm fortunate because I have a family support network, but I just think about single mothers, people living on their own.

Having an equal or less gendered division of labour in one's personal life was particularly important, resonating with Jacqui Briggs' (2000) research with councillors in Montreal and Hull in the mid-1990s where she equally found that 'behind every successful woman' councillor was a supportive partner who 'helps with childcare and the general domestic duties'. Her participants stressed, as did interviewees here, that the absence of this support, especially for those with childcare responsibilities, would have constituted a major barrier to their political involvement and participation.

Interviewees also mentioned that their families had, previously, helped them realise when their work-life balance was being skewed, reining them in when they were spending too much time on their role:

Rose: I've got adult children, but I would say there've been times when my adult children have said 'Come on Mum, this is enough now, just, let's do this, let's do that. You don't need to check your phone, you don't need to do that.' So I think it does encroach on your personal life.

Families and partners can ground councillors and encourage them to re-assess their time commitments to their roles when the political and personal boundaries start to become blurred, playing a role in ensuring a work-life balance.

Marie discussed the strain that balancing the political with the personal has on female councillors, and how relationships can be damaged irreparably by the time commitments that the councillor role entails. For Marie, despite reassurances from political peers that her relationship would 'still be there at the end of' campaigning and election, her marriage broke down less than a year after she became a local councillor:

Marie: Not long after I got elected, my marriage broke down. So, the whole campaigning and everything, I think was the final straw in a very sort of long relationship - it does test relationships. And that's really quite common - I know a lot of female councillors whose marriages don't survive because you are, it's incredibly hands on, the campaigning. So, from January to May, I was out every evening, I had to campaign at weekends, I was on-call [...] I remember our campaign organiser said, "Don't worry, your husband will still be there at the end of this", and I saw him six months later and went "No, he wasn't".

Leah: Do you think there's a gendered aspect to that then?

Marie: I think it causes a change in the dynamics of the family. Whereas I had been primarily in a domestic role, a lot of my meetings, and they still are, a lot of

meetings are scheduled around mealtimes or very, very close to tea time. And so, yeah, it's... you cannot have a normal 9-5, evenings off family environment or weekends off even. So particularly after I was elected, [...] I was [male Mayor's] consort, which was a huge privilege, but it meant an awful lot of evenings, so a lot of events and I was spending more time with him than I was, I mean, I didn't feel that I was neglecting the family, but I think it was the final straw.

Marie's account suggests that the time commitment, structure of council business ('meetings scheduled very close to tea time'), and the additional responsibilities of the political shift had a profound impact on her personal and private life. Marie's changing role away from a traditionally gendered, domestic-focused role towards an active, campaigning political role was positioned as a catalyst for her divorce. The role conflict identified by Marie has been identified in previous studies as a barrier to women's political participation. Hills (1983, pp. 44-45) found that 'a husband's attitude to his wife's activities outside the home may limit' women. Spousal or partner support of women's political participation has been discussed elsewhere and found to be a crucial resource for female politicians (Johansson Sevä and Öun 2019), especially those with domestic and caring responsibilities which can constitute a major supply-side barrier for women's descriptive representation (Briggs 2000; Mackay 2001; Smith et al. 2018).

Interviewees believed that spousal support was a necessity for women politicians and that a gendered domestic division of labour was a barrier to women's political participation:

Jacqueline: I'm pretty sure that it's women who, as you say, agree - they do most of the domestic stuff, and I think that's... that's a barrier for women coming into politics."

Rose: We've got a more equal balance in terms of our domestic life. So, my husband cooks, and he's an amazing cook

This rebalancing and reprioritising of personal life with political duty can lead to personal regret and sacrifice and have a profound emotional impact. Although Marie maintained that she did not feel like she was 'neglecting the family', Lara mentioned how juggling her early political career with young children had been 'a huge pressure and [she feels] quite a lot of guilt sometimes looking back'. Gwen, who had strongly traditional views about being a 'Mam' first and then going back to work once children were grown up, told me that being a councillor with young children would not fit her morals or priorities:

I wouldn't have gone on to be a councillor with a young family. Because that's gotta take precedence. [...] It's trying to find childminders, and the kids are

bouncing from school to a childminder's and don't get to see you until 8 o'clock at night - that's not fair. So, I wouldn't do it with a young family [...] But it's your priorities, and my priority was my family when they were little, so I just accepted it. If you got a young family, you're at home, you look after them, bring them up, then you carry on and go back to work.

Previous studies have also found that women often put off their political careers until their children are older. Campbell and Childs (2014), found that the average age of female MPs' children was 16 years old compared to 12 years old for men, and that women MPs had comparatively fewer children with 45 per cent being childless. Overall, support from family networks was perceived by study participants as a vital resource for women councillors, especially those with caring responsibilities. The absence of this support means that managing the personal and the political is more difficult and, ultimately, leads to poor levels of descriptive representation of women. Support with childcare is crucial for women councillors to overcome the underrepresentation of mothers in politics and the current formal organisational practices rule women out rather than help them stay in. The formal institutional rules and unwritten expectations of councillors explored throughout this chapter combine to create local government institutions with numerous barriers to the political participation of minority groups, and change has henceforth been resisted by those usual suspects.

Whilst it may be unjustified to organise creches (as per Westminster) for what would likely be a small number of children per council meeting, allowing councillors to claim for caring expenses has been the agreed solution in Welsh local government and there have been some recent shifts in the remuneration practices surrounding this. IRPW's 2022 report outlines how:

'additional costs of care required to carry out approved duties should not deter any individual from becoming and remaining [a councillor] or limit their ability to carry out the role' (IRPW 2022, p. 52).

The review of the financial support for councillors (IRPW 2020) implemented the following changes (IRPW 2021, p. 32):

- a) Allowing for claims for dependents under 16 years of age, or a minor or adult who cannot be left unsupervised;
- b) Members can claim for costs of care for council business, approved duties, and ‘appropriate and reasonable preparation’ as well as travel;
- c) Replace the monthly maximum capped payments with
 - a. Formal care costs paid following evidence
 - b. Informal care costs (e.g. unregistered carers) paid up to maximum rate equivalent to the ‘Real UK Living Wage’ at the time

Despite these positive shifts, the Panel still requires councils to publish the total claimed for costs of care and personal assistance. A key and easily achievable institutional amendment to the gendered formal rules to alleviate this burden could simply constitute no longer publishing councillors’ childcare allowance claims, even on a whole-council level. This research has shown that publication of these claims, coupled with media and public concerns over politicians’ expenses, has created stigma around claiming for necessary childcare costs. As Childs (2016, p. 20) found, “legitimate children related costs [are] perceived as “expensive” in the media, by political opponents, and amongst the public”. Thus, whilst a ‘seemingly neutral’ rule about political business and reporting, the publication of childcare expenses has a significant gendered effect (Lowndes 2014) – an issue acknowledged by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGGA 2018). It would remain easy to identify which councillors – those with children – who are claiming for care reimbursements within councils and, to solve this, publication of spending (indeed, important for transparency) should be restricted to an all-Wales or regional level (such as South Wales, Mid Wales and so forth).

Empirical data here therefore add weight to the contention that reforms towards gender equality can be subverted and undermined by poor implementation. The attempt to ‘layer’ these new rules and processes of reporting childcare expenses on a whole-council, rather than individual level, without tackling wider stigma or informal tradition, whilst an attempt to renegotiate this one element of gendered institutional practice, has meant that gender inequality remains. As per earlier discussions of feminist institutionalist views on achieving institutional change (Lowndes and Roberts 2013), layering new amendments onto existing practices has proven vulnerable to resistance and subversion, and insufficient for a feminisation of Welsh local government or for preventing councils from falling foul of the Equality Act 2010 and institutional sexism.

It is not only the poor levels of remuneration which make balancing the professional ‘shift’ with the political hard, but the time commitment of the role also creates tensions

between councillors' professional and political commitments. Professional support from employers was consequently viewed by interviewees as vital to effective participation as a councillor, which reflects the findings of earlier studies by Linsley et al. (2006), Hills (1983), Charles (2014) and Farrell and Titcombe (2016). Interviewees commented that employers' levels of support for councillors varies significantly and affects their ability to attend meetings and undertake their civic duties. According to the Employment Rights Act 1996, employees in the UK are technically entitled to time off work for certain public duties, including councillor duties, in addition to normal holiday entitlements. However, they are not automatically entitled to pay for that time, and often being granted this time off is at discretion of their employer who 'can refuse a request for time off if they think it's unreasonable' (Employment Rights Act 1996). Rose felt fortunate because:

My employer facilitates this [...] other female colleagues [...] aren't able to have the flexibility that I have. I'm very fortunate that I work in an institution where there's a policy which enables us to have an additional 18 days paid leave for public service - not all employers help with that.

Tara had a different experience with an unsupportive employer:

I think when I was a back-bencher [...] I did find that quite challenging because my employers weren't, they weren't supportive, and they didn't see the value of it, and therefore, they didn't really encourage me to attend meetings. And I think that is disappointing and I know from speaking to other members like they do still have similar experiences, where they're trying to juggle work and council commitments.

Flexibility and support from employers were crucial to fulfilling council duties and the absence of this support presented a barrier to engagement and being present in politics:

Sioned: For instance, the Mayor last year - I'm not sure where he worked - but they wouldn't give him time off to attend his Mayoral duties! Which I think is absolutely disgusting, you know, he's supposed to be the First Citizen, isn't he? So, he could only do so many things, in the evening he used to do it, and the weekends, which is bad really.

Although this is not specific or unique to women, it can be argued that women councillors with children may face a double bind as they are usually the parent contacted in emergencies and will take time off work to care for sick dependents⁸². The combination of political and personal responsibilities means that women councillors are taking more time off work than

⁸² AIG (2019) found that women are three times more likely to take time off work to look after children, meaning that mothers are those more likely to have time off work to care for dependents.

male councillors, something which can jeopardise both their professional and their political careers (Siebert 2009).

Support from fellow party members was also seen as a resource for female councillors, especially newer councillors who saw peer mentoring and encouragement as important in their first few days ‘on the job’. Learning the rules on the ground was discussed in the previous chapter as something reliant on informal discussions with political peers and colleagues given the presence of unwritten traditions and expectations, and interviewees often named those who had helped them ‘learn the ropes’ in their first terms. Being part of a supportive political party grouping and informal opportunities to learn the ‘rules of the game’ and ‘how things work around here’ from peers was important. Political peers, however, must further be considered a crucial part of conditioning women councillors into the gendered rules present in local councils as political institutions through their condoning or calling out of behaviours which serve to create and maintain the very institutional organisational practices which can ‘rule out’ women. For example, in the search for solutions to the high time cost of being a woman local councillor, interviewees said that changes need to be made formally (with modernised and re-gendered organisational rules), but there also needs to be a shift in attitudes, away from presenteeism, which mainly punishes women with jobs and caring responsibilities, towards acceptance of the pressures of professional and personal commitments. Interviewees perceived that current piecemeal layering or conversion type tactics to improve gender equality and re-feminise political institutions were not successful, were undermined by majority resistance, and that more radical and wider-reaching transformative change, akin to that seen within gender mainstreaming (Joseph et al. 2011), was necessary.

Concerning restructuring the masculinised formal organisational practices, the interesting turn of events surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic positively presented a solution to the timings and locations of council meetings, in the form of remote attendance⁸³. As explained in Chapter Four, methodologically for this study the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic meant the transfer to interviewing via online platforms. Mirroring this, council business also transitioned to online platforms like Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams. This led to fruitful

⁸³ For a fuller discussion of the possibilities presented by remote meeting attendance during the Covid-19 Pandemic for women’s political participation, please see the author’s recent article publication (Hibbs 2022b) in the *Journal for Cultural Research*, here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14797585.2021.2011365>

discussions with participants about the possibilities for restructuring council business through greater acceptance and adoption of remote meeting attendance. Remote attendance at meetings has been a long-debated element of the organisational practices of local councils and other political institutions across the UK (Childs 2016; Awan-Scully et al. 2018; Mencarelli 2021). Childs (2016), for example, made the case for MPs being able to vote remotely at Westminster and called on the House of Commons to address ‘the question of technology [and virtual conferencing] – a widespread practice beyond Parliament’. Similarly, the ‘presenteeism’ of physical attendance at meetings was identified by participants as antiquated when compared to the private business sector where ‘boards of multinational companies [are] not physically all getting together in one place, they're using Skype’ (Rose).

Senedd Cymru passed the Local Government (Wales) Measure in 2011, enabling local councils to use remote attendance technologies for voting and meetings but, although it had been trialled, very few councils had utilised this for formal meetings pre-Covid. Many councils had embraced webcasting of Full Council meetings for the ease of viewing/attendance by the general public, but there was still a general reluctance to employ IT resources to improve experiences and remote attendance options for councillors. In pre-Covid interviews, participants wanted to see more modernisation and engagement with technologies to allow for increased flexibility:

Ffion: What we are desperately needed to sort out is remote attendance at meetings. [...] You know, I could be sitting in my office in London and I could be engaging in a meeting here.

Rose: You know, in the 21st century, we can engage with each other in other ways than having to have face-to-face meetings [...] there are other tools that we can use to engage and to support us in the decision-making process, which would give us that flexibility.

Some interviewees felt that reluctance to implement remote attendance had largely been caused by a sense of ‘macho presenteeism’ by retired male councillors as well as their desire for physical meetings to act as social occasions. Traditionally, if a councillor could not *physically* attend a meeting, they would have to be absent and sacrifice their vote, which, as Marie states, is often used as political ammunition and particularly impacts lone parent female local councillors:

To be a lone parent, female councillor with no support network you wouldn't get the levels of attendance that you need. And again, attendance levels are highly

scrutinised, particularly by the opposition, and they will post on social media if you're missing meetings. There could be very good reasons why you're missing those meetings. You know, if your child is sick or whatever. But there's no mercy shown, really, when it comes to politics.

Remote meetings, whilst allowing for easier balance of professional life and personal responsibility, also remove the necessity of travelling to the meeting venue – City or County Hall. This was a welcomed change for those in more rural councils. All participants from Council 'D' were interviewed via Zoom or Skype during the Coronavirus pandemic and lockdown. They discussed the possibilities and promises of using online remote meeting attendance to increase levels of women's descriptive representation and participation through addressing the issues of extensive travel for councillors. Moving council business online because of the virus presented a 'valuable window of opportunity' for changing formal procedural traditionalism and, fundamentally, modernising how politics is done, whether through holding meetings entirely through online platforms, or through enabling hybrid remote attendance with councillors 'skyping in':

Samantha: One thing I've found since [coronavirus] kicked in, is that so much business we can now do like this. I had a group meeting yesterday on Zoom, for example, not that everybody joined but we're getting there slowly[...] before we went into total lockdown, I had to go into quarantine for a fortnight just in case, so I couldn't get down to the main meetings that were held in that last week and I was on this computer, and I was able to take part in the chamber as if I was there.

There were some opposing views. Jacqueline (Council 'B') felt that physical meetings give 'a much better chance of everybody having their say' – particularly important as an opposition member – and that Zoom meetings, as had been implemented in her council during Covid, were often 'limited' and 'hard to manage'. This has been referred to by Mencarelli (2021, p. 7) as a 'relational cost' of digital updating of politics, namely 'the loss of spontaneity in parliamentary behaviour [...] preventing those moment of informal interactions between MPs', and was further identified by Jacob Rees-Mogg MP who argued that hybrid proceedings were 'deliberately arranged to be non-contentious' (as cited in Meakin 2021). This was echoed by two councillors from council 'B': Tara who stated that there were problems when employing these in a hybrid manner, and Marie who echoed the difficulties they had faced meeting online:

Tara: I think the only issue with this is the hybrid. And we were having a meeting with several other members remotely on Skype. And because of where I sat the chair of the meeting couldn't see me because they were focusing on the screen

Marie: It's more difficult to speak and put your point across during a virtual meeting than it is in a well-chaired face to face meeting. Not being able to see

everybody's facial expressions in a room. Not being able to read a room when you're dealing with difficult subjects is, is very, very difficult.

These councillors were interviewed relatively early in the Covid-19 Pandemic (Spring 2020) when councils were only just implementing the technology, so some improvements may have been made since to overcome technological difficulties. Indeed Ceri, who was interviewed pre-Pandemic and was unsure of remote meeting technological solutions has since been recorded on her council's website as praising them for their accessibility and encouraging their use moving forward. Marie noted that her peers in another council had been voting and remote accessing council meetings prior to the pandemic with little difficulty, so there was some optimism that it could help women councillors who:

...can't get in who have got childcare issues to engage, because at the moment if you don't attend to meeting you're out, you don't get a vote, you don't get anything - that would change.

Tara also explained that she felt physical meetings had value because they allow for political peer support and member development⁸⁴. For Tara, in-chamber and 'outside of meeting' conversations between members enable councillors to avoid feelings of isolation, especially as newer councillors have opportunities to ask nearby, more experienced colleagues questions. This was echoed by Marie who thought that online meetings 'could be more isolating than inclusive' until technology improves. This had been important for Tara when she first joined mid-term as being able to ask a fellow councillor made her feel 'a bit more at ease, a bit more comfortable, more confident'. Furthermore, Jacqueline stated that she felt that even in-person, *formal* council meetings were often restrictive because 'you have to be restrained and polite in the chamber' so, in her view, councillors have 'much more of an interesting chat [...] in the members room [where] you can perhaps be a little more forthright'. This sense that more business is often done outside of the formal council chamber was echoed by other councillors:

Lara: And actually [the Chamber] is not really where you do the business

Mared: Cause generally, you see, I don't think [Full Council] is quite so much like that anymore, it's more about, not the ticking boxes, you've got to have

⁸⁴ Elsewhere concerns have been raised around whether there may also be a gendered impact of remote working with research suggesting that women who work from home may become disadvantaged and it may negatively impact work-life balance (Tomei 2021). Brearley (2021) stated that "those with caring responsibilities or with disabilities will tend to stay at home [and] will look like they're less committed to their job". Given the current expectations regarding in-person presenteeism, this could easily become the case in politics.

discussions, but really things have gone through a whole process now, and essentially it's the end of the line.

There has previously been a recognition that council business which takes place outside of formal meetings can often take place in arenas, locations, and at times which mean that women feel uncomfortable or unable to attend, for example, in pubs (Farrell and Titcombe 2016; Maguire 2018). However, no interviewees mentioned such events or, if they did, it was to discuss how the council's environment had shifted away from the 'old boys' club' and 'politics in the pub' culture.

Other re-gendering of council organisational structures has included implementing job-shared elected roles which allow female councillors, particularly those in senior positions with professional and personal shifts to balance, the opportunity to carry out political roles with less of a time commitment. No case-study council here had employed a job-share scheme, but these are present in other councils in Wales, in the Welsh Local Government Association, in some councils in England, and are a common form of employment in other sectors⁸⁵. Research has shown openness towards job-shared political roles (albeit at the national level) from the electorate (Campbell and Cowley 2014), and the institutional shift has been encouraged by think-tanks and political parties (including the UK Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats), the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, and Senedd Cymru as a strategy to increasing women's political representation (Graham 2013; Fawcett Society 2017; Anderson and Jones 2018; Fawcett Society 2018; Equalities Local Government and Communities Committee 2019). Job-share was raised specifically by three interviewees:

Marie: I would like to see a lot more open-mindedness or job shared positions in cabinet. They do it in [another council], it works very well. There are lots of women councillors with very small children who are able to juggle the responsibilities.

Ffion: Yes, so we've taken that job-share model into the WLGA, so [two female councillors] job-share a role and we've been looking at that as well because that's eminently sensible to do that [...] I don't think you can job-share the Leader [...] But I think all other roles are compatible with job-share.

Theresa: I don't know how popular this is, particularly amongst people in my party actually, it definitely isn't, but I don't actually mind it. In [other Welsh council], I know they have women cabinet members that share a job [...] it seems good to me, but in my day job, I do job-share, so I suppose it would. But yeah, I think, you know, it's a nice way because I don't think people should necessarily be priced out of a job that they might be really good at.

⁸⁵ 123,000 people job-share currently in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2021)

Marie was concerned however that the job-share prospect may leave councillors with ‘an awful lot of work for very little financial return’ and that women job-share councillors would still work full-time hours for part-time pay given that women dedicate more time to council business than their male counterparts.

The institutional shifts outlined here have been encouraged through layering or conversion tactics within, for example, the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. This includes a section on access in local government (Part 3: Promoting Access to Local Government) which details arrangements around remote attendance, contending that this should be implemented as it ‘enables persons who are not in the same place to attend meetings’. Part 4 outlines the ‘entitlement of members to job-share’. This makes provision for local authorities to enable ‘two or more councillors to share office on an executive’, including the position of Leader and elected Mayor, and for other ‘principal council office’ positions listed as:

- (a) chair and/or vice-chair
- (c) presiding member/deputy presiding member
- (e) chair/vice-chairs of a committee or sub-committee of a principal council;
- (g) deputy mayor in a mayor and cabinet executive

Job-share has therefore been reserved as an option only for those holding some senior or principal office like chairing of a committee but not for the basic role of local councillor. Again, this feminist institutionalist approach provides evidence that layering tactics do only achieve only small piecemeal changes – here only for senior councillors – whilst failing to address the underlying gendered ‘rules in use’ or rules which have gendered effects which create barriers barrier for all women and candidates should be offered the choice to run for office on a job-shared basis.

5.4: Conclusion

This chapter has presented data regarding the institutional, formal ‘rules of the game’ which affect women’s descriptive political ‘presence’ in Welsh local government. The ‘triple duty’ of balancing political duties with personal and professional responsibilities was explored and found to be a significant barrier for women who work and/or are mothers. The challenge of finding time to combine political, professional, and personal responsibilities was a pertinent

issue for my interviewees, highlighted significantly by a dearth of young working women and mothers in my interview pool and sample (reflecting the wider situation in Welsh local government). Examining data through a feminist institutionalist lens, councils' organisational practices and formal rules of the game are found to further intersect to rule women out and create political institutions which are family unfriendly or not gender sensitive. There are empirical findings here which could justify a case for institutional sex-based discrimination by local councils in Wales as their practices and lack of attention to and compliance with equalities laws like the Equality Act 2010 exclude women with child (and other) caring responsibilities on a basic level.

Participants' views and recommendations for measures to alleviate the triple duty and remove barriers to participation included comprehensive support networks, remote meeting technologies, job-share roles, and changes to publication of childcare expenses. The Coronavirus Pandemic has shown the possibilities presented by remote attendance particularly for decreasing time costs associated with travelling and inconvenient meetings times and, in turn, increasing women's ability to participate. Recommendations for institutional shifts in organisational practices and rules from this chapter's data are summarised in Chapter Ten.

Overall, balancing the personal and political is a particularly gendered task. Women councillors, because of gendered social norms, face role conflict between being a politician, working, keeping a tidy house, and/or being a 'Mam'. Institutional rules, like the publication of details of the caring allowance, do not act to support women in juggling roles, and combined with professional responsibility, it is easy to understand why most female councillors are older and retired with no dependent children. In the next chapter, the feminist institutionalist gaze is turned towards the informal norms, cultures, and contexts of Welsh local government, exploring how these are masculinised, their effects on women councillors' experiences of being local councillors, and how this affects the political representation of women descriptively and substantively.

Chapter Six

Gendered Institutions II – Informal Norms and Cultures

6.1: Introduction

Feminist institutionalism contends that there are informal gendered ‘rules of the game’ working alongside formal gendered organisational practices, which influence the cultures, contexts and norms of political institutions. Given the historical dominance of the ‘grey men in grey suits’ in local politics (Charles and Jones 2013), such institutions’ distributions of power are often arranged to privilege masculinised political behaviours which can constrain and alienate ‘others’ or minorities – like women – who enter the political arena. This chapter examines Welsh local councils as political institutions with gender regimes and ‘stable, valued and recurring patterns of behaviour’ (Huntington 1968 cited in Lowndes 2014), their implicit informal institutional rules which ‘prescribe “acceptable” masculine and feminine forms of behaviour for men and women’ are revealed (Lowndes 2014, p. 687).

As Fiona Mackay et al. (2010, p. 582) contend, ‘the masculine ideal is standard and underpins institutional structures and practices and dominant masculinities are presented as common sense, ostensibly gender-neutral norms, conventions and practices’. The chapter argues that, in this Welsh case study, cultures, contexts, traditions, and norms of local councils remain masculinised, and consequently, women councillors must either tolerate, assimilate, or mirror masculine political behaviours, or risk being undermined, frustrated, or having their ideas diluted as they try to substantively represent women and adopt a ‘feminised’ political approach, or alternatively must show resilience and spend considerable effort in resisting and challenging male norms (Childs 2004a).

This chapter first explores interviewees’ perspectives on the political culture of the four local councils, exploring whether the ‘old boys’ club’ identified by previous researchers in Wales endures (Charles and Jones 2013; Charles 2014; Farrell and Titcombe 2016). Participants suggest that overt sexist remarks and ‘macho’ politics are becoming rarer, but these have often been replaced by implied, implicit and subtle sexism, and a culture of patronisation which intersects with age for younger women councillors. The chapter explores how the gendered nature of Welsh local government institutions affects women’s political representation through exploring whether female councillors are ‘doing politics differently’ and prefer the ‘kinder, gentler’ political approach Pippa Norris (1996a) identified, finding mixed evidence for this conclusion. Finally, the impact of masculinised norms and

conventions on council meetings is discussed, demonstrating that action-driven women councillors (in other words, those who prefer to implement policy solutions quickly, rather than focus on lengthy debate and deliberation) face frustration at male posturing and prefer a different political approach.

As the following discussion shows, interviewees' perspectives reveal that the combination of these masculinised norms, traditions, and contexts in Welsh local government, alongside the previously discussed formal organisational practices, fetter the substantive representation of women by making it harder for them to shape the agenda, contribute to debate and decision-making. Further, I argue that, whilst critical masses have altered the gender regimes in some councils, this has not been a guarantee of substantive representation and a more gender-equal politics, and, often, individual or small groups of women – critical actors – are left to fight against long-standing androcentric traditions. The impact of critical mass on the substantive representation of women and on political legislatures is discussed further in Chapter Eight.

6.2: Still an Old Boys' Club? – Macho Culture and Sexism on the Inside

The purposive sample undertaken in this research (see section 3.3) aimed to interview both long-serving and newer councillors to consider longitudinal change and its impact on women's experiences. Length of service ranged from councillors who had completed half an electoral term, to those with thirty years of experience. When asked about the culture and environment of local councils, interviewees generally agreed that councils have left behind the 'macho', 'old boys' club' political atmosphere that characterised council chambers in the late 1900s and early 2000s. Longitudinal improvements and a slow process of 're-gendering' were recognised both by long-serving interviewees who had experienced these changes first-hand, and by newer women councillors who had often heard 'horror stories' about what councils 'used to be like' from fellow women councillors. As critical mass theorists had hoped (see Kanter 1977b; Studlar and McAllister 2002; Childs and Krook 2008 and Chapter 2 of this thesis for a full discussion), these changes were perceived by interviewees to be the direct result of having more women present in the chamber and critical acts by women, particularly those who had risen to senior positions. The importance of the interplay of critical mass with critical actors at the top, and their role in championing the re-gendering of institutions, is discussed in more depth in Chapter Eight.

Ffion and Mared (Council 'A') both became councillors at the same time in 2004 and felt that the environment they entered did not reflect the 21st Century. They blamed the 'old guys', the '70 plus club', and the women who were already there as privileging a 'traditional', antiquated political environment. Ffion reflected on the traditional language used to describe women councillors and antiquated attire at ceremonies:

We arrived here and we were like "What?", you know "Councillor Mrs?!" And you know, I'm not Mrs, and neither is Mared and, you know, we said "just call, use Cllr [last name]" [...] also, wearing hats at the mayor making! We were like "who wears hats in 2004?!". [Council 'A'] particularly had lagged behind a bit, a bit old-fashioned

Ffion further argued that herself and Mared as 'the 21st century entrants' ensured Council A 'got up to fashion pretty quickly' and that they had 'changed things quite significantly', forcing a re-gendering of the council culture. Indeed Gwen, who entered the same council in 2012, perceived that the council environment had changed before she was first elected, and was aware that the women who came before her had experienced the council differently:

Leah: When you first came in did you find it a welcoming environment?

Gwen: Yes, it definitely was. I know other women that came before me didn't find it that way, but I have, but [...] So maybe that, there has to have been a mind-shift because it was like the old school tie but I've never come across any, I've got to be honest.

Conversely, Rose recalled that, although she too was elected in 2012, she had still found remnants of a traditional council culture. She spoke about her first day after being elected and there being 'a lady in the Member's Room who was making tea and toast for the members'. This was, for her, an example of a stark contrast between experiences from her professional career experience of 'the chief executive making a tray of tea for everybody', and that it exemplified a lack of progress at that time in local councils. She explained that the presence of this woman was disconcerting for her as it implied 'that councillors needed to be looked after in that way', yet also identified that 'there was a gender issue in the way that those long-serving male councillors interacted with that woman'. Rose seemed more aware and conscious of the gendered aspects and cultures of the council than Gwen, perhaps because of her professional background in academia – another institution which is regarded as highly masculinised – but Gwen generally expressed more traditional views throughout her interview, and even identified her own opinions as '*so old-school*'.

Rose also identified instances where male councillors in her early years of office made ‘clearly sexist’ remarks in full council meetings:

‘[an opposition councillor] said something in full council and it was clearly sexist [...] and I challenged him and that got reported by the paper’.

Similar instances of this overt sexism were mentioned by other interviewees, with councillors recalling receiving remarks including:

‘What do you know? You’re a woman.’

‘We make trains, we can make them in any colour you like, any colour, any pattern you like, we could even do Laura Ashley’.

‘Who are you? Who do you think you are? [...] Who the hell does she think she is?!’

Rose had also experienced other, more severe inappropriate sexist harassment and treatment:

I can't believe this really happened...in my first term there were um colleagues, some long-serving colleagues in the local authority, that were, I suppose, well meaning, but...maybe a bit inappropriate. And I did, I've been married for twenty-five years and been with my husband for thirty-four years but I think probably for about nineteen of those years I've never worn my wedding ring, I've never, but I did start to wear my wedding ring again. Which is, which I think is a reflection of sometimes how I felt uncomfortable by some of the interactions [...] but, yeah as a kind of symbolic move, I did start to put my wedding ring on again.

Rose felt pressured to wear a signifier of her partnership/relationship with a man which she otherwise would not wear, to prevent inappropriate comments from council colleagues. This suggests an environment where women without partners were seen as ‘fair game’ for inappropriate sexist remarks or advances. We see elsewhere evidence that women are often forced to disclose personal relationships with other men, both true and as a deception, to prevent unwanted advances whilst maintaining men’s honour (Stratmoen et al. 2020). Despite these more extreme experiences, however, Rose did still feel that ‘things had moved on’ since her first term, and that the perpetrators of these inappropriate comments and sexual harassment were ‘no longer councillors’.

Although the overtly sexist comments and harassment experienced by Rose and other interviewees were perceived to be less common, there was a sense that sexism, where it does exist, had instead become more veiled, implied, and subtle. Interviewees reported subtler forms of sexism, including being ‘talked down to’, patronised, or simply ignored:

Jacqueline: But I, I do find often that they will try and talk you down. Talk me down, they can be somewhat patronising. [...] But across the chamber yes, you can get that feeling 'Oh, you know, Bloomin' woman, what do you know?'

Leah: So, are those very much overt comments being made or is it more kind of implied?

Jacqueline: More implied. I would say yeah, more implied. And actually, when I think about it, I actually would attribute that to maybe just two or three of the male opposition. Now like I say, they're in power so [...] they've got that power and they're not afraid to show you that. And I think there are times when they, you know, can and do imply: "Well, you know what, what do you know?" Because you're a woman is the implication.

Mared: I was sat here and it was to do with *my* IT problem and [IT male staff member and male councillor] they're both sitting there, talking to each other. So, it's things like that.

Sioned: Can I be honest? I don't like male, chauvinist pigs [...] and some of the male councillors, especially the Labour ones, do try and put women down all the time. Yes. The older ones it is.

Samantha (Council Leader, Council D) had also experienced a male councillor in her first few terms trying to 'put [her] down' and she believed that being a woman councillor requires resilience:

When I was Leader of the Opposition, and the Leader of the council then was a man, [he] was a little bit too ready to try and put you down. But it just got my goat and I just give as good as I get - I don't put up with that, sorry.

Leah: Do you think being a councillor requires that thick skin?

Samantha: Ah, definitely, yeah [...] you've gotta have broad shoulders and a thick skin and just get on with it with a smile on your face.

Being patronised or 'put down' by other members was a particularly common experience for younger women in this study – the intersection of age and gender here significantly affected their experiences as politicians. The younger councillors interviewed – Eleri, Tara, and Theresa – reported differential treatment because they were *young* women:

Eleri: But as there was very much the patronising attitude. Once I'd made that [first] speech, somebody made a comment that I 'spoke very well for a new member'. I don't think that had anything to do with my being a new member, I don't think they would have said that to a new member who was a 60-year-old man, you know? And so, I don't think there are tangible barriers [...] but there's definitely a condescending attitude that could be a barrier to other people.

Theresa: Yeah, like I said, for me, unfortunately, everything is tied up with fact that I'm also young [...] and I'm like a baby face, too. [...] I think as well the fact that I'm a new councillor, probably, you know, compounds on that, too. 'Cause people have been there like twenty years and then it's really a case of, you know, people talking to you like you're a baby for multiple different reasons.

The intersection of gender, age and 'newness' here created an atmosphere of condescension and experiences of being patronised which Eleri felt could 'be a barrier to other people'. This echoes Erikson's and Josefsson's (2021, p. 82) research into the intersection of gender and being young in the Swedish Parliament. They found that young women faced a 'double disadvantage' and were 'the most exposed group in terms of pressure, anxiety, and negative treatment'; and that women often had to work harder to meet demands and be taken seriously, as women's 'competency and legitimacy [...] are questioned to a greater degree'. This was found to contribute to young women experiencing a higher number of 'micro-aggressions or micro-inequalities' including patronising comments, being spoken over in meetings, or having their ideas stolen/miscredited. Being young also often coincides with relative newness and inexperience in the institution, and other studies have found that being newly elected can contribute to women's marginalization. As noted in Chapter 4 (section 4.4), newly-elected women undergo a period of induction into the political arena and thus learn to expect subtle sexist treatment (Kerevel and Atkeson 2013).

Erikson and Josefsson (2021, p. 96) commented that the young women they interviewed were 'particularly thick-skinned' to deal with the negative treatment from colleagues. Similarly, participants in this study mentioned the need for a 'thick skin' (Gwen), being resilient, 'broad shoulders' and the strength to 'just get on with it' (Samantha). Interviewees' reaction to public sexist comments often affected future treatment and not showing vulnerability was a tactic for women councillors to protect themselves against future sexism or gendered commentary from colleagues.

Gwen: You know, I had one person who said to me "Oh yeah but what do you know? You're a woman." And by the time I finished, they never said it ever again! I don't think you could or should record what I said, but you get the gist.

Again, this echoes the findings from Erikson and Josefsson (2021) where women would speak up about inappropriate treatment as a tactic or counterstrategy which enabled them to 'do their job in spite of unequal conditions'. Linguistic tactics and political approaches which could also be considered counterstrategies are considered further in Section 6.4.

Women's experiences of being a woman local councillor and their treatment from fellow councillors are perceived by interviewees to have improved over the past two decades yet, as is perhaps the case with wider society, men have adopted more veiled and subtle sexist tactics which are more likely to go unchecked. Condescension, patronisation, and subtle sexist jibes were still experienced by the participants, and there remains a common view and consensus that being a local councillor requires resilience and the strength to laugh off or quip back at male colleagues. Taking a feminist institutionalist perspective to these findings allows us to establish how institutional mechanisms and the oversight or failure of individual committee/debate chairs in council meetings enable subtle sexism and micro-machismos – the ignoring of or conscious resistance towards any existing rules which may prevent such behaviour therefore acts to support those who try and silence women in debate and deliberation on a daily basis.

6.3: “More visible and vulnerable to attack” – Sexism, Abuse, and Violence from the Outside

In order to provide a holistic, contextualised account it is pertinent to explore how women are treated by those external to the council and, given that community activity was a common motivator to stand, how women experience being a local politician within their community. Moreover, given that councillors are expected to be accountable through the media and on social media, the treatment of women in digital spaces must be addressed. This section illustrates that it is not just informal practices and sexist cultures within councils which subject women to sexist treatment, wider societal treatment of politicians also has a substantial impact. These incidences cannot clearly be tackled by a feminisation or re-gendering of our political institutions, but it remains important to outline how factors internal and external to local government in Wales must be considered when understanding why levels of women's descriptive representation remains poor.

Interviewees discussed a feeling of vulnerability and anxiety when attending residents' homes or having residents attend their homes. Councillors can be asked to visit constituents' homes to discuss complaints. They also have their *own* home addresses publicised as a requirement upon election so dealing with constituents on their own doorstep is also a likely scenario. Interviewees discussed the tactics they employed for avoiding situations which may pose them harm. For example, Angharad (Council D) would take her husband with her to some houses in her constituency:

Angharad: I'm lucky because my husband's on the Town Council so if there is something that arises, I'll sometimes say, "OK, well, I better not go to this house on my own". I'm aware then that I'm a woman on my own, maybe a man wouldn't necessarily think that. [...] If my husband can't come with me, I'll arrange for colleague to go with me. But I think that's just common sense. Whereas if I'm going to see a woman, I wouldn't necessarily worry about that.

Theresa explained that she had similar thought patterns when asked to go to residents' homes:

Theresa: So, you know, so I'm just gonna over their house and then I'm like, do I take somebody with me? Like, you know, my boyfriend, who's also a councillor, he would much prefer me to just say, 'no, I'm not you know, I'm not comfortable with that. We'll have to do it over the phone.'

This suggests that women councillors have internalised that it is their responsibility and 'just common sense' to take steps to keep themselves safe from experiencing violence or harassment. These sentiments echo recent concerns following the murders of Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa⁸⁶, regarding how, in situations of gendered violence, the onus or blame is so often placed on women who failed to keep themselves out of a dangerous or harmful situation, rather than on perpetrators who chose to commit the violence or harassment. Women are told they must not walk home alone in the dark, must wear conservative clothes which discourage gender-based violence, must stick to well-lit areas, must stay with friends, and must not make themselves vulnerable through alcohol or 'poor' choices.

Theresa discussed trying to mentally plan an escape route from a resident's home whilst the man spoke about his genitalia:

Theresa: But I have gone to people's houses before and sort of been led through multiple rooms, like all the way to some back exit of their house and then that person actually had a problem with public toilets closing. Like he was talking about like his you he was talking about his genitals. And I was kind of like, oh my God, like, I'm deep in this this guy's house,

⁸⁶ Sarah Everard was kidnapped whilst walking home in Brixton Hill, South London on 3rd March 2021 by Metropolitan Police officer Wayne Couzens who falsely told Everard that she was being arrested for breaching Covid-19 regulations. He later raped and strangled her, burned her body, and disposed of her remains. Everard's murder provoked strong feeling from women and allies across the country and led to public protest and vigils in her honour. Sabina Nessa was murdered on 17th September 2021 by Koci Selamaj in Cator Park, Greenwich whilst walking to meet a friend. Her murder also attracted widespread media attention and further vigils across cities in the UK. Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London) subsequently stated that violence against women and girls was an 'epidemic' (BBC News London 2021).

you know, if I want to get through the front door like it would have, it's three minutes to get through the house. [...] And this old man is telling me about his penis and you just think like, you know, like there's so many ways this could go that I would like not have any way out of, you know?

Whilst community activity was a crucial factor in their decision to run for office, participants often did not feel safe in their communities, and encountered situations where they felt vulnerable. Marie raised similar, gendered safety concerns, including the vulnerability of doorstep canvassing during campaigning, and harms that arise from one's address being publicly available:

Marie: I think particularly as a woman, going out campaigning at night on your own, being expected to go out and visit complete strangers in their homes. Your address is all over everywhere - everybody knows [...] within the first few weeks being elected, I came back from a late meeting and my kids were scared because an angry man knocked at the door because he'd been given a parking fine and it was *my fault*. So, I think you're really quite exposed now as a single woman. It can be quite difficult, I think you very often put into compromising situations which I didn't consider well before standing, certainly.⁸⁷

It is not just the councillor themselves affected by these feelings of vulnerability or exposed to possible harm, as their families, homes, and properties can also be targets of violence. Concerns about violence against women in politics in the United Kingdom became salient following the murder of MP Jo Cox in her constituency in 2016⁸⁸. It is not a 'new' phenomenon, however, as the threat of physical and psychological gendered violence, as well as the sexism and misogyny experienced by women in the political world, has become normalised as 'the cost of doing politics' (O'Connell and Ramshaw 2018; Krook 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020). In Northern Ireland, research found that 'carrying out constituency business exposes elected women to risk, particularly when they are [...] out visiting constituents' (Turner and Swaine 2021, p. 14). Violence against women in politics has been considered and understood as constituting a barrier for women considering an elected role and as a problem endemic to politics. However, research and media attention has largely centred on women in national political arenas, rather than at the local level. This is concerning given that local politicians live and spend more time within their local

⁸⁷ Italics represent interviewee emphasis

⁸⁸ On 16th June 2016, Jo Cox MP was murdered by Thomas Mair who shot and stabbed her multiple times whilst she was on her way to hold a routine surgery with constituents in Birstall, West Yorkshire. Cox's murder raised concerns about the safety of MPs and particularly raised issues about the targeting of abuse towards women and other minorities in politics.

constituencies and communities and are often more ‘visible’ and recognisable to the general public than their MP:

Ffion: I'll walk down to the city centre and people know who I am. With the greatest respect, they probably wouldn't spot their MP. I'm *much more visible*, we are much more visible, and that's why we're more visible and vulnerable to attacks.

This research highlights that violence against women in politics is not a matter reserved to national political legislatures, and that women local councillors feel equally as vulnerable whilst carrying out their basic electoral duties.

The increased digital or *online* presence expected of politicians has further led to concerns for women's safety in digital spaces including social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Attention shifted towards the experiences of gendered violence against women in online or digital spaces during the #MeToo movement which emboldened various women in politics to speak out publicly about the misogynistic abuse they had received on various platforms – for example, MPs Diane Abbott, Jess Phillips, and Mhairi Black all spoke out in Westminster about abuse received on Twitter, Facebook, and via emails. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016, p. 6) found that ‘social media have become the number one place in which psychological violence [...] is perpetrated against women parliamentarians’. Whilst online attacks are not only experienced by women, Citron (2014 cited in Krook 2020, p. 56) argues that men tend to be attacked for their ideas or political actions, whereas women are ‘disproportionately targeted for being female’ and, as Krook (2017) contends, ‘tend to be attacked in highly personalised, sexualised, and often vitriolic ways’. Erikson et al. (2021, p. 12) further find that men were attacked for being politicians, whilst “women are targeted as gendered beings [experiencing] degrading comments that explicitly target them as women and sexualise them” (Wagner 2020; Fuchs and Schäfer 2021; Harmer and Southern 2021).

In her recent book *Violence Against Women in Politics*, Krook (2020, p. 71) attests that access to social media and the internet has ‘dramatically expanded opportunities to harass women directly’ through its ‘decentralized and anonymous nature [which] lends important protective cover to perpetrators’. Mantilla (2013) asserts that online attacks on women are an adaptation of the offline misogyny often carried out by men to drive women from public spaces to a new, digital world. Online attacks are also further enabled by what Suler (2004, p. 321) denotes as the internet's ‘toxic disinhibition effect’ (original emphasis) where ‘people say and do [non-salutary] things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily

say and do in the face-to-face world'⁸⁹ and, relevant here, dissociative anonymity where 'they don't have to own their behaviour'. Ffion shared this view that social media and digital spaces have been the main locations of recent incidences of violence against women local councillors:

Ffion: Well, there's several reports out at the moment about harassment of women in public life [...] I think I have to qualify and quantify that *that's* been the difference. There's been no difference in how I've been treated *politically* within the context of the council chamber or ward issues, but I think how the general public relate to politicians these days has changed. And women politicians are much more susceptible to umm, to social media trolling, to hate comments. I've suffered from it personally, quite, quite extensively. [...] But it is particularly pointed for women and research has shown that women are being vilified in this way. [...] Because yes, it is awful, it is difficult, and I don't want to detail exactly what has happened to me but it has been pretty horrendous and the police have had to be involved.

All study participants had either experienced abuse on social media or knew of fellow women councillors who had. The majority had not officially reported it, unless it is 'something really bad':

Samantha: I think the fact that there's been more recently about people being quite nasty I think especially with social media [...] It's more so on the social media, on Facebook and Twitter, you can get some people sounding off in a nasty way. And I must say, if I find something is coming through, I tend to don't look at it, I'll ignore it and I don't follow anybody who does anything like that. If it's something really bad, I have on occasion reported it to the monitoring officer.

There are mechanisms for reporting any concerning and serious abuse or threat on social media. Marie had experienced a serious threat which she had reported to the police and the perpetrator received a prison sentence:

Marie: I have had a threat from a [man] and he put a threat on my Facebook profile page, which I reported, and it was taken very seriously by the police and by [council] officers, and the person that made the threat actually got sentenced to three months in prison.

⁸⁹ Suler (2004) makes the distinction between *benign* and *toxic* disinhibition – the former denotes when people share emotions, fears, wishes, or commit acts of kindness and generosity online, whilst the latter encompasses negative or taboo behaviour such as hatred, threats, and the 'dark underworld of the Internet'.

Theresa, like Marie, received a death threat, but this was based on a political statement made by the Conservative Prime Minister at the time and nothing to do with her own actions. Ironically, the statement was in support of a social issue which Theresa herself was ‘vehemently against’:

Theresa: They just sent me a death threat. And it was kind of like, but that was particularly annoying, again, because it wasn't for a position that I held. [...] That was from a woman, that death threat, just to clarify.

The playing-down of this incident as ‘just’ an ‘annoying’ death threat here perhaps suggests again this normalisation of violence against women in politics as something to be expected even when particularly concerning. Theresa clarified that a woman was the perpetrator of this incident, evidence that violence against women online is not necessarily committed by one specific gender.

Interviewees also discussed other gendered aspects of their treatment by those in the community. There were feelings, for some, that residents did not take them seriously or, at the very least, *as* seriously as they may a male or, for younger councillors, an older female colleague. For Tara, whilst she was clear that she had not experienced much sexism from within her council, not being taken seriously by residents had been an issue:

Leah: No, so you, you feel that kind of you are treated differently by residents and maybe sometimes not taken seriously, as seriously as men?

Tara: As in, like I think that if, for example, if I was a 40-something year old, white man and I've said what I've said in an e-mail, people wouldn't have come back so quickly with questioning it. I think they would have just been like 'Oh okay, thank you very much'. [...] Whereas I, I sometimes I get 'Oh, well if you can't help me then I'm going to write to the MP'.

Eleri echoed these sentiments, stating that she ‘had to work harder to show [constituents] that I'm competent’, which she did not ‘think somebody who was older would have to do, whether male or female’. This put her under ‘extra pressure [...] to show that I know what I'm talking about’ and to ‘work hard to show that your age, that your gender isn't against you’. For Eleri, age was more significant than gender:

Eleri: My ward colleague is a woman, and she won't mind me saying, but she's a little north of 60! And out of the two of us, especially when we first started, people would go to her more because she is older. So even though both of us are women, after that option they go for what they know or what they're used to seeing.

Eleri alludes to the stereotype of local politicians as older, regardless of gender, and the public gravitating to the councillor who fits best with their expectations of what a politician *should* be and look like. Participants therefore faced a gendered battle or “double-bind” to be recognised as politicians and taken as seriously as their male colleagues by constituents. This corresponds with decades of research showing that women politicians often must work harder to prove themselves to the public than their male counterparts but that this work is also often questioned (Mezey 1978; Dittmar et al. 2017; Dimitrova 2020; Costa 2021).

6.4: Doing Politics Differently?

Turning attention back to the gendered informal norms and cultures *within* the institution of Welsh local government, a further exemplar of the informal gendered ‘rules of the game’ is that masculine political behaviours, languages, and political styles are rewarded and incentivised above women’s political approaches and how women ‘do politics differently’. Previous research has argued that female politicians introduce a ‘kinder, gentler’ style of politics into institutions (Norris 1996a, p. 93), preferring collaboration and cooperation to adversarial, combative politics (Bicquelet et al. 2012) (see Chapter 2.3). This has been termed ‘the different voice ideology’ and is the foundation for current discourse in which women politicians ‘find the prevailing, “male” style of political communication “oppressive”’, preferring a distinct feminised political language characterised by cooperation and consensus-seeking (Cameron and Shaw 2020). Academics had hoped that increased levels of descriptive representation of women to critical mass levels in politics would engender this ‘feminisation’ of political styles (Childs 2004a), and a shift away from the ‘ya-boo’ culture of traditional UK political institutions like that seen in the House of Commons (Lovenduski 1997).

Participants in this study were asked here about their preferred style of politics or how they ‘get politics done’ as local councillors, and whether they perceived this as distinct to their male counterparts. Some interviewees perceived themselves, and other female councillors, as preferring a distinct political approach to their male colleagues. Theresa, for example, stated that she thought ‘the way that politics is done is very different between the two different genders’, arguing that women are ‘cooperative generally’, ‘passive’, and prefer to ‘talk somebody around’, distinct from men who ‘want a moment in the sun’ and will ‘make it a big show, a big speech [...] for three minutes until finally told to stand down by the Mayor’. This echoes findings elsewhere where male politicians are ‘more likely to gain and hold the floor’ or ‘violate formal rules in debates [...] in order to gain the floor’ and

female politicians are punished because they prefer a less adversarial political style (Shaw 2002, pp. 401-402; Biquelet et al. 2012). Common descriptors used by interviewees who similarly described themselves as adopting a 'feminised' political style included: kind, pragmatic, measured, balanced, professional, collaborative, listening, poised, and value-driven. Rose spoke about her preferred approach:

Rose: It's possible to engage with people and be professional and be kind. There are ways to kind of deliver decisions and interact with people that don't need you to shout, or be the person that shouts the loudest, it's about being balanced and measured and kind and collaborative and, but always, always, making decisions that are underpinned, for me, by those socialist values.

Other councillors also preferred to resist the 'grandstanding', 'macho shouting' style of politics:

Lara: I've got more confident with going with my style which, and actually, on the whole, I think it pays off because, if you're not doing the grandstanding all the time, actually people don't tend to do it back to you. And also, it means that if you do need to grandstand occasionally then people pay attention.

This indicates a resistance to assimilation into masculine political approaches, with women wanting and feeling able to assume their own styles of politics akin to those identified by Norris (1996a). This suggests that there is a dominant style of masculine political language in Welsh local government and that some women prefer, instead, their own political style and approach. However, Rose and Lara both were in senior positions in their council and were perhaps assured that they would be listened to during debate; backbench councillors may find it more difficult to be heard whilst doing politics 'differently' to the informal norms and cultures. Positional power is therefore found to afford more freedom to conduct politics through feminine-coded communication tactics.

There were other tactics of resistance to the masculine norms of political communication. For example, Eleri discussed her use of the Welsh language in the Chamber and the impact that often had on her way of doing politics. Despite seeing herself as a co-operative councillor and non-adversarial, she said that speaking in Welsh often meant that her comments unintentionally came across as more 'damning' than she often intended in the Chamber. This was largely because she had to speak slower in Welsh for the translator:

Eleri: My style is prohibited because I speak in Welsh. I have [to] speak slower than I normally would. If things wind me up and I do get angry, I will express that. But I'm not aggressive and I'm more of a, again, because I have to speak slower - it's that poised, kind of drop my tone if I'm really angry. [...] And the way it came out in Welsh, there was a lot, you could feel the silence, like you could feel that 'Oof', it was a lot more damning.

Eleri described an incident where a male councillor was being aggressive and 'screaming in [her] face' in a meeting without intervention by the Chair until she began replying to him in Welsh. Using Welsh, in this instance, was a mechanism for dealing with a male councillor attempting to use adversarial political communication to intimidate a female colleague. Eleri stated that he 'lost the room' when she began to speak as non-Welsh speakers 'scrambled' to put on headsets for translation. Use of language was an important site of resistance for Eleri, which enabled her to undermine and draw attention away from a fellow councillor who has been trying to use the informal political culture and language norms to his advantage.

The opportunity of language as a site for resistance for Eleri here was indeed a positive here, yet from a feminist institutionalist perspective, her account reveals institutional failures to address and control political debate in a manner which engenders the equal participation of all in an environment and denounces negative, sexist practices. Eleri should not *have* to rely on her Welsh language abilities to participate in debating within the chamber and this is a clear example of institutional decoupling (Meyer and Rowan 1977) whereby gaps between institutional formal rules and informal practices are created and maintained by dominant groups. It appears that, regardless of any written procedural rules which should govern political debates in chambers, the environment and language used in the meeting discussed above was as '(un)feminised' as those who oversee it – had the chair been stricter in a calling-out of the male councillor's sexist and aggressive behaviour, Eleri's linguistic resistance would not have been needed.

Pressure to do politics a certain way and the feeling that certain political styles, approaches and behaviours are privileged was nonetheless a common experience for participants, who occasionally felt side-lined by the privileged masculine way of doing politics:

Theresa: I think the rest of us are kind of a little bit cowed in conversations like there are instances when people have said things and kind of like immediately been shouted down and there's something about that

environment, I think.

Lara: I just didn't like the tone or the style. I don't like that kind of posturing and showcasing type politics.

Being 'shouted down' or interrupted is a common tactic used by male politicians to rule out women in political debate and chambers. Och (2020, p. 388), for example, argues that 'maninterrupting' – whereby men interrupt women to control conversations or to discredit their arguments – is often an attempted 'form of resistance against women in politics and, in its worst iteration, prevents female representatives from representing women's interests'. Though her research found women in the Bundestag⁹⁰ to be unphased by such tactics, with her concluding that women would adapt to 'the dominant institutional norms'. However, Och (2020, p. 403) contends that interruptions and other forms of linguistic resistance to the feminisation of institutions and their debate 'have the possibility to silence or discredit women's voices'. This has been found at other levels of politics where women are disadvantaged by linguistic practices and make fewer contributions in parliamentary debates as a result of these micro-aggressions and, at times, more overt sexist attacks (Shaw 2002; Childs 2004a). This is particularly prevalent in political institutions where there has not been much contemporary institutional reform. Shaw (2002), for example, found that the linguistic practices in the House of Commons comparatively disadvantaged women MPs more than their women equivalents in the Scottish Parliament, which was generally less adversarial.

Whilst some participants saw themselves as embodying kinder, gentler and co-operative political styles, others perceived their political style as 'bolshie', 'fierce', 'fearless', 'brusque', 'blunt', and 'abrasive'. This often was in direct contradiction with what fellow councillors and the wider community expected from a woman councillor:

Gwen: People are sort of, "oh you're very abrasive", well if you, why dress it up with flowers and roses? Just say what you need to say, get it done, and sort it out. Done. That's how I am. [laughs]

Leah: Do you think people are kind of a bit shocked by that because they don't expect it from a female, woman councillor?

Gwen: Yes, they are, they are very, very shocked [...] They feel it's, Jesus Christ she's like a whirlwind, and then after a bit, because I'm so on their case constantly, it's "who the hell does she think she is? This gotta stop",

⁹⁰ The Bundestag is the German federal parliament and is the directly elected representative body in Germany.

and they get really bent out of shape - they cannot stand it. But it don't scare me.

Mared: There's still some stereotyping about what sort of personality you should have, you know 'don't go around shouting off'.

This echoes research which suggests that aggressiveness is perceived as a masculine trait in political communication which is thus 'more noticeable and less acceptable' (Cameron and Shaw 2020, p. 151) when adopted by women, and that 'gendered mediation means that female candidates are more likely to be portrayed as blasting, attacking, and accusing [...] a more negative impression' (Gidengil and Everitt 2003, p. 227).

Interviewees who perceived themselves as just as fierce or abrasive in their politics as the men argued that the justification for this was that women often must fight harder to make their voices heard and to make a difference in the Chamber. Women, they perceived, must be tougher, cleverer, thick-skinned, and avoid being 'shrinking violets':

Ffion: Well, you've got to be cleverer, tougher. Um, you've gotta, you know, you've gotta work harder.

Marie: But I think really being a councillor is incredibly, it can be, incredibly lonely. You are, you can't please everybody. You have a tough, tough skin – people will take exception to you straight away without even knowing you, and make comments and make assumptions.

Gwen: If I was gonna talk to another woman, I would say "grow a skin, you need a thick skin".

Samantha: If you're going to be a retiring violet, you won't get anywhere. You've got to be there on your own terms and your own personality [...] You've gotta have broad shoulders and a thick skin and just get on with it with a smile on your face.

Jacqueline: I suppose it's better slightly now than it was, but I think, you know, you as a female have a, it's sometimes a bit more difficult to get your points across.

Ffion reflected on women being under pressure to prove themselves, stating "we'll have reached true equality when mediocre women get into places of authority like mediocre men". Women, it was perceived, need to be more than 'mediocre' to succeed in local government, suggesting that the informal norms and 'rules of the game' privilege the political styles and

language preferred by men, and one must either be strong enough to resist, or assimilate into the expected. Lara, who preferred her own collaborative and open political style, perceived that there were “a few of the older women councillors, particularly on the Tory side [who had] swallowed the stereotype [and become] the female equivalent of the male councillor stereotype”, a sentiment also echoed by Mared and Ffion. Marie took, perhaps, the severest perspective on capability, going as far as describing some of her fellow women councillors as ‘incapable of a political position’, contending that there ‘are elected members who shouldn’t be there [... they] are incapable, you know, they can’t contribute’. Whilst she admitted that she could ‘find many more men who are incapable of the role than women’, she openly stated that lack of ability, and not the way that doing politics is gendered in the council, was the reason many women did not contribute in the chamber.

Briggs’ (2000) research in Montreal and Hull found that female local councillors felt that there was more pressure on women to ‘have a hide like a rhinoceros’ and to be ‘strong, decisive, compelling and convincing’. Furthermore, she found that, without a strong personality, female councillors are at risk of becoming intimidated by politics and dropping out. Participants in this study discussed female councillors who had lost the confidence to compete in the masculine political arena and had dropped out of politics or not sought re-election. Rose, for example, called for more training and mentoring for councillors as she could identify councillors from her earlier terms who had lost their self-confidence:

Rose: And also mentoring and support, I think particularly of one person who was with us in my first time of office who didn't stand again, really capable [...] mentoring and support, just being able to, umm, supporting people to hold onto that confidence and self-belief that they've come into this with. Because I've seen people go when they've lost that confidence and self-belief.

The expected informal norms of ‘doing gender’ and the unwritten rules around political speech and language in local councils have a significant impact on women’s desire and ability to participate and do politics in their preferred style or approach. Some interviewees suggested that only women strong enough to adopt their own political style, or who identify means of resistance or who can assimilate and ‘do politics’ through performative masculinity will succeed in being listened to, contributing, and feeling self-efficacious as politicians.

Gendered styles of political speech and language influence Welsh councils’ ‘rules of the game’ and the atmosphere in formal council meetings. There were feelings of frustration

amongst participants about how council business and meetings were dominated by male posturing, grandstanding, and a Westminster-esque political point-scoring convention (Shaw 2000, 2002), rather than action-driven and focused discussion to ‘get things done’. The traditional dominance of masculine styles of doing politics meant that meetings were characterised by ‘posturing and showcasing’ (Lara). The gendered ‘rules-in-use’ meant that the traditional procedural conventions and structures around council meetings frustrated interviewees who perceived themselves as more focused on action and implementing policy than debate. This, in turn, prevents and discourages the substantive representation of women, as it can leave little time for the deliberation and debate of gender equality reforms and women’s issues (Bäck and Debus 2019).

Interviewees were keen to outline how they must fight extremely hard to get their voices heard in council meetings and that they had to be resilient to common gendered micro-aggressions (like being ignored by male chairs or having ideas stolen/repeated by male councillors):

Marie: It's really very competitive. There's an awful lot of grandstanding. There are an awful lot of attention-seeking. There's a lot of political point scoring. And if you're not willing to join in with that, your voice goes unheard.

Theresa: I mean, when you watch the MPs in parliament, it makes quite an image when you see like a woman stand up to say something. And then there's like 50 like braying men from the other side of the bench and [then] that's you, you kind of feel like, “OK, well, that's the last time that I say something”.

Sioned: it's all prepared speeches. It's a bit like Westminster [laughs] on a small scale.

Mared: So, you might have 3 people want to ask a question - Oh, I've just forgotten, “Herbert”⁹¹ was on the cabinet and I call it a “Herbert” now - cause he forever, never, never, never asked me. [...] Could only see the men. So, it's subtle stuff all day long, which I'm sure you suffer from and other women, it's exactly the same.

Leah: Yep, men repeating things in meetings that you've already said

Mared: Ahhhh yes, when they take your ideas! I had exactly that the other day! I said, "That's exactly what I said just now!" He said "Oh yeah yeah," he said, "that's right."

⁹¹ Anonymised name

The informal conventions of council meetings which intersect with the formal formats of how council business is carried out clearly privilege those who prefer a more vocal, adversarial approach to politics and, as Theresa highlights, this can prevent women from participating, or, as Mared explained, lead to men stealing women's ideas or women being interrupted. Being interrupted or 'maninterrupted' (Och 2020) or men stealing women's ideas is not unique to politics. For example, Cannon et al. (2019) found that women are more likely to be interrupted in group conversations during 'one of their early participation attempts' resulting in a 'cascading effect' whereby they are then subject to multiple subsequent interruptions by peers and have 'fewer rights to the floor'.

The posturing and grandstanding style of meetings was, for some interviewees, a source of frustration. They wanted to get away from the 'bollocks and bullshit' (Rose), 'get straight to the point in meetings' (Mared), 'sort it out' (Gwen), and 'get things done' (Eleri). Women's preference for action-based politics was a common theme across the interviews. Lengthy speeches and posturing were seen as a 'waste of time' by interviewees who expressed a want for more action- or output-based deliberation processes without 'male colleagues [who] might like to hear the sound of their own voice' (Rose). Critical mass theory contended that women are more likely to participate and engage in political debate when there are greater numbers yet, even when this does exist, research finds that "women speak substantially less than men in most mixed-gender combinations" (Karpowitz et al. 2012, p. 545). Hence, without changing the institutional procedural traditions and unwritten cultures regarding meetings or, indeed, challenging male politicians who violate formal rules, women continue to be silenced or were resented by interviewees and, at some extremes, women councillors recalled times where they felt entirely disengaged, spending 'meetings catching up on emails' (Lara), or 'cowed' (Theresa).

Lara stated that the 'business' of local government 'gets done' outside of the council meetings and Chamber and, indeed, often full council meetings are not arenas where political decisions are made but mere procedural displays. The masculinised culture of local government therefore permeates council meetings, frustrating, alienating, and disengaging women councillors who prefer a more action-focused approach to doing politics at the local level. As studies in national parliaments have suggested, most women are put off by the 'Westminster style' of politics, and want a legislature that is more co-operative, kinder, and which gets things done (Norris 1996a; Shaw 2002; Childs 2004a). Women's political

representation, both descriptively and substantively, is negatively affected by these masculinised settings as women feel unable to participate fully and lose confidence in their own ability, and it is only when they consciously or unconsciously resist or assimilate gendered convention that their voices are heard.

6.5: Conclusion

Overall, this chapter has turned the feminist institutionalist gaze towards the informal norms, cultures, and rules of Welsh local government. The domination of the ‘pale, male and stale’ councillor continues to affect the experiences of ‘others’ entering these legislative setting, frustrating and fettering their attempts to overcome gendered inequalities. Although study participants report that progress has been made regarding a decrease in overt sexism and sexual harassment, there are still instances of women being ignored, patronised, receiving sexist comments, and being silenced by individuals and the wider gender regimes of these institutions. An increase in the presence of women to critical mass levels in some councils has not caused or delivered a re-gendering or ‘feminisation’ of politics, though was recognised as key in lessening overt sexism. Notwithstanding the treatment of women councillors from *within* their elected institutions, there were further reported incidences of women local politicians feeling vulnerable whilst carrying out duties (visiting residents’ homes) in their local community. Moreover, violence against women in politics now takes an online form even at the local level, with councillors reporting online abuse, harassment, and trolling as a significant issue for elected politicians.

Examining the gendered nature of political language, communications, and procedural traditions in meetings, this chapter has outlined how women politicians who do not resist or adopt masculine political styles and language can be ‘cowed’ in their politics and prevented from fully representing women and participating in the Chamber. Being fierce, abrasive, strong, and resilient was found to be a requirement of women councillors who face additional barriers to being heard. Masculinist political styles were supported and maintained by traditional micro-machismos. This chapter has positioned the informal norms of Welsh local government as remaining organised around a privileging of masculine political styles, ethos, and culture. Attention turns now towards those few women who do successfully navigate the labyrinth and make their way to senior positions in Welsh local government and the impact they can have on changing the formal and informal gendered ‘rules of the game’.

Chapter Seven **Gendered Leadership**

7.1: Introduction

Evidence in previous research (see section 2.4) suggests hierarchical marginalisation exists in politics, namely that women's descriptive representation decreases as the level of seniority in the political institution increases: "the more important the position, the fewer the number of women who are found to be in occupation" (Henig and Henig 2001, p. 67). Given that holding a position close to decision-making makes a difference to feminising political agendas (through strategic policy management and setting) and to feminising the institution itself (through leading on institutional change), this underrepresentation of women in senior positions means fewer opportunities for women's substantive representation (Norton 2011; Fawcett Society 2017; McNeil et al. 2017). This chapter addresses this study's third research question⁹² by exploring the unique experiences of female councillors holding and/or seeking senior positions within local government. 'Senior' female councillors⁹³ were purposefully over-sampled in this study. Consequently, of the 19 participants, twelve held some form of 'senior' position at time of interview and one had previously held such a position.

This chapter first explores women's journeys to leadership positions, arguing that these are highly gendered, and exemplify the 'labyrinth to leadership' (Carli and Eagly 2016) discussed in Chapter 2.4. The process of attaining a senior position generally takes much longer for women than men, with female Cabinet members and Leaders in this study reporting having to 'pay their dues' by holding their backbench position and a wide range of semi-senior positions (Chair, Party Whip) before attaining Cabinet or Leader positions. Men, in comparison, were often handed Chair roles and Cabinet posts directly after being elected. This is problematic given that women are more likely to 'fall off the ladder' and not stand for re-election after fewer terms (Allen 2012a).

The chapter then extends the thesis' feminist institutionalist approach to explore how the gendered formal and informal 'rules of the game' discussed in Chapters Five and Six

⁹² What are the unique challenges faced by, and experiences of, female councillors holding and/or seeking senior positions within local government?

⁹³ 'Senior' here denotes the following leadership positions: Leader, Deputy Leader, Cabinet Member, Opposition Spokeswoman, or Committee Chair

constitute some of the more significant structural barriers to women's progression to and ability to hold senior positions. Women's self-efficacy and confidence is also examined with the assertion that a lack of mentoring and encouragement can often mean women do not perceive themselves as able to hold cabinet or leadership positions.

The role of political parties and individual leaders as gatekeepers is explored, as it was in Chapter Four, this time identifying the part that these individuals and organisations play in either removing or presenting obstacles on women's journeys through the labyrinth. This chapter addresses the contention that left-wing parties, and particularly the Welsh Labour Party, are more 'female friendly' (Stockemer and Sundström 2017), arguing that, whilst Welsh Labour does perform generally well in encouraging the descriptive representation of women in senior positions in Welsh local government, this is not guaranteed.

Women's experiences of holding senior positions are explored in relation to the gendered pressures to prove and re-prove themselves as a female senior councillor (see Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011). This section is accompanied by an exploration of participants' leadership approaches and their working relationships with external council partners⁹⁴, Cabinet and Leader councillors, and their Officers and employees. Participants were more likely to be undermined and questioned by external partners, especially in certain portfolios, which do not fit the traditional 'pink', 'soft', or 'feminine' portfolios identified by Krook and O'Brien (2012). The importance of situated knowledge or lived experience is discussed with reference to how women hold portfolios, which have previously been identified as 'pink' or 'feminine'. Moreover, participants felt 'pink' portfolios were often more important than 'masculine portfolios' like transport or infrastructure, as portfolios for education, and social care – held by women – were identified as 'the two big spenders'.

Finally, recognising the interplay of descriptive and substantive representation at the top, the chapter debates whether critical masses in senior positions make a difference, and how or if senior councillors substantively represent women. The interview data indicate that holding a Cabinet portfolio enables opportunities for substantively representing women, with participants holding Cabinet positions being more likely to list and highlight *specific* policies for women to which they had contributed or championed. Having more women on the cabinet, and particularly a female Leader, is perceived by participants in this study as a

⁹⁴ For example, external services that Cabinet members engage with to deliver their portfolios.

positive force which can engender a better cabinet environment and atmosphere. This leads to discussion of how women (and men) in senior council positions act as critical actors at the top – exploring their role in championing, reaching a hand down, and in changing organisational practices to improve the representation and participation of other women.

7.2: Getting to the Top – Navigating the Labyrinth to Leadership

As detailed in Chapter Three (section 3.4), Eagly and Carli (2007) proposed that what had been a ‘concrete wall’ in the way of women’s advancement, and then a ‘glass ceiling’, had transformed into a ‘labyrinth to leadership’. Through this ‘labyrinth to leadership’, women can find a path to the top, however, this path is littered with translucent, dynamic, and subtle obstacles and barriers, which still maintain the entrenchment of men in the highest echelons of power. Women’s descriptive representation in the highest senior position in Welsh local councils – Council Leader – is low, with only six women Council Leaders being present in Wales during 2017-22. In cabinet positions, the average level of women’s descriptive representation (DR) across the twenty-two councils was 28 per cent, matching that of women’s DR as councillors in Wales generally.

Women’s DR in senior cabinet positions on average across the four chosen councils in this study is illustrated in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: Women's representation in Councils A-D, showing overall % and percentage of women in leadership positions (data obtained from council websites and manually calculated)

Council	Overall DRW (%)	DRW in Council Cabinet (%)	Gender of the Leader/Deputy	% of female councillors in the council who held a cabinet/leader position
A	32	44.4	Female/Male	25
B	33	16.6	Male/Male	5.6
C	43	44.4	Male/Female	12.5
D	12	37.5	Female/Male	60

Three of the councils (A, C, and D) had higher levels of DR in senior positions than their overall levels representation of women on the council. Council B was the only council that had a lower percentage of women in senior positions (16.6 per cent) compared to the

representation of women overall (33 per cent)⁹⁵ – a key motivation for its choice as a case study. Nonetheless, whilst women seem to be comparably well-represented in senior positions in these councils, none of the councils had a gender parity in its senior positions, and Council ‘B’ only had a single woman in its cabinet. Furthermore, although numbers at the top seem relatively positive, many of the women in senior positions were long-serving councillors who had held senior positions for a long time and could reflect on their experiences getting to their positions under more traditional, ‘boys club’ councils in the past, but were also considering stepping down in coming election cycles. Only Tara was a relatively new female senior councillor, having only served half a term before taking up a cabinet position.

The journey to a senior positions has long been recognised as a gendered process (Kanter 1977a; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011). However, Marie, a Labour councillor who was disparaging about positive action techniques and all-women shortlists, argued that the ‘traditional reticence within [Council B] to give chair or cabinet positions to newly elected councillors’ was ‘irrespective of gender’. This view was similarly expressed by the male councillors in Farrell and Titcombe’s (2016) study. Nonetheless, other participants in this study said that they had experienced the selection process for senior posts as being highly gendered.

A key aspect of participants’ perceptions about the gendered processes of seeking senior positions was that their, and other women’s, journeys to the top had taken longer. Senior women recalled being first back-benchers, then holding an array of other positions (Committee chairs and so forth), before finally becoming cabinet members, and for two participants, council leaders. Participants listed other positions they had previously held:

Gwen: I've been a backbencher, then I went onto Scrutiny, from Scrutiny I was a chief Whip and then from there I applied to be a Cabinet member.

Rose: I was also a role-holder within the group because, obviously, the Labour Party have got that gender balance requirement. So, the group, I was the Secretary for a bit, I was the Chief Whip for a bit. [...] So, I suppose it was um my engagement with the scrutiny process, getting involved in other groups as well - we had a scrutiny review group as well

⁹⁵ This changed during the writing of this thesis and as of 2020/1 there was an additional woman in the cabinet of Council B, meaning that women’s senior representation was then equal to their overall representation on the council, but for clarity here, data refer to the situation at time that data collection took place (2019). This will also have changed following the 2022 local elections.

that was trying to kind of improve the performance of scrutiny and make it more meaningful. I think I probably got noticed through that.

This echoes Farrell and Titcombe's (2016) research which found that women thought there was a disparity between the amount of work and experience required for male councillors to be considered for cabinet or leader positions, and that expected of women. Long-serving senior councillor, Mared, asserted that the 'labyrinth to leadership' (Eagly and Carli 2007) was a 'good description' and was 'resonant' with her experiences. Similarly, Rose commented that the higher echelons of local government had traditionally been dominated by 'time-served, retired men' (Rose). This suggests that women's journeys to senior positions traditionally necessitated being present for multiple electoral terms, a worrying trend given that women tend to have shorter political careers, something found by Lazarus et al. (2022, p. 29) to "hinder their efforts to accrue the seniority and expertise necessary". Ceri perceived that this has improved but she expressed concern that there was 'a slot in time where very capable women, just gave up rather than keep pushing and pushing those barriers', because women, when she was first a councillor, had to 'keep kicking a lot of doors'. Ceri felt that men did not experience those same challenges:

Ceri: If a man wanted to put himself forward, you knew you were on a hiding to nothing anyway. If you wanted to go for that position, you knew you wouldn't get it.

In Council 'A', Ffion and Mared had experienced being passed over for male councillors in their earlier years as councillors. They explained how male councillors who were elected in the same election cycle were given scrutiny chair positions 'straight off the street', whilst they were not:

Ffion: I think we had six scrutiny chairs then, all run by Labour and the new *male* councillors that came in had scrutiny chairs, but the new *women* councillors that came in didn't. And we would have equally been able to do those straight off the street, you know, I think out of the chairs, I think two new men that got them straight away, but the women didn't. And I remember that fact, because I remember thinking 'how come he's got it because he hasn't been a councillor before either' but the women were just not considered by my predecessor.⁹⁶

Mared: I saw men coming in who were elected first time straight into Chairs, scrutiny, and that didn't happen accidentally. [Ffion] and I just sat there on the backbenches.

⁹⁶ Italics denotes participant's emphasis

Consequently, achieving positions of political leadership took longer for these women than for their male colleagues, meaning that they were reliant on being elected multiple times at the ballot box and serving multiple terms. Tara, the only cabinet member in Council 'B', echoed this sense of being reliant on the ballot box as the Welsh Labour Party there only had three individual women elected in 2017 who had served previously, meaning that only herself and two other women could have even been considered for cabinet positions:

I'm a cabinet member - I'm the only female cabinet member but I was one of only three returning women. There was, in our group there were only six women that got returned. We put out, I think, a 50/50 kind of slate [...] however, when it came back, we had six women and I think 20 or 19 men.

This is concerning given that women have been found more likely to drop out of politics after fewer terms (Allen 2012a, 2012b). Additionally, the gendered nature of this process suggests that previous assertions by Lovenduski (2005) about a lag hypothesis whereby women will 'catch up' to men when they have been present lower on the political ladder is accurate at the individual level, but not on a whole-gendered level. Furthermore, Curtin's (2008, p. 490) assertions that women's underrepresentation in seniority could be considered a consequence of the fact that '*any* politician [must] build a political career' regardless of gender, can now be questioned as, according to data presented here, male councillors have not traditionally faced the same lengthy career building period before being handed senior positions in local politics.

A concerning result of this career trajectory is that most senior female local councillors are older. All bar one of the senior councillor interviewees across case study councils A, C and D here were over 50 years of age – Tara, cabinet member in Council B, was the only young, female cabinet member across the four councils and had been a councillor since 2015. Younger male senior councillors are more common, suggesting an intersection of age and gender. Participants positioned this as problematic, and the older senior women were aware that there was an issue with recruiting young women to senior positions:

Lara: So, the groups not badly balanced but it's not 50:50 but if you look at the age and sex component, you would see that it's very different. So, we've got a few younger male councillors, only got one younger female councillor. So, I'm, I don't want to insult the other women, I think I'm the second youngest woman in the group. So, yeah, it's quite interesting that, whereas you've got quite a few younger male councillors, there's only one younger white woman.

As discussed in Chapter Five, younger women face more difficulty balancing the triple duty and will be more significantly affected by the gendered formal organisational practices which are further exacerbated at the top. Difficulties balancing the political, personal and professional mean that younger female councillors may only be able to serve one or two terms as local councillors, and they cannot therefore establish the ‘political career’ necessary for women to gain senior political positions. Moreover, Chapter Six highlighted how young women further experience more patronising and sexist comments and are taken less seriously than their older counterparts, which interacts with the formal barriers to create a particularly hostile and unfriendly political environment. Consequently, younger women often face the organisational barriers of gendered institutions more keenly than their older, oft-retired female senior councillor colleagues.

7.2.1: Institutional Obstacles in the Labyrinth to Leadership

Progressing through the seniority levels in Welsh local government (to Committee Chair, or to Cabinet and Leader and Deputy Leader positions) does come with a corresponding increase in remuneration. However, this is often accompanied by increased time commitments, personal and professional sacrifices (most senior councillors, at least at Cabinet or Deputy and Council Leader levels, will leave their professional occupation elsewhere), responsibilities, and a more keenly-felt sense of insecurity and risk. Moreover, there are few institutional practices present to support those who are not ‘the usual suspects’ to enter more senior roles. As has been found elsewhere (Lyon and Woodward 2004), seniority, therefore, can exacerbate the challenges of the triple duty and the difficulties balancing time between political careers and home.

Though money is certainly not ‘everything’, remuneration is once more important. Levels of remuneration increase depending on the grouping of that council (as per Table 5.1 earlier), which is based on the population of the local authority borough. For example, those in councils with populations of less than 100,000 in their borough receive less than those in councils with larger populations and larger budgets like Wales’ major cities. The four case study councils here cover all three salary ‘groups’. This sliding senior salary scale echoes Scotland’s approach yet, unlike Wales, Scotland does not specify the exact amount that senior councillors (other than the Leader and Civic Head) should receive. Councils in England set their own remuneration levels for senior positions. Council leaders in Wales therefore often earn less than council leaders in England who are responsible for poorer

council budgets⁹⁷. Therefore, whilst intra-Wales equity does have its benefits and prevents public outcry at individual councils' levels of remuneration, senior local councillors in Wales face territorial injustice and can be considered at a major disadvantage compared to some of their counterparts in other UK constituent countries.

For most interviewees, the remuneration offered to holders of senior positions in council cabinets combined with wider shortcomings in institutional design and practices, as well as the increased time commitment required, was viewed as an explanation for the lack of women, and younger councillors, in these positions. Tara (early 30s), who was then the only female cabinet member in Council 'B', discussed how she felt she was 'worse off' financially since becoming a cabinet member as this had meant having to leave her employment outside the council and that, prior to taking on the role, she had been saving to buy a house but was, at time of interview, living at home with parents.

Thirteen participants positioned being or seeking a senior position as forcing financial and lifestyle sacrifices for councillors, especially for those who are younger and would otherwise be in full-time employment. Marie commented, 'it's very much those who don't need to earn a second income' because, whilst all councillors face the insecurity of losing the subsequent election, this is heightened when holding senior positions as one's position makes employment elsewhere impractical. Marie, a backbencher in Council 'B's majority Welsh Labour Party administration, had previously been offered a cabinet position but declined it due to study commitments, taking a Committee Chair position instead, with its lesser commitment expectations, responsibilities, and remuneration. Marie shared that, had she taken the cabinet position, she 'would have to claim universal credits in order to top up [her] income' as a single parent. It was the combination of these specific circumstances which prevented her from accepting the cabinet member role⁹⁸.

Senior positions are insecure in the long term and, whilst a senior council position may be 'hugely secure for four or five years, much more so than any other job' (Mared),

⁹⁷ For example, the Leader of Cardiff City Council was responsible for a budget of £656m for the year 2020-21 and was paid £54,100 (Table 5.1). This is comparable with the Leader of Manchester City Council who had a similar budget of £665m and earned £59,198. However, for performing the equivalent position in Bristol, Mayor Marvin Rees, who is responsible for a much smaller budget of £395.7m, earned a total pay allowance of £80,871 (Bristol City Council 2021).

⁹⁸ Marie has, since data collection, been appointed as a Cabinet member in Council B but it is unclear whether her financial situation changed.

there is the real possibility that the next election cycle may result in loss of election, position, and all form of employment/earnings for senior councillors:

Tara: It's a gamble at the end of the day, you've got four or five years in office. But do you give up your full-time employment to do this, knowing that you may not be re-elected?

Mared: You've got that insecurity, so you've got to stand for election every five years. And that, that would be both the same for women, younger women. Because how are they going to have a career?

Tara further explained that there is no financial safety net for local councillors who do lose their seats:

with MPs and Assembly Members, [...] they have an allowance for a short amount of time after they've lost their seats to enable them to like get on their feet again [...] that doesn't happen in local government

Tara is referencing the resettlement grants MPs and MSs receive if they lose an election, when councillors, even those who had held senior positions, receive no such safety net or allowance, are 'escorted' to clear out their desks and face 'trying to work out what they're going to be doing with the rest of their lives' (Tara). Accepting a senior position was perceived as a 'a risk', 'a gamble', 'a big ask' and 'insecure'. This supports conclusions that being a councillor, especially at the senior level, can often be incompatible with professional life, and with achieving personal milestones – consolidating the political and the professional with the financial and occupational aspirations of younger, less secure councillors is a difficult task which further forms a barrier to senior positions for women, as evidenced by Marie's refusal of such a position. Considering this from a feminist institutionalist perspective, therefore, we can see that Welsh local government has failed to implement any institutional practices to support women (and particularly those with additional care responsibilities) who would otherwise consider senior positions. This consequently maintains the male dominance of senior local government positions, and excludes those balancing other responsibilities alongside politics.

7.2.2: The Importance of Gatekeepers

As with women's journeys to their political roles explored in Chapter Four, the role of gatekeepers to senior positions was significant, as in previous research (Dahlerup 2006a; Childs and Kittilson 2016; Kayuni and Chikadza 2016). Both individual leaders, as well as political parties, were perceived by interviewees as playing a key role in removing or putting obstacles in the way of women's journeys to senior positions. The present data suggest that council

leaders play a particularly crucial role in promoting the descriptive representation of women at the top – they pick their cabinets, have presence in recommending chairs, and will allocate portfolios as they see fit. Previous research has shown that leaders act as gatekeepers to cabinet positions, selecting members that reflect their political priorities and can be relied on for support (Blondel and Manning 2002; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Claveria 2014; Goddard 2017). Ffion's and Mared's experiences of being previously reliant on male leaders and party groups as gatekeepers to senior positions were also echoed by other participants, as well as the likelihood of women being passed over for men. Therefore, women's likelihood of holding senior positions was perceived as reliant on the support and championing of them by Leaders:

Rose: it took me a little bit longer to recognise that this, the leadership side of this [female] Leader was completely different, and they were willing to cast the net and really look at building a cabinet that was based on ability and not length of service.

Mared: Umm, but it's down to personal choice, it's not down to your ability, it's - I wouldn't say that it's on a whim - but it's not like in a workplace. Although that can be on a whim sometimes! But it's essentially, the Leader is all-powerful

Leah: So that can maintain the male-dominated...

Mared: If you've got a man there, absolutely, you know, I mean you're up against it really and all those voices

Ceri: We've got a wonderful leader now in [Council C] that believes we're all equal and that we are judged on our capability, not because we are a woman. You know, we get promoted, we get promoted because we good at what we do.

As will be discussed in section 7.3, critical actors at the top are crucial to women's descriptive representation in senior positions, and women at the top were perceived to make a significant difference if they reach their hand out to bring others through the labyrinth.

Another factor to consider is that party membership or affiliation affects women's ability to seek and hold senior council positions:

Mared: So that was the first four years where they didn't take any notice of me really, and then of course next time we were in the opposition, you weren't going to have any power then anyway.

Membership of a party in minority coalition and/or opposition is accompanied by fewer opportunities to rise through the ranks as positions in the Cabinet and as Leader/Deputy are generally unattainable – local government councils tend not to follow the Shadow Cabinet approach employed in devolved and central government⁹⁹. Progression opportunities are heavily dependent on party performance at the ballot box and opposition parties are only allocated a handful of Committee Chair and Scrutiny positions. As Eleri outlines, even when being nominated to an Opposition Chair position, she experienced barriers:

I have been nominated by my party to be Chairs of different committees. So, what happens is there are some committees that the ruling group are not allowed to be Chairs of. But because they got the votes, the ruling group will choose who they want. So, I mean, it is a great endorsement that my party thinks that I would be able to Chair that, but especially if you're going up against a different group, I am nominated on the basis that there's less than 10 percent chance I'll get it, you know.

This suggests that encouragement from one's colleagues and peers can only go so far, and opposition party women will have fewer opportunities to progress.

Political parties' internal opportunity structures also play a significant role in facilitating or fettering women seeking positions of seniority. Previous research has identified that left-leaning parties with feminist ties have 'female-friendly opportunity structures' (Stockemer and Sundström 2017) and formal party rules which attempt to address the paucity of women represented by promoting women as candidates. This means there is a larger 'supply' of women left-wing politicians available for senior positions, and left-wing political parties have been found to succeed in helping them up through the ranks because they favour radical change often through 'soft' rules for equal representation in senior positions (Webb and Childs 2012; Fox and Lawless 2014; Goddard 2017). Consequently, governments led by left-wing parties tend to appoint more women to cabinet positions.

All councils in this study were arguably led by 'left-wing' or 'left-leaning' parties – the Welsh Labour Party (Councils A, B and C), and a Plaid Cymru-led Coalition (Council D). At the time of data generation, only Council B did not have a critical mass (taken as 30 per cent here) of women in cabinet member and leadership positions. Councils A and C both had

⁹⁹ Opposition parties may assign a portfolio area to one of their elected members who will then ask questions to the relevant portfolio-holder in 'Questions to Cabinet' in Full Council meetings, but this is not always present unlike at Westminster where there are corresponding 'Shadow' positions for each Minister in the opposition party group.

four women in their nine-person cabinets (44 per cent), and three of Council D's eight positions were women-held (37.5 per cent). Council B, a Labour-minority led council, only had a single woman on its cabinet – Tara, although this has since improved to two members. This suggests that the Welsh Labour Party is perhaps more successful in promoting gender balance in some councils than others and other factors, such as councils which remain more loyal to the traditional gendered norms and are yet to progress away from their masculinised cultures, can further have influence. As discussed in Chapter Four (section 4.4) interviewees suggested that Council 'B' was a more 'traditional' council generally.

The Welsh Labour Party was praised by all Labour interviewees in Councils A, C and D for its record concerning women's representation in senior positions, and the Party's efforts to promote this were also recognised, even if they were not always positively viewed¹⁰⁰. The Labour Party explains in its Rule Book that the party 'expects' that

'Labour cabinets [should] reflect the diversity of the area represented by the local authority and deliver at least a gender balance of leadership positions to reflect the make-up of the group' (Labour Party 2020, p. 69)

Therefore, there is an encouragement that the top two positions – Council Leader and Deputy-Leader – should be gender-balanced insofar as if there is a male Council Leader, then the deputy-leader should be female, and vice-versa. This was the case in Council 'A' and 'C', but not in Council 'B' where both the Leader and Deputy-Leader were men.

Women in Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru were mostly laudatory of their political parties as positive gatekeepers to senior positions, suggesting some changes in "practical alliances between men and women for achieving equal-opportunity measures" (Connell et al. 2005, p. 1817). These interviewees cited other reasons for not putting themselves forwards to senior positions such as a personal lack of ambition or the formal barriers discussed in Chapter Five. Of the two Conservative Party women interviewees, Jacqueline was an older councillor who had had experience in a senior position in a council elsewhere previously, where the party had been in a majority, and held an Opposition Spokesperson position at time of interview. However, Jacqueline was critical of the Conservative Party's efforts and track-record in including women in Council 'A'

¹⁰⁰ See discussion in Chapter 4.3 about some Welsh Labour Party interviewees' opinions about positive action and All-Women Shortlists

Jacqueline: In my conservative group here in [Council A] there are 12 of us. Only three of us are female. That's not really a good balance, is it?

Jacqueline had been involved with Women2Win – a Conservative Party scheme to encourage and mentor women into political positions, but she thought more needed to be done. Theresa was member of an eight-strong Conservative group in Council 'B' where half were women, although both the party group leader and deputy were men. She was positive about both her group leader, and the Labour leader of the council, praising them both for being 'progressive', 'easy to talk to', and 'into intersectionality'. Theresa felt comfortable expressing any issues or questions in the council chamber, and within her political group. This suggests that political parties and key individuals within those party groups play a significant role in fettering or enabling women's political representation and their progression to senior positions.

Women's own perceived personal limitations – such as ambition, confidence, and self-efficacy – were also identified by participants as obstacles to overcome on their journey through the labyrinth to leadership. Previous research has found that women suffer from lower levels of self-efficacy, self-belief, and aspiration than men – a key influence in their lower levels of political engagement and participation (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988; Zimmerman 1995; Rowlands 1997; Narayan 2005; Hibbs 2018; Hibbs 2022a). Previous research (Hibbs 2018; Hibbs 2022a) argued that women's confidence needs to be improved through efficacy-increasing exercises and suggested that building women's intrapersonal psychological empowerment through confidence-building empowerment programmes, like the Conservative's Women2Win or Labour's Jo Cox leadership program, increases their political participation and willingness to take on positions of responsibility and power. This evidence suggests some institutional failure to prepare women for seniority – the informal and formal rules in use interact here to make women feel unsuitable for seniority, meaning women councillors must rely on supportive programmes outside of their councils to equip them with necessary self-efficacy and ambition. Participants in the present study similarly expressed their feelings of self-doubt, lack of confidence and self-efficacy as having delayed or prevented them from seeking a senior position.

Rose: I dunno about barriers, my own self-confidence I suppose. I dunno how to, so I was aware that the Leader asked me to apply for this position. Initially, I didn't quite believe her, which, you must have come across this, I dunno why I didn't believe her because it's my area of professional expertise [...] I don't know why, I did question why she would want me

and I don't know why I did that but confidence probably, but I don't know.

Tara: I think, however they are I think there are personalities, like they are all seeds of doubt within women.

Ceri: When I say more than luck than by judgment, I've never seen in myself what other people see, and to a degree, that's because of the, the inability to believe in myself, to believe in... I've always known I was capable, but I didn't know the level of capability.

Rose thought there was room for better mentoring and support training for female councillors to enable them to deal better with frustrations and set-backs and to 'maintain that confidence and self-belief that they come in with'. She explained that this could prevent drop-out of 'really capable people' who choose not to stand again because 'they've lost that confidence and self-belief'.

As with motivations and decisions to stand as councillors initially (see Chapter Four), a key solution to these doubts was being asked or encouraged to put oneself forward. Being encouraged was crucial for overcoming initial intrapersonal barriers on women's journey through the labyrinth to leadership (Eagly and Carli 2007). For example, Eleri described how having support, encouragement, and a 'powerful whisper' of "you'd be good at that" from women within her party group was important for solidifying her previous aspirations for Committee Chair positions. This form of support was a gendered issue as men, they discussed, would not think twice about putting themselves forward for a position they were less qualified for:

Eleri: I dunno why I didn't think about it because I don't know why. I mean, I, I find that if women fancy something, they need at least two or three people to say, "yes, this is a good idea", as well. But I think a man will just go, "I fancy that, I'm going to go for it". [...] I think it stems from: there's more pressure, you have to work harder, so you want to feel that you can do that 100 percent before you go for it. Which majority of the time you can't feel 100 per cent that you can do it because you'd already be doing it, wouldn't you?

Theresa: Like, I know that a woman is less likely to put herself forward for council. I'm sure because that woman is less likely to put herself forward for a job than a man is full stop. You know, like I know that we look at the job description and we think in terms of things we can't do. [...] And men look at the job description, they think, 'oh my God, I can do like six of these', whereas I would be like, I can't do five of them.

Theresa raised an important point about the gender gap in self-promotion and, consequently, applications for positions. Outside of politics, there is evidence of learned modesty, where women are socialised to minimise their skills and successes (Mancuso Tradenta et al. 2017; Exley and Kessley 2021). As discussed in Section 7.3, having critical actors to reach down a hand and provide validation is an important factor in overcoming personal doubts in women considering seniority in local government elected positions.

Institutional issues within local government were also seen as barriers to women seeking senior positions. Some of these have been explored in Chapters Five and Six in relation to gendered institutions, including remuneration, lack of job-share opportunities, and silencing of women's voices in meetings. Consequently, these issues will not be discussed in great depth here, but the gendered nature of the institutions and organisational practices within them were often raised by interviewees as gendered barriers to senior positions. Being a senior councillor requires further commitment to council duties – something which has a significant impact both personally (an issue for women with caring responsibilities), and professionally (problematic for women wishing to establish careers outside of politics at the same time). An increased number of meetings, more evening or weekend commitments, inadequate remuneration for the increased time commitment, and poorer work-life balance prospects all act as obstacles on the labyrinth to leadership.

Many probable solutions to the dearth of women at the top have been under-employed in councils. Job-sharing cabinet portfolios, for example, as enabled by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (Welsh Government 2021) is permitted as a structural solution to women's underrepresentation in senior positions but has only been adopted by one council in Wales. Allowing councillors to share a cabinet portfolio has been employed elsewhere – for example, Tower Hamlets Council had two job-shared Cabinet positions between four councillors in 2020, three of which were women, and Bristol City Council previously job-shared a Deputy Mayor position between two Green Party women. Previous research has also discussed job-share as a solution to the dearth of women in senior political positions (Wilkes 2013; Campbell and Cowley 2014) and the Liberal Democrat and Green parties have publicly announced their support for such measures. As also explored in Chapter 5.3, many women interviewed were in favour of job-sharing solutions for senior positions to alleviate the exacerbated triple duty faced by senior women with families:

Marie: I would like to see a lot more open-mindedness or job shared positions in cabinet. They do it in [Council], it works very well. There are lots of women councillors with very small children who are able to juggle the responsibilities [...] And I think that would help women progress and to get the experience of a cabinet portfolio responsibility without committing to full time hours.

Accordingly, there are solutions which could be employed to combat the dearth of women at the top but they have not yet been widely adopted in Welsh local government. Improving the prospects of being a senior councillor and making it more compatible with commitments outside of council duties would go some way in tackling this under-representation of women in senior positions. The underrepresentation of young women is concerning, and job-share, as well as increased remuneration, and opportunities to continue career-building external to councillor duties are areas need attention and wider solutions.

Overall, the interview data presented show that the labyrinth to leadership remains an apt metaphor for female councillors' journeys to senior positions in local government in Wales. Interviewees underlined that their journeys are longer, reliant on party and council gatekeepers, hampered by their own self-perceived failings, and that they encounter and experience more keenly the gendered structural barriers embedded in Welsh council institutions. Solutions to these issues were suggested by interviewees – job-sharing portfolios, mentoring and training programs, and more support from political parties and council leaders – but these potential solutions need to be employed more widely. Taking a feminist institutionalist approach to considering women at the top in local government therefore uncovers how seniority and the journey to it is contingent on politicians' access to informal networks. Moreover, the layering on of solutions such as job-sharing portfolios or softer informal solutions like training or mentoring (not provided by the political institution itself) is insufficient in offsetting the gendered effects of formal working practices which make seniority more difficult to achieve for women councillors.

7.3: Does Seniority Make a Difference?

The data in this study suggest that senior women are critical actors in substantively representing women through debating, shaping agendas and implementing policy reflective of women's interests and issues (as discussed in Chapter 2.4; see also Lovenduski and Norris 2003). They are also involved in championing, reaching a hand down, and pulling other women up the ladder, encouraging them to be councillors initially, and then to take senior

positions, thus increasing women's descriptive representation. This section focuses on the role of women at the top in Welsh local government as being crucial in re-gendering and feminising institutions. The impact of women at the top as critical actors or policy leaders on the substantive representation of women is discussed more fully in Chapter Eight.

Female leaders emphasised 'equality' and 'diversity' mainstreaming, rather than a gender-specific focus, as their priority in leading their councils. Both Ffion and Samantha were keen to present themselves as Leaders who mainstream equalities, rather than gender-specific issues:

Leah: Do you often get policies that come through the creation tunnel that are specifically aimed at women? So, policies specifically for women's interests and needs, or does it tend to be about equality?

Samantha: No, it tends to be equality, because I'm an Equality Champion for the county [...] so we've got to make sure that we take into account everybody's needs. It's not just sex-based, as it were, or gender-based. It's all the needs - be they gender-based, or disability based or whatever. So, we keep an eye and we've got an ongoing equalities policy and an action plan which the different elements are reporting on - so we keep an eye that everybody's being treated equally and fairly.

When asked about gender mainstreaming and approaching all issues from a gender perspective, Ffion stated that her ambition was to be a 'diversity' government which represented women and all minority groups:

Ffion: We talk about the Welsh Government having made a commitment that they're going to be a 'feminist' government, well I'd like to take local government further and say that we're going to be a 'diversity' government. So that all aspects are examined, from a feminist perspective, from a BME perspective, from a gay perspective, from, you know, from everyone's perspective, disabled. Let's look at it all, try and take all of that into consideration and get away from the white, middle class mainstream.

Ffion, who was also a key figure in the WLGA, was clear that diversity should be the priority of, not only Council 'A', but all councils in Wales and in the United Kingdom. Council Leaders are more greatly scrutinised by the public and by other levels of governance or organisations than individual cabinet members. Accordingly, along with their concerns about anonymity in this particular study, they are perhaps likely to be less radical in their expressed political priorities to researchers and journalists, preferring to uphold a public image which portrays them as democratic, equal, and inclusive. Furthermore, because of increased pressures on their time – leaders will undoubtedly attend more meetings both internally and

externally than any others in the council and so it may be the case that they are constrained temporally from policy innovation, preferring, instead, as Samantha states, to focus on a mainstreaming, scrutiny approach.

A key arena for the substantive representation of women is through the holding of a cabinet portfolio. Women in this study held a range of portfolios including:

- Education
- Children and Adults' Social Services
- Wellbeing / Future Generations
- Health
- Culture
- Leisure
- Environment
- Council Business
- Regeneration

There is more concentration of women holding portfolios which have been considered 'pink', 'feminine', and 'medium or low prestige' in studies of Ministries at the national level (see Table 2.2 in Chapter 2.4.3). Although local councils do not have the range of portfolios that national governments do¹⁰¹, there is still a gendered hierarchy of portfolios in local government. Finance, transport, business, and regeneration are traditionally associated with and given to male councillors, whilst education, health, wellbeing, culture, and social services are considered 'soft' and are allocated to women (Goddard 2017). Bochel and Bochel (2008), and Campbell's (2016) work suggests that women *choose* more feminine portfolios. Yet this is unfounded here as the majority of councillors were allocated their portfolios by their respective Council Leaders. Most understood that their portfolio allocation was usually the result of their expertise or previous experience in their professional backgrounds, rather than personal preference.

Decentralisation has shifted the importance of portfolios at the local government level. The transferral of more powers and control over budgets to local councils means that

¹⁰¹ Local government does not have a defence portfolio, a Home Office, Chancellor, or foreign affairs position, for example.

portfolios in areas that are traditionally seen as more feminine and of medium or low prestige, are actually now some of the ‘big spenders’ in local government:

Samantha: there's a tension between funding for education and funding for social services - they're both big spenders and they both need to spend, but in the past I think there had been male dragging feet saying "why do we want to spend on social services?". So, we've, we have put more emphasis on social services and tried to invest, although it's been very difficult having to face up to austerity because we've had to face about £40m of cuts over the past ten years.

Education and social services portfolios particularly, even though they have been, and still are traditionally viewed as soft and less prestigious portfolios, often come with the most responsibility for their Cabinet members. As Samantha argues, there has been a significant impact felt by these portfolio areas in terms of dealing with the consequences of the 2008 economic crash and resulting austerity measures, meaning that they often require tough decisions to be made by the corresponding female senior councillor. All senior interviewees were conscious of the impact of austerity on their decision-making, with balancing the books and making decisions about cuts taking priority, and many expressed regrets that they could no longer deliver the same services and projects as before (see section 8.3).

Individuals at the top matter, and the importance of a supportive and progressive critical actor leading one's party group and/or the overall council was discussed at length by interviewees as helping to address power balances and offer sites for resistance towards gendered rules and norms. Having a supportive party group or council leader – woman *or* man – can significantly affect the representation, participation, and experiences of women in the party group and in the council, and particularly (in the case of critical actor Council Leaders) in engendering a more gender-balanced cabinet. Senior positions were therefore perceived as amongst the most effective positions for critical actors to hold on councils. They present the individual with the opportunity to both symbolically (if a woman) and substantively represent women (see section 8.2), and also to champion others in bringing women up the ladder.

Reaching a hand down to bring other women up the ladder was seen by many interviewees as an important responsibility for women in senior positions. This challenges findings by O'Brien et al (2015) who suggested that female leaders ‘shut the door’ on their female colleagues in their efforts to assimilate into masculine political leadership behaviours. All senior female councillors here, from both left and right-wing parties, were keen to outline

how they were not shutting the door, and were making it a priority to encourage or mentor other women:

Leah: Would you say you've used your role to champion other women?

Gwen: Yeah, I think I have actually. Um, because the new girls that have come in behind sort of look at me and say "Are you not scared?!" I say "my knees could be knocking but they wouldn't know it." You just stand your ground and bluff your way through, if that's what it takes.

Ceri: I try to tell especially female members, when they come into the council is um we buddy-up, give them, I try to act like a comfort blanket and say, look, it can be frightening, it can be intimidating [...] So I impart that on all, especially new female councillors. And saying to them, if you've got worries, if you've got concerns, come and speak about it. You know, there's an open door policy.

Others, like Tara and Jacqueline, had been involved in campaigns and empowerment programs within their political parties which aimed to increase the numbers of women both in local councils and further up the governance levels.

Tara: I do a lot in terms of the Labour Party, like I do the 'Be a Councillor' sessions and I do them for the kind of BAME side of things as well as the women's side of things. And I and, you know, if people message me afterwards, I always get back to them, I always have a conversation with them. I tell everything I've learnt to try and pass it on. [...] I'm a mentor on the Women's Equality Network and they send, they've had quite a few, they've had a few successes in terms of some of the people have gone through the programme are now MPs.

Jacqueline: We are very supportive and involved with Women to Win because that's what we need. We need to see more women on this front line, don't we? [...] I think like Women to Win, that's a good mechanism for moving forward. But, yeah, we need to spread the Conservative ethos and to encourage women to sign up for that.

Rose said she had been supported by female colleagues 'right from the very beginning' and that was a key motivation for her in being a good role model in return:

Rose: My female colleagues here, absolutely, there's been no raising of the ladder if you like, people have been supportive all of the way. And I think because of the interactions that I have on a day-to-day basis with the community or in my professional life, or as a senior councillor, yeah, I think I would see myself as a role model.

It was not just women *within* the council who had played a championing role for interviewees. Eleri, a young Plaid Cymru councillor, identified many women in her party more widely who had been inspirations for her standing and who participated in what she

identified as a party tradition to nurture young women coming through. Others also talked about encouragement to stand to become councillors, or take on senior positions from other women in their party – MPs, MSs, and MEPs – and could name individual women who had inspired them, and who had individually encouraged them, including Rosemary Butler, Anita Gale, Eluned Morgan, and Leanne Wood¹⁰². Consequently, asking women in the community or their local party to stand to be councillors was important and was an activity that most of the councillors had committed to undertake. Samantha spoke about bringing new women in and described times when she had ‘been on the phone for half an hour or more’ with prospective female councillors. Interviewees mentored women in their local party branches, or championing them for positions elsewhere:

Leah: So, we kind of talked about role models, do you think being in a senior position allows you to champion other women? You were talking about not wanting to be the woman that pulls the ladder up

Rose: Absolutely. Absolutely. We, um... in everything, so whatever opportunities, there may be people, we've got um a branch member at the local level, she's our youngest branch member. [...] I suppose I'm using her as my example because, um, really and truly it's absolutely nothing to me to hook her up with somebody else, or somebody she might want to talk to or invite her to come on a street surgery with us, so she has that exposure and develops that understanding [...] it's not just about giving her access to those opportunities, it's that little safety net of support that we can give her while she's doing that as well.

Council Leaders are important for increasing women’s descriptive representation – particularly in senior positions. The female Leaders here had both made significant in-road into increasing women’s descriptive representation on their cabinets, and they were continuously looking for ways to carry on their legacy. Ffion was clear about her succession planning through mentoring and training women:

Ffion: You must never pull that ladder up. I'm very clear about succession planning. [...] I'm absolutely clear about my succession plan and the new young women that have come into the group since 2017 you know, I've been working on extensively with support and training, one of them has gone through the Jo Cox programme, the other is going through the LGA leadership programme, [...] ensuring that the women are having that extra

¹⁰² Rosemary Butler was a Welsh Labour Senedd Member between 1999 to 2016. Baroness Anita Gale is a current Labour Party member of the House of Lords, having previously been the Labour Party’s Women’s Officer for Wales and General Secretary for Wales. Baroness Eluned Morgan (Welsh Labour) is currently Minister for Health and Social Services in the Welsh Government having been a Senedd Member since 2016, a former Member of European Parliament (1994-2009), and has been a Member of the House of Lords since 2011 where she has held various roles including Shadow Minister for Wales, Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, and a whip. Leanne Wood was leader of Plaid Cymru from March 2012 to September 2018, and was a Senedd Member from 2003 to 2021.

training and support they need. [...] I wouldn't be surprised if a woman succeeds me here.

Samantha was also clear about how she chose to include the other two women in her party group in her cabinet because of their gender and experience:

Leah: Do you feel that it's important as a female leader to bring women through into your cabinet?

Samantha: Most definitely, definitely. [Nia's] been a member of my cabinet from the beginning, I brought her in. [Angharad] was a newer member, she's been there 17/18 years now. I wanted to give her an opportunity to prove herself - she'd been chair of Social Services Scrutiny and um she took on the Social Services role for me and she did well with it, so I kept her on.

Female leaders are particularly important figures for ensuring gender-balanced cabinets with both Samantha and Ffion having a critical mass of women in their cabinet teams. Rose was clear that Ffion's leadership was 'completely different' and that she was 'willing to cast the net' when filling cabinet positions 'based on ability and not length of service'. Additionally, whilst women's overall descriptive representation in Council 'D' was the poorest of the four councils, Samantha brought every available woman from her political party into her cabinet, meaning that 60 per cent of *all* women in her council held a senior Cabinet or Leader position, and 100 per cent of Plaid Cymru women.

These findings echo previous research which found that women in senior positions can break down the 'homosocial reproduction' of masculine appointments by promoting women (Kanter 1977a). Goddard (2019), for example, found that women are 30 per cent more likely to appoint a woman than their male counterparts. This does not downplay the success of the male leader of Council 'C' and his gender-balanced cabinet, however, and interviewees from that council commended him on his progressive and inclusive approach. Critical acts and support for women was not reserved only for female leaders or party figures, however, with the male leader in Council 'C' as well as both the Labour and Conservative Party group leaders in Council 'B' being highly praised for being fair, progressive, and for supporting women:

Theresa: The council leader is somebody who is definitely easy to talk to and I feel like I can have a conversation with him quite well. And I know that he is very kind of progressive. And he's into like intersectionality. And I feel like he would be somebody that you could quite easily work with on something. [...] what I will say about our particular council is that there are

really good relations between the leaders of all the groups. [...] So, I feel like we're all lucky in that our leaders are all kind of the most, you know, kind of the most progressive.

Leaders and cabinet members were clear that, as Duerst-Lahti (2011) and others have found, having a senior position can make a significant difference to one's ability to substantively represent women, both through championing women's issues in the policy creation space, in debate and decision-making, but also through changing and feminizing the council. Positional power in institutions, therefore, allows women to effect gendered change, although this may be limited (de Vries 2015). In this study, women at the top were crucial in the 'feminisation' and re-gendering of formal and informal institutional norms and practices. For example, Maread discussed how Ffion had played a crucial role in tackling the '70 plus club' with their 'traditional' ways of doing politics. Ffion also mentioned that 'the first thing' she did as Leader was change meeting times to 'facilitate the work-life balance of members of the cabinet' – a clear move to combat previously-inaccessible meetings for employed members:

Ffion: Well, I think I have to consider myself [a critical actor] because the words I've said have made changes. And sometimes that's been subliminal, and sometimes that's been deliberate. But what I have, what I've always tried to do from my days as a teacher, I've tried to be a role model. [...]. And yes, I suppose I've played more of a role than I've actually estimated that I have myself. So, it's difficult to point to particular issues but clearly equality, diversity has been at the forefront of what I've done.

Samantha said that she had changed the ethos of Council 'D' to be more inclusive, and in shifting away from 'an old silo-based mentality'. Accordingly, leaders have the capacity, remit, and institutional power to alter council business and change organisational practices, within reason, and the female Council Leaders in this study had utilised that power and autonomy to try and make councils more accessible and modern. Ceri had also taken steps to feminise her council, not just for councillors but also for council employees and female staff by running awareness campaigns and support groups around the menopause. At time of interview, she was trialling 'menopause packs' after she heard women employees discuss instances of men being unsympathetic towards women opening windows to combat menopausal 'hot flushes'. Leaders and other senior members therefore had an impact on feminising their councils and often implemented schemes and policies to refigure their political workplaces around fewer masculine gendered norms and cultures.

7.4: Conclusion

Women in senior positions are crucial to the political representation of women, along with male critical actors and supporters who also attempt to feminise from the top. However, the data illustrate that women's journeys to the top often take much longer than men's which, given women councillors' propensity to serve fewer terms, means that there are significant barriers to women obtaining seniority. The institutional formal and informal factors discussed in Chapter Five and Six which interact to exclude women and limit their participation are also exacerbated at the top, and the layering on of rules to combat this (such as job-share) has not been accepted or engaged with on a wide scale – participants here only 'knew of' a few examples.

Once women do reach senior positions, evidence here suggests that they can make a difference – as critical leaders who can feminise organisational practices, and as critical actors who champion and reach a hand down to other women, and who substantively represent women through their politics and leadership. Holding a portfolio, particularly one which aligns with one's lived experience and/or previous professional experience, is seen to engender more opportunities than on the backbenches to include women's interests. The next chapter builds on these findings to consider how and when the substantive representation of women is most likely to take place, and other institutional, economic, and social barriers preventing women substantively representing women.

Chapter Eight

Gendered Representation

8.1: Introduction

This chapter brings together the previous chapters and addresses research question four and its sub-questions. The analysis is consolidated into a holistic view of how this thesis contributes to ongoing discussions in political representation theory, exploring the links and interactions between descriptive and substantive representation, and their cognate theories of critical mass and critical actors, to identify how women's representation occurs and plays out in local government institutions, and how these contexts (from a feminist institutionalist perspective) might constrain or fetter. To do this, the following discussion is structured around the following questions:

How do female councillors' experiences, the culture, and the context of Welsh local government shape the substantive political representation of women in Welsh councils?

- a. What are women councillors' views on the role of 'critical mass' and 'critical actors' in shaping patterns and processes of substantive representation in local government?
- b. How and to what extent do feminist motivations inform women councillors' commitments to substantively representing women?

Moreover, the chapter presents and summarises findings regarding barriers to women's descriptive and substantive representation and, whilst discussions of institutional and experiential barriers have been woven throughout the previous three chapters, this chapter considers more specifically the barriers of partisanship and resistance towards cross-party working to promoting women's representation, frustrations encountered by women councillors in opposition, and the pressures on councils to move away from women-specific policies given austerity-led budget cuts.

Reflecting the need to anonymise councils and councillors in this study, exact figures regarding their levels of descriptive representation of women (DRW) are not provided, instead rough percentages are offered. A summary of the descriptive representation of women in the four councils was provided in section 3.3.2, but to contextualise discussion here, the case study councils are outlined. Councils A, B, and C all boasted a critical mass of women with councils A and B having between 30 and 35 per cent akin to a 'tilted group', and council

C having over 35 per cent women councillors – a ‘balanced group’ (Kanter 1977b). Council D had less than 15 per cent of women in its council chamber and can thus be characterised as a ‘skewed’ group (Kanter (1977b). The three critical mass councils were Welsh Labour controlled councils with A and C having clear Labour majorities, and B being a minority Welsh Labour-led council. Council D was a Plaid Cymru and Independent coalition-led council. This chapter now considers the influence of the presence of women and, specifically, the presence of women below and at/above critical mass levels, on the council chambers and on councillors’ claims to substantively represent women (SRW).

The extant literature on the influence of critical mass on the gendered contexts of legislatures, as well as the content of politics was discussed in section 2.2. In brief summation, critical mass theory posits that increasing women’s presence in legislatures will a) benefit from group solidarity and leave them freer to behave in ways which challenge hegemonic masculinist norms, practices and cultures thus leading to a feminisation of legislatures (norms, rules, culture etc.); b) will inspire women to form alliances with fellow women; and c) will lead to a qualitative shift in the content, contexts and styles of politics within the political arena, and improving the substantive representation of women in policy and law-making, budget allocation, and in feminising the political institution itself.

Chapter Four explored the motivations of women to become councillors as well as the influence of positive action techniques and political party mechanisms on women’s political presence. This chapter extends this discussion, exploring whether the feminist motivations expressed by some interviewees are reflected in women councillors’ commitments to substantively representing women. Chapter Five considered councils’ formal organisational practices and their impact on women’s political presence, this chapter builds on this to outline the impact *of* women’s political presence on councils and their work.

Chapter Six focused on the informal contexts of councils and their gendered norms and cultures, finding that interviewees felt that women prioritise attaining more cooperative political environments. This chapter assesses the extent to which this cooperation extends across Welsh council Chambers and between political party groups. Chapter Seven illustrated the impact of women ‘critical leaders’ in feminising council cultures and critical actors are revisited again here in order to highlight their disproportionate impact on women’s substantive representation. This chapter therefore draws together these discussions and summarises the key, salient factors shaping women’s experiences and representation

emerging from study participants' situated knowledge of Welsh local government. It further considers whether and how women's substantive representation is best achieved through the *interplay* of critical mass with the presence of critical actors (see section 2.2).

8.2: Does Critical Mass Matter?

The core justification for descriptive representation and critical mass is that increasing the number of women in a legislature will change its nature, context, norms, and, crucially, political and policy content (Phillips 1995; Mansbridge 1999). More women present means the potential for more policy which is responsive to women's views, interests, opinions, and is more representative of the population, and for the feminisation of political institutions. Testing this theory in local government, this study's participants were asked whether they believed that the presence of more women in council chambers had, or would, improve(d) their council in terms of women's substantive representation or in feminising their institution.

All case-study councils, bar Council D, boasted a critical mass. Long-serving Welsh Labour councillors from councils A, B and C, who had experienced their councils pre-critical mass, stated that improvements to women's descriptive representation had positively affected their experiences as councillors, particularly regarding the issues of sexism and harassment (see section 6.2), and shared the perception that a critical mass had led to more inclusive governance practices. Ceri discussed how her initial experiences of being a local councillor in Council C were affected by few women being present:

When I got elected as a county borough councillor, I was very mindful and aware of the fact that at that time, twenty-three years ago, there was very much, umm I call them the old boys' club [...] they did frown upon women and I think the women had a particular place in the pecking order [...] I was told by one man I'd be better off in the kitchen with the tea-towel cooking, than I would in the political arena. [...]

When asked whether she thought this had changed now that Council C had a critical mass, Ceri explained that:

It has changed dramatically. It has changed. And I think that's because women are now no longer afraid to speak. I was always mindful many years ago that my opinion will be decried or shouted down because there were more of them, that isn't the case now. [...] Now there are a lot of us and we, we haven't got the upper hand, but we've got that, you know, we're respected because...and that again is down to the fact that you've got the numbers, you know, we're all treated with respect and as equals.

Ceri felt empowered and emboldened by the increased political presence of women in the Chamber, and that this meant women were ‘respected’, and that the council had escaped the ‘stranglehold’ of the ‘old boys’ club’. Therefore, increasing the number of women was perceived as enabling the feminisation of political behaviour and institutions (Studlar and McAllister 2002; Childs 2004a). Ceri also identified specific changes or feminisations in the council’s approach to ‘doing politics’ which she also attributed to the presence of a critical mass:

And I also felt because you had to put your hand up to speak in those days and you wouldn't be allowed to speak until after the old boys' club had had their say, no, you wouldn't be in the pecking order, you'd be way down - That's changed.

Women being ignored had been maintained by rules with gendered effects, such as the raising of hands to speak, which interacted with informal preferential treatment of men by fellow male councillors. The improved political presence of women was perceived by interviewees to have been central in re-gendering these rules and other, longer-serving councillors reported that their experiences had improved as a direct result of critical mass achievements. For example, Mared described it as a ‘numbers game’ and others highlighted the benefits of ‘getting more women in’ (Lara). Council B had also changed because of women’s increased political presence, engendering more flexibility in the council’s organisational practices:

Leah: So, you've been a councillor for quite a long time now. Have you noticed any sort of changes in the council environment, the atmosphere, as time's gone on?

Mali: Oh yeah definitely, there's more females now than they were when I went in - I think probably only... of 54 councillors, I think there was only five originally. Uh don't ask me how many there are now - It's too many for me to count - the balance is much better now. And also, there's a realisation that perhaps you've got to account for people who work, for children and things like that. And there's more flexibility now in meetings and times.

This echoes Ceri’s earlier point about the impact of critical mass on re-gendering council business towards greater flexibility. Evidence here therefore supports the notion that critical mass and women’s improved presence can mean that minority groups are able to achieve incremental changes to institutional working practices, either through shifts in tradition (in feminist institutionalist terms: ‘conversion’), or the alteration of existing gendered rules (‘layering’).

Ffion, who had been a councillor since 2004, had also experienced shifts in Council D's informal 'macho' cultures, but attributed this more to individuals:

Leah: a lot of research has said that there's still, especially in local government, this very much macho culture...

Ffion: ...I would say that that hasn't disappeared completely, however when you've got positive role models like me and, you know, women leaders, woman leader of the WLGA. Those positive role models are helping [...] [We still need to] move away from that macho culture of town halls, I don't think we've got rid of it completely but we're certainly in a different place in 2019 than when I first walked in here in 2004. So, I think things have improved tremendously, and you know trailblazers like me who've helped to lead the way.

This quote implies that both having more women overall in councils has been transformative but, additionally, 'trailblazers' and 'positive role models' – synonymous with critical actors – play a key role in changing political cultures. It is therefore the interplay of critical mass with the presence of individuals with lower thresholds for radical political action which, as elsewhere (Chaney 2011), are identified as crucial to feminising Welsh local government. Although Council B had a critical mass, Theresa felt that this was not enough to 'shape policy decisions' or make important changes within the council:

The more women there are, you know, the more we can shape. That's the problem, that we're continually having: when we want to try and shape policy decisions, the way the council is going to run, there are so few of us. Even if all of us voted as like a block of women and we said, you know, you should be able to video call in, if you're, you know, caring for your child and you can't go into council [...] And even if we all voted together as a block, there would be enough opposition every single time that nothing what would happen, you know. So, you know, the more women there are...

For Theresa, gender clearly matters, and women's political presence was considered key to the feminisation of institutional norms and practices and to substantively representing women. However, her comment about 'enough opposition' suggests that a critical mass below 'balanced' (defined as 40:60 by Kanter 1977) may not be enough to improve the substantive representation of women or make a tangible difference by the re-gendering of working practices, particularly in councils clinging onto tradition through strong informal resistance. This echoes previous research which has criticised the assumed automatic link between critical mass and feminised political contexts (Mackay 2008; Childs and Krook 2009).

Interviewees from Council B linked the resistance to change with the council being different to councils in larger cities:

Theresa: I have friends that are councillors [...] in places that are like cities, councillors in London and stuff and obviously it's fundamentally different there. Whereas [Council B] is its own little thing.

Improving political institutions' contexts and content is not a 'guarantee' (Mackay 2008) once a critical mass is achieved and the relationship between critical mass and feminist politics is 'far from straightforward' (Childs and Withey 2006) with resistance commonplace (Thomson 2018). The embedded nature of gendered rules-in-use and institutional factors can constrain and fetter women's substantive representation and the feminisation of institutional norms and practices.

However, although other factors may limit its success at times, increasing the number of women was viewed by participants as underpinning changes in the substantive representation of women. Interviewees argued that improving diversity and women's political presence could change not only the norms, rules, and contexts of Welsh local government mentioned above, but also its content and the policies deliberated, discussed, and ultimately passed. This link between descriptive and substantive representation of women, or between women's political presence and the presence of women-friendly policies, is now 'generally supported' in the field of politics and gender (Allen 2021). This is based primarily on the assumptions of lived experience and situated knowledge, meaning that women politicians are more likely to speak and bring forth women's concerns and interests. As discussed in Chapter 2 (section 2.3), substantive representation has shifted in focus from 'women's issues' towards 'women's interests' which are less biologically essentialist, homogenising and recognise difference between women and men and aligned with Norris and Lovenduski's (2003, p.84) 'process of politicisation'.

The shift to women's interests has been paralleled by a wider shift towards the 'politically fashionable' (Rees 2002) approach of 'mainstreaming' the interests and voices of women and other minority groups into all policy decisions, creations, and implementations (Daly 2005). Some participants in this study had been involved with women-targeted policies, whilst others, who could not name any *specific* policy, stated that their claims of representing women were embedded in situated knowledge and shared lived experience that influenced their actions, priorities, and response to constituents' issues. This section explores

these in turn, first discussing the specific, named policies that some interviewees had contributed to, and then the perceived importance and impact of shared/lived experience and being an ‘authentic’ voice for women.

As a caveat to this ensuing discussion, it is important here to highlight that this thesis did not undertake a policy-mapping or tracing exercise to explore substantive representation. It is based on women’s personal accounts about whether they perceived themselves as representing or acting for women. Women were therefore asked the following questions:

In terms of thinking about ways that you represent women in your role, can you think of any specific issues that you've stood up and spoken against where [maybe] it would've been something that would impact women in your constituency?

Does that [your political priorities] come into how you represent women’s views in the chamber?

Do you include women’s interests in your day-to-day work? Such as with your portfolio work as a cabinet member?

How would you say holding those roles allows you to represent women?
Have you been able to advocate for women's interests?

This approach relied on women retrospectively recalling any involvement in specific policies which, for longer-serving councillors, meant remembering actions over almost thirty years of service. Moreover, asking women whether they feel they represent women may elicit responses which look to assuage a researcher who, by the very nature of the feminist framing of her research, is likely to support improving the representation of women. One might expect, therefore, women to overplay their claims of representing women, however there were several interviewees here who clearly stated that they could not recall any specific policies or times where they had acted for women, as well as those few interviewees who did not believe gender affected their political actions.

Previous research has found that institutional position and power can improve women’s substantive representation – “committee position makes a difference” (Norton 2011, p. 113). Therefore, it was unsurprising that participants in senior positions could more often recall implementing and spearheading policies for women. Holding a senior portfolio was perceived by interviewees to have a positive impact on their ability to substantively represent women and include their voices and interests in their specific remit. Lara, Rose, Mared, Jacqueline, Tara, Mali, Ceri, Angharad, and Nia all discussed specific policies for women that they had led on or supported through their senior positions.

The majority of these policies were centred around what could be considered the issues which fit the traditional “women’s issues” definition – for example, biology-focused and health-based issues concerning menstruation and menopause, as well as Female Genital Violence, or those related to violence against women like domestic violence, but there were also other non-biological policies and campaigns mentioned, including:

- encouraging girls into apprenticeships,
- tackling sexism in schools (for example, in school plays and performances),
- scrutinising the gender pay gap within councils,
- murals to commemorate women’s history.

These policies were presented as equally important by participants. However, the most commonly mentioned policy was related to period poverty. The recent focus on period poverty as a salient policy issue in public media and other levels of governance meant that it was a policy or deliberation area discussed by women from all councils:

Lara: We're doing, we're giving money to deal with Periods in Poverty. So, we're trying to deal with it as period dignity and what we did as part of the Children's Rights things, is actually getting voices from young people themselves. But actually, widening it out so that it wasn't just about whether or not they could afford sanitary provision, but trying to get feedback on the actual facilities, umm, what they thought about the toilets.

Mared: I raised an issue with [Senedd Member] on Friday about their policy regarding feminine hygiene issues.

Angharad: There is the recent issue, of course, with schools, you know, the period poverty issue. I think I welcome the fact that now we can talk openly about things like that, before it was sort of euphemisms and skirting around the issue.

Jacqueline, a senior councillor in opposition, was also supportive of the Periods in Poverty campaign:

Jacqueline: Well, we've got that here, we've got that here. And I'm very pleased that that has been highlighted. [...] I had the conversation with our head teacher at the comprehensive school where I'm a governor and she was very quick to tell me that the provision of sanitary pads, et cetera, was there any way, it was already in place, which is good. [...] So, I, I'm not sure that that was the case everywhere. So, period poverty being highlighted, I think it's been a very good thing.

Support for such policies extended beyond senior female councillors and Eleri had been instrumental in starting a Periods in Poverty campaign in Council C and in Welsh Government taking responsibility for providing funding across Welsh local authorities.

Interviewees agreed that gender was an enabler in substantive representation, and that women have distinct lived social and biological experiences. This influenced their own political priorities and their propensity to act for women. This conception of women's interests and gender of representatives contends that women politicians have a 'communicative and informational advantage' over male representatives to carry out the substantive representation of women because they have situated knowledge and experiential expertise. This experiential expertise helps women to substantively represent women in debate and deliberation 'in a committed and accurate way' (Allen 2021, p. 6).

Biologically-centred policies were handled primarily by women critical actors, and interviewees were clear that this was the result of women's previous (or future, in the case of menopause) lived bodily experiences and shared, situated knowledge¹⁰³. Lived experience of women's reproductive and menstrual health issues was perceived as crucial. Councillors shared stories about managing unpredictable and 'taboo' menstrual cycles in schools and these discussions were facilitated by the researchers' ability to empathise and share her lived experience. Mared shared this story from a friend whilst talking about girls needing single-sex bathrooms in schools:

Mared: And I said, that's okay, I can understand why they [have mixed gender bathrooms] but actually, girls need privacy. I remember a friend of mine [...] and she came in and said, 'oh I'm having trouble with my little one' and I say, 'oh why's that?', she said 'well when I go in the toilet and I'm opening up my tampons, he thinks I've got sweets in there and he's going mad - he thinks I'm eating my sweets in the toilet!' Right? [...] With regard to um sanitary products, well they don't want to be getting those whilst the boys are there, do they? So where do they go to get those? Are we, do we really know with period poverty, what the situation is?

Situated knowledge was important for issues centred on women's bodies and, particularly, menopause and menstrual health because of the social stigma which continues to surround these topics (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020). Lara and Ceri also felt that lived experience was an advantage when discussing such policies:

¹⁰³ All the women interviewed here were cis-gendered women.

Ceri: And that's, again, an advantage of being a woman I suppose, that you see things differently. [...] So, we now provide free of sanitary products in all our schools and through that I overheard a conversation - there was no sanitary provision in some of our big buildings where a lot of women work. [...] So now we've got sanitary provision in most buildings. So, again, it's, it's something and I'm not being disparaging to men, but men wouldn't think of that, would they? [...] They absolutely wouldn't think.

Leah: Yeah. So, this is the idea of lived experience, isn't it?

Ceri: Yes.

Lara: I think instinctively it will be women, because they can, even if they have not actually been through the direct experience of not being able to afford sanitary products [...] people do just naturally, refer back to their own experiences.

Ceri had been involved in securing the provision of sanitary products in all of her councils' buildings and that she believed that men would not have considered this issue. Lara echoed the idea that people 'naturally' rely on their own lived gendered experience and the importance of lived experience was also raised by Angharad when discussing the issue of menstrual products in schools. She explained that, whilst male councillors in her council were keen to address issues of period poverty and promote the use of reusable menstrual products including menstrual cups, they did not understand the implications of these for girls in schools which do not have basins inside their toilet cubicles¹⁰⁴:

Angharad: And they're saying, oh, no, we need to promote use of reusable [menstrual] products [...] And another colleague of mine said that maybe they didn't get it. They didn't they didn't realise what it meant. Right? [...] You know, the man said, "you've got to promote use of reusable and say, oh, use cups". And what does that mean exactly? He didn't know what it meant for girls. [...] You know, schools have just got a cubicle, wash-basins outside. [...] And so, I suppose that's an example where people who haven't had the experience and they sort of mouth off about things without realising what the repercussions are.

Support from male councillors was appreciated but lived experience and intimate knowledge of the issues was perceived as crucial for achieving the best implementation of gendered policies. However, other interviewees highlighted concerns surrounding the intersection of gender and age – and, indeed, socioeconomic class – even amongst female councillors. Older female councillors, whilst enthusiastic to support campaigns aimed at younger women and girls in schools, were not always aware of contemporary issues surrounding biological policies for women. Eleri, who spearheaded Council C's Periods in Poverty campaign,

¹⁰⁴ Menstrual cups require washing out during replacement and therefore require access to running water.

discussed with me how a fellow female councillor was surprised that girls ‘can’t afford 50 pence for a tampon’ – something she considered a reflection of the usual socioeconomic class of the middle-class, white, female councillor. Mared, an older female councillor, admitted to not knowing what a ‘Mooncup’ was when discussing alternative sanitary provision products in schools¹⁰⁵.

Eleri felt that the predominance of older and middle-class female councillors in senior positions sometimes inhibited and fettered the representation of younger women and girls, especially of those who may experience deprivation. Diverse representation of young girls and women is reliant on younger women being present in councils, and on them feeling empowered enough to be able to substantively represent women and raise these issues – as Eleri had done. The present study findings underline that increasing women’s political representation needs to be accompanied by a focus on intersectionality of gender with age, and with other intersecting characteristics like race and ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status, and nationality.

The menopause was a political priority for the older senior women councillors in this study who had implemented various schemes and policies for women’s menopausal health. Tara, a younger councillor, also mentioned the menopause and stated that it ‘would have not been something that I would have brought to the agenda because I haven’t gone through it’ and so an older woman councillor ‘runs the menopause stuff’. As well as working on sanitary provision for periods in poverty, Ceri believed that the menopause was an issue which, due to continued taboo and stigma, was ‘shocking’ to the male councillors at first:

What we've just done now, and I brought this up and ooh the shock on the faces of the males, when I raise this about the menopause cafés, they are all taken aback “Who said menopause?”. I did, me! We've had menopause cafes, but it's pleasing to see that men have attended though because they had, if you were gone through the menopause and you'd have a bad time and some male partners, husbands they're on the receiving end of that.

Therefore, whilst men were often supportive figures and could act as critical actors in *supporting* policies for women and in promoting women’s descriptive representation by choosing them for their cabinets, they were not often cited as critical actors who *initiated* these policies. This highlights once more the importance of the political presence of women

¹⁰⁵ A ‘mooncup’ is, as described on the company website, ‘the original, soft, medical-grade silicone menstrual cup designed by women as the convenient, safe and eco-friendly alternative to tampons and pads.’

critical actors who use their own lived experience as a foundation to bring forward women's interests and policy priorities.

Even participants who had not implemented or could not name specific policies they had championed – like Gwen – were clear that they brought a different perspective to senior roles:

Leah: But you do feel that the gender balance in the senior positions is important?

Gwen: Definitely, yeah, because, as I said as a different animal altogether, they see things completely different from the perspective of a female and vice versa. But, if you only got all men at the top, you're not getting a balanced approach so you've gotta have that balance, you've got to.

However, participants were clear that they could not speak for *all* women – white, heterosexual, non-disabled interviewees were keen to emphasise how they could not represent ethnic minorities, LGBT people, disabled people, and other intersecting groups as they did not share those characteristics. For example, Mared discussed being able to speak 'authentically for women' given her '60 years' as a woman, but not for gay people as she was not gay:

I can't represent gay people cause I'm not gay, um or - I can support, which I do - but I am a woman and I know what it's been like for the last 60 years and I don't want that for my daughter and my granddaughter or anybody else. So, I can speak authentically for women.

Authentic voice was perceived as reserved for those who shared the gendered experiences of being a woman and, crucially here, a sense of shared historical marginalisation or poor treatment on the basis of gender, but did not presume intersectional experience where it did not exist. There was a sense of responsibility for future generations of women and an emphasis on being a role model:

Rose: Yeah, I think I would see myself as a role model... for my baby granddaughter as well.

Burden (2007) argues that substantive representation can occur through, first the 'proactive leadership on a smaller set of issues' akin to those women councillors leading on the policies outlined above, whilst others have contended that gender can more subtly impact women politicians' approaches and priorities in politics. These assertions were echoed by the participants in this study. The benefits of lived experience extended beyond specific policies

to a more general sense of responsibility to women as a gendered group. Theresa, said that she agreed with fellow women councillors on some issues because ‘their head is often in the same place as mine is on a topic’, even though she generally disagreed with notions of a ‘grand female experience’.

Gwen positioned herself as ‘gender neutral’ and dismissed ideas about the importance of gender in representatives’ characteristics. However, she often reacted to constituents’ issues in a distinct way to her male colleagues and saw herself as more emotive and empathetic than her male counterparts.

Gwen: With the greatest respects to men, they're the breadwinners, they go out, they earn the money, they bring it home - they don't care whether the kitchen's working properly [...] but the women, stuck in that house all day long with water running down the walls, mildew everywhere, the kids being taken to hospital because of their asthma. [...] And women do see things with a different perspective to men, so like my [male] colleagues will go in and say "oh, this is not good, is it?". Whereas I'll walk in and say "WHAT ON EARTH IS GOING ON?" and then I'll kick off then like a lunatic until they sorted it out.

Others echoed the views that women prioritised different issues to men. For example, Samantha commented that social services is often not prioritised by male members who prioritise transport and roads. Eleri also listed infrastructure under male councillors’ priorities. Other interviewees were less convinced that gender was the core factor to differences in political approaches or priorities. Marie stated that general life experiences, like having a family, ‘could give you a different perspective on things, but [this was] not gender specific [and there were] very empathetic and touchy-feely male councillors’. Tara also raised the point that age, for her, had more of an impact on her political priorities than gender.

Participants wanted to see more diversity amongst senior colleagues, not just more women, but other underrepresented minority groups. Tara – the only ethnic minority woman interviewed – discussed that having more women in positions of seniority in her council’s cabinet, as well as increasing the representation of ethnic minorities and ‘people with disabilities’, would lead to a ‘diversity of ideas’ and that ‘the way [councils] would work would be different’. Gender and the representation of minority groups was important to interviewees as lived experience and shared situated knowledge were perceived to be crucial to the substantive representation of women through gender-specific policies, through gender

mainstreaming, and through politicians' political priorities. Critical mass was not seen as a guaranteed route towards women's substantive representation, which remained contingent on the actions of critical actors, who were mainly women with shared experience and situated knowledge.

8.3: Barriers to Women's Substantive Representation

The substantive representation of women is never guaranteed (Mackay 2008) and is always contingent on social, economic and cultural structures and norms, political opportunities, and on structures within institutions themselves. Another assumption of descriptive representation and of critical mass theory was that increasing women's political presence would encourage cross-party working, coalitions, and solidarity between women across party lines to further the cause of women's representation through creating countercultures to the masculine hegemony (Kanter 1977b; Dahlerup 1988; Dahlerup 2006b). Women's substantive representation was thus contingent on the propensity of women to work together regardless of political party ideology. As Chaney (2006, p. 699) contends, substantive representation 'ultimately depends upon the legal, constitutional, and party-political aspects of power relations in a given legislative context' and in the 'interaction between governing and opposition parties' which is central to the 'deliberative link between women's descriptive and substantive representation'. This section explores these factors, focussing on partisanship and reluctance for cross-party collaboration between women; the influence and role of political party ideology; the frustrations faced by those in opposition; and the impact of austerity on the ability of councils to fund policies for women.

Cross-party networking and caucuses have been shown to be crucial in political institutions for gains regarding women's substantive representation and the re-gendering of institutional norms, as well as for providing personal support networks for women politicians. For example, Johnson's and Josefsson's (2016, pp. 848-849) work on Uganda's Women's Parliamentary Association found that it was 'instrumental in securing a comparatively gender-sensitive constitution' and made it easier for women to 'lobby and build that critical mass'. Similarly, Sawer (2012) found that the presence of a cross-party network of women parliamentarians was fundamental in securing cross-party sponsorship, which ensured the

passing of a Bill which ‘lifted a ministerial veto on the importation into Australia of the ‘RU486 abortion pill’’¹⁰⁶.

However, this study suggests that the cross-party collaboration many hoped would result from critical mass, and that has been found in some contexts, was generally not engaged in by women councillors across the four case study councils and, in certain circumstances, was openly opposed by interviewees. There was evidence of reluctance and resistance to cross-party working and to the formation of women’s caucuses or groups, suggesting that critical mass does not guarantee women’s alliances, which remain contingent on individual willingness and commitment to uniting to represent women beyond party ideological bounds.

This study’s findings suggest that there was more reluctance to take part in cross-party working in Councils A and C than in Council D which had less than 15 per cent of women councillors, and in Council B which as previously discussed was viewed by interviewees as a more traditional or ‘old school’ council. This indicates some influence of party size and the security with which the majority party is in power. In councils A and C, Welsh Labour had a clear majority, with over 60 per cent of councillors in both councils meaning they had little need to rely on opposition parties to pass policy and thus perhaps did not see engagement cross-party as particularly necessary. In Council B, Welsh Labour was only a minority administration thus requiring more collaboration with and support from other parties across the chamber. It was a similar situation in Council D, though without as many women present in the Chamber. Interviews were conducted with councillors across parties, from those in power to those in opposition or minority party groups. Councillors discussed whether they were currently, had previously, or would consider future working cross-party with female councillors across the chamber from other political party groups.

Ceri: You wouldn't get a Labour councillor buddying up with a Plaid Cymru councillor, no, it doesn't happen. You know, you've got your own political groups and it's being sure that within your own political groups and your own political structure.

Party political membership and loyalty was presented as a barrier to forming cross-party networks or support systems in Council C. However, Ceri (Council C) was open to working cross-party, stating that she ‘wouldn't have any problem in doing something as a group of women across the political spectrum’ and that ‘once we’re outside the political arena, there’s

¹⁰⁶ The RU486 (mifepristone) abortion pill is an approved method of medical abortion which involves taking two medicines which work to end pregnancy.

no animosity' but was clear that 'generally you've got different politics, so it doesn't work'. Rose (Council A) contended that 'sometimes there's less commonality between female councillors because there's still maybe some class issues' between Labour and Conservative councillors, however she did mention that there was a Women's Forum which was supposed to be 'non-political [...] about advancing the cause for women' and thought that it was important to network and engage, though for her, personally, most of this was carried out with external women's groups like the Women's Institute.

There was some sense of common ground between female councillors in Councils A and C. Gwen, a Welsh Labour cabinet member in Council A, had found herself 'generally' in agreement with most of the female Conservative councillors in Council A when on the same committee.

Gwen: I worked with some Conservative ladies in Licensing but on the whole, we generally agree with each other in all honesty - you know, "that person shouldn't have their taxi license" and she'll say "no, you're not kidding he shouldn't, that was dangerous!" And we quite agree on, bizarrely, quite a lot! [laughs] But I just think that's more of a female perspective on things as opposed to a male one.

This extract echoes a sense of shared situated knowledge as women, and the existence of a 'female perspective' which facilitated agreement on some matters, as well as the importance of considering institutional mechanisms in the shaping of the substantive representation of women. For example, Gwen was clear that she had also exchanged heated words and had strong disagreements with two Conservative women councillors, and they no longer spoke. One incident was witnessed by the researcher at a Full Council meeting:

Leah: Yeah, I came to Full Council mid-July and there were a few uh, heated moments. Between you and [a Conservative woman councillor].

Gwen: Yeah, oh she had both barrels. She doesn't speak to me at all now.

Leah: No?

Gwen: I'm not really bothered. [...] she hasn't talked to me since [laughs] Oh, and I'm not going to lose sleep over that. [...] And the other [Conservative] lady I found was a bit bizarre when she said we should sweep the homeless off the streets and hide them away. I just looked, are you kidding me? [...] But even her own party were getting a little bit vexed, trying to get her to shut up because she just made them all look like idiots. Give her enough rope, let her crack on, she's not bothering me, I'm just pointing out what an absolutely horrific attitude she has. But, on the whole, I gotta be fair, we kind of agree on quite a lot. With the exception of them two. [laughs] I dunno where they've come from, Mars or somewhere [laughs].

A difference of opinion here, between Gwen and another woman councillor led to a reluctance to even communicate with each other. Looking at this from a feminist institutional perspective, this suggests that the substantive representation of women here may have been influenced by institutional mechanisms. There was some openness and realisation of shared perspective during committee work which may be characterised by a more open, cross-party nature, but exchanges in Full Council meetings and in plenaries in the council Chambers were often tense and more adversarial.

Looking more specifically at women's networks and caucuses, some councillors thought that women-only meetings or caucuses were not a priority for them because they were 'echo chambers' (Marie) or simply 'just another meeting'.

Alys: I don't tend to go to just the women's group. I don't know why I don't go - I think it's just another meeting. I think I'm more focused on the doing bits, not so much the talk and have another meeting - I like the action part of it. If somebody said, "right we need to be doing something, we need more women, we need to get more women in" and things like that. Then give me a role, give me an action and let me do it. [...] I don't tend to go, I don't think there's many places that I go where there's just females - everything I do is like mixed, you know?

This raises important issues for cross-party networking, namely that it must have a specific purpose and be action-driven, meetings without clear outcomes were not appreciated. Tara, a senior councillor in Council B, explained that she perceived there to be some risks to cross-party working, which cautioned her against women-only networks or caucuses:

Tara: It's also like a bit of a trust as well, isn't it? You've got to have a safe space where you can say things that won't be used against you later on, down the line. To be honest, I don't think we're in that space like cross-party to have that.

Leah: Yeah. So, do you feel that kind of political, you know, sort of boundaries very much prevent that type of thing? And especially, like you said, it's kind of a minority because you're a minority council.

Tara: Yeah. And I also feel like, there's people...there's people that have taken things, twisted them and put them in the press. And I think they're not against me, but I've seen it against some of my other colleagues and I would... Why expose yourselves to a risk that you don't need to?

Leah: Yeah. Yeah. That's a bit of a shame, isn't it there's kind of fear that other women would do that, like you say.

Tara: But they do, I do feel like women are probably worse to other women, than men are. I think personally, I had a female colleague that literally bullied me.

However, there was more receptivity to cross-party collaboration amongst those in opposition and those in power in minority councils. Theresa, for example, believed her party (Welsh Conservatives) had good relations with the Welsh Labour group in Council B and that other women in the chamber would be supportive if she brought a question to the table:

I feel kind of free that I would be able to, you know, put a question in about something or ask for the council to consider some legislation or bringing something in. And I think that I would probably be able to get quite good support for that from, you know, the other women. [...] But everybody genuinely gets along and they'll talk about things in that [meeting between leaders of party groups] and then how they'll go back to their groups and they kind of say to them, this is what's going on. You know, we're going to do this thing because we can all agree on this consensus here. So, I feel like we're all lucky in that our leaders are all kind of the most, you know, kind of the most progressive.

Angharad from Council D had also worked with fellow women councillors 'on a day-to-day basis' but this was more common when she had been a backbencher on scrutiny committees. She felt there were fewer opportunities to engage with each other once she became a Cabinet Member except when,

'there's a proposal going through full council, very often you work with someone from the other parties, women or men, so you've got a consensus then for everybody involved'.

Opposition interviewees were open to working together on women's issues, including those from Councils A and C. Eleri said that she found a 'sense of camaraderie [existed] on occasions, but it's not there as often as [she] would like'.

Eleri: I mean, I'll talk to anyone, but there's definitely...I mean, I think some parties are more like it than others. In terms of, say, somebody from our group was speaking to somebody else then we've got nothing to lose, we've got no, none of the local power, but we haven't got that control to kind of reign in and keep hold of, whereas things are different I think if in the ruling party, unfortunately. I don't think you can truly make friends with somebody who's in a different party, which is a shame.

Whilst some willingness to cooperate existed amongst opposition councillors, women in power were sometimes more reticent to form alliances across party lines. Eleri had experienced frustration at the actions of Welsh Labour women in her council who she thought would 'stunt the growth of others' to ensure power, and also resented how Welsh Labour had

claimed at a national conference that her Periods in Poverty campaign had been implemented by their Cabinet Member.

Eleri: There, there are also women who are at the hands of power then who think they should be the only woman to have power and will stand down on others or try to stunt the growth of other people. I've seen that and that's not nice to witness either.

Leah: Oh, and you've said you really want to help those after you. So, yeah, you feel that there are some women kind of shutting the door?

Eleri: Yeah, yeah, yeah absolutely. [...] So yeah, it was very strange, and then there was two Labour conferences where I never thought I would feature so much in a Labour Conference in my life. And I saw these workshops going on, how we're leading the way in [borough] and they that Labour councillors, they who and the Cabinet Member for Education who had no involvement in it and I'm thinking 'What?!'. Mental.

Jacqueline, an opposition councillor in Council A, commented that being in opposition was often a frustrating experience because of the lack of power, but stated that if an issue required working cross-party that 'you've not got to allow politics to get in the way':

Leah: We've spoken quite a lot about kind of your sort of relationship with the women across the chamber in the Labour Party. Do you think that perhaps if there was a key issue for women coming through, perhaps a policy that would particularly impact women? Do you think you would work cross-party with them?

Jacqueline: Well, I would hope so. I would certainly be willing to do that, and I would hope so. I think sometimes, you know, cross-party working is never easy because you've always got the rules and regulations of your own party sitting on your shoulder. But I would certainly, in terms of any issue affecting women, absolutely want to work together on that. [...] But I think sometimes [party ideology] can be a factor. However, I'm not afraid to, if I think my party is wrong on an issue, I'm not afraid to stand up and say so. So, I would be more than willing to work together with an opposition, opposition women on a women's issue if I felt, you know, it was strong, strongly enough that we needed to push that issue forward. [...] You know, sometimes you've not got to allow politics to get in the way.

There was frustration amongst backbench female councillors at how majority parties respond to or collaborate with them on policies:

Jacqueline: You as a woman in opposition, you're a very different creature to a woman in power. You know, having experienced both. I find being in opposition at times very frustrating. [...] Especially if I see something where I think they are getting it very wrong.

Leah: Mm hmm. Do you think that's particularly because it's obviously Labour versus Conservative?

Jacqueline: Yes, I do. I mean, here in [Council A], [...] Labour are in power and that gives them the authority if you understand me?

Eleri: What's difficult being an opposition party is, whatever you do isn't going to get through, and even though you can work that out mathematically, the realisation of that is a very different thing. So, in terms of - I can make the best debate in the world, I could bring the best research, I can make the best argument you have ever heard. But if the ruling group has decided against that for political reasons, then it does matter as they've got the numbers to vote it down and that's it, that's the end of it.

[...]

Leah: So, you think being in kind of especially in opposition limits the amount of you can do kind of gender equality and for women, specifically in terms of those specific policies?

Eleri: Yeah, absolutely. Because there are, you know, certain equality champions and things like that within the council. So, it is expected that they fulfil that role in terms of like council staff and things like that. I am well within my rights to scrutinise that work, which I do quite often, but in terms of actually going out and starting something, I am very limited in what I can do. [...] it's like banging your head against a brick wall.

These extracts make an original contribution to evidence on critical mass and cross-party working. They highlight the importance of party power and the positioning of women critical actors in council chambers as in power or in opposition and suggests that, without a willingness to cooperate, there are limitations placed on the propensity of councils to substantively represent women.

A further frustration for participants was the economic climate and, importantly, austerity measures. Since the 2008 economic crash, local government has been at the forefront of making difficult decisions about cuts to public services as a result of reductions in council budgets, with the 2010 Spending Review cutting local government funding by almost 27 per cent (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). Austerity cuts, whilst they may appear gender-neutral, are actually profoundly gendered (MacDonald 2018) and have differential impacts delineated by social class, with women in deprived areas being 'the worst affected' (Hastings et al. 2021) and bearing the brunt of austerity-led cuts to services and tax credits (Waylen 2015).

Sarah Champion MP, then Shadow Equalities Minister, published analysis in 2017 which documented that women had borne 86% of the austerity burden since 2010. Research by the Women's Budget Group in England (Wakefield 2019) found that austerity presented a 'triple whammy' for women as women firstly rely disproportionately on local government

service provisions, and are more likely to work in local authorities themselves which have also cut jobs and staff. Moreover, disabled, working-class, and ethnic minority women have been those most negatively affected by budget cuts. This has detrimental impacts on the substantive representation of women and on women-targeted policies or services. For example, a request for information by Grierson (2018) for The Guardian newspaper into the funding of refuges for vulnerable women and children found that, across councils in Wales, England, and Scotland, there had been cuts totalling nearly £7 million since 2010. Kenny and Mackay (2020) contend that prolonged periods of austerity can pose a challenge to ‘advancing an equality agenda’ when ‘cuts have impacted disproportionately women, particularly marginalised groups like black and minority ethnic women’.

For participants, austerity and budget cuts had imposed limits on the types of policy that could be funded and voted through in Welsh local government. Longer serving councillors were conscious about the financial deficits facing councils during austerity and the impact of this on councils’ scope and ability to substantively represent women. They had experienced being a councillor when there were questions of how to spend money (Mared), and now were faced instead with difficult decisions of what to cut. This topic was also covered during researcher observation of a Cabinet meeting at Council A where decisions were being made around how to make cuts of £22m to council services. As Mared noted, whilst this can ‘sharpen up’ the delivery of some services, austerity has placed significant pressures on councils in deciding what can and cannot be funded:

Mared: It's awful, in 2004 when [Ffion] and I came on, it was all [...] 'How are we going to spend this money?' and I'd say 'Why don't we have some luncheon clubs? Why don't we do this, that and the other?' It was a whole other world. And I think the people who have been elected since, and certainly since the last election, coming in to just be told that we haven't got any money, we aren't doing that, things are going, you have to decide what's going to go. I mean, I dunno how they get their heads around it, it's very difficult for us, it's very miserable.

Leah: Makes it harder as well to fund the things that you'd like to do

Mared: Very, well we can't do anything we'd like to do. Well, there is good work going on, and I think that it's sharpened up the council, there are positives from that point of view. [...] But you know when we talk about the £30m out of the budget in the next few years - schools in deficit, and I'll say to people [...] 'why wouldn't we want to give you money?' Why wouldn't we want to do this? There's no money to, there's no money.

Samantha's council – Council D – also faced substantial cuts, and this led to tension between what she called the 'big spenders' of education and social services, often seen as 'feminine' portfolios, and hard decisions about what to fund whilst making £40m worth of cuts:

Samantha: But that's something that's also been important because there's always been a tension between funding for education and funding for social services - they're both big spenders and they both need to spend, but in the past, I think there had been male dragging feet saying: "why do we want to spend on social services?". So, we've, we have put more emphasis on social services and tried to invest, although it's been very difficult having to face up to austerity because we've had to face about £40m of cuts over the past ten years so it's been, it hasn't been easy, but we're trying.

Nia echoed these sentiments and discussed facilities and services in her area that had either closed due to austerity or been taken-over by the community or independent business, including: a sixth form at a local school, the library, the leisure centre, the bowls club, the children's park, three banks, a sorting office, and the local post office. Gwen was also aware that the impact of austerity and cuts had meant key council services were being reduced, such as bin collections, and stated that 'we have less money than ever – we've lost about £57 million at this point'. Whilst no interviewee directly mentioned gender budgeting, austerity was perceived as forcing a shift to equalities and gender mainstreaming rather than policies for women, meaning that councils and councillors must now try to be as fair and equal with the limited resources they have:

Ceri: I try to ensure that we do the best that we can for all our members across the political spectrum and across see the genders as well to ensure that everybody is equal in parity. So, my priority is to ensure that going forward, we do the best that we can with the limited resources that are available to us. [...] So unfortunate in as much that, although we've gone through austerity, there are things that we have done as a council which have been front runners and that other councils don't do.

However, budget cuts and austerity were barriers which prevented councillors from doing more, and, importantly, doing more for women in Wales:

Lara: Umm... in terms of the role itself, I mean, I... I wish I was doing it when we more money. I do wish that. [...] We've got very, very limited flexibility about what we can actually do in terms of that - it's not like the old days where you could say 'I want, I think we should run this course for women', you know, 'with this set of facilities' unfortunately.

Ffion: In general discussions with the WLGA - so there are three other women leaders in Wales [...] but we've never specifically talked about

being women, we're, we're too busy talking about the problems of the funding and not having money in the public realm to run our councils.

Austerity was identified as a limiting factor for women's substantive representation, and it placed constraints on projects or policies for women. Senior councillors argued that austerity means fewer opportunities for women-targeted policies, and it engenders a shift towards an approach with councils trying to achieve the most equality possible for all with what little money there is available. Had this research taken place prior to the introduction of austerity measures, as Mared suggests, there may have been more projects and policies for women coming through. Maintaining the substantive representation of women through targeted policies requires funds and budgetary adjustments which, due to not only the prolonged period of austerity-led local government cuts but further to this the ongoing impact of Covid-19, are currently not available. Councillors and councils face the difficult task of prioritising those policy decisions which use what little money is left for the good of the greatest number of their constituent populations.

8.4: Conclusion:

This chapter has considered the impact of the institutional contexts, party-political membership and councillor positions, on the substantive representation of women. It has sought to explore the deliberative links between descriptive and substantive representation, finding that presence is important, but that substantive representation was often contingent on critical actors and leaders. Addressing prior assertions that critical mass does not guarantee the substantive representation of women in all councils, institutional and political contexts (such as continued tradition and a privileging of masculinist politics and partisanship) are found to play a key role. Women-targeted policies have been discussed, supporting again the assertion that women politicians were more likely to critically act for women and were likely to do so on the basis of lived experience and shared situated knowledge, or a 'feminised perspective'.

Building on Chapter Seven, this thesis' empirical data and feminist institutionalist analysis of Welsh local government supports the notion that 'committee position makes a difference', finding that institutional position and power is crucial as senior women have more freedom and opportunity to implement and introduce women-focused policy. Senior women have more freedom as critical actors to cause institutional change through layering or conversion tactics, because they are less constrained by institutional norms and frustrations

than opposition or back-bench members. Lived experience and situated knowledge were perceived by participants as crucial to their political priorities and their approach to politics, suggesting that women politicians contribute to policy and politics in a distinct way, and are more likely to focus on certain policy areas like housing, education, social services, and health.

Other factors limiting the substantive representation of women included the reticence of some women councillors towards cross-party women's networks and caucuses which many had hoped would be spaces for resistance towards the masculine hegemonic institutional norms outlined in Chapters Five and Six. This was evident amongst those women in power in councils where their political party were the majority party as they were not reliant on opposition members for votes or support in debating chambers. Opposition and councillors from minority in-power parties showed more willingness to collaborate but there were few tangible examples of women's networks or caucuses in any of the four councils. Councillors' positioning as either in power or in opposition was also discussed in regard to their ability to substantively represent women – opposition councillors often faced frustration because of their lack of power, and there were instances of women from parties in power 'shutting the door'. These empirical findings suggest that the institutional rules and practices of Welsh local government operate according to traditional political approaches like party whipping and simple majoritarian politics. Tribal allegiance is relied upon to secure the passing of policies by majority parties, rather than the nuanced cross-party working many had hoped to see arise from improvements in women's political presence.

Finally, this chapter considered the economic impact of austerity on women's substantive representation, finding that budget cuts have limited councillors' abilities to introduce specific policies for women and have forced councils to make hard decisions about provisions of services which, in turn, have gendered effects. It can be concluded that the substantive representation of women is never a guarantee, particularly in councils without critical masses, without funds, and without women willing to work across party political or ideological lines.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion, Recommendations, and Original Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions of the Thesis to the Field

9.1: Introduction

Women's underrepresentation in Welsh local government (between 2017 and 2022) is the stark numerical reality of an average of only 28.9 per cent women across Welsh local councils¹⁰⁷ (Blair and Mathias 2018). This thesis moved beyond this surface level statistic and shifted attention from the issues surrounding women 'getting in' to representational roles to exploring women's experiences of 'being in' elected office and the gendered nature of political institutions themselves. In this chapter, this study's key contributions to the field of feminist political science and social policy in Wales are drawn out, and links made between the empirical findings of this thesis and the conceptual or theoretical framework it adopted.

Firstly, by drawing together findings from Chapters Four through Eight, section 9.2 addresses and answers the four research questions. This section provides an exploration of the research questions in relation to the agency and structure conceptual framework with links back to the literature discussed in Chapter Two to provide the building blocks for section 9.5 on the thesis' theoretical contribution. It summarises how women's political participation and their agency to substantively represent and act in women's interests were constrained and/or facilitated by structural factors and positional power (both personal and that of others in the form of gatekeepers) in Welsh local government. The empirics of this thesis draw together cognate ideas within political representation theory (critical mass and critical actors), women's first-hand experiences in legislatures, the informal and formal institutional rules-in-use (feminist institutionalism), the impact of wider structures¹⁰⁸, and the influence of positional power (gendered political leadership). Each research question is discussed in turn, and Table 9.1 at the end of this section summarises these findings in light of the conceptual framework.

Limitations of the research are then considered (section 9.3), addressing the consequences of the choice to anonymise participants and local authorities, the impact of the

¹⁰⁷ Women's numerical representation rose to 36 per cent at the 2022 Welsh local elections.

¹⁰⁸ One of the key justifications behind the broader agency and structure conceptual framework here was that it enabled a study which went beyond that offered by a discrete feminist institutionalist analysis. Taking a broader view of structure meant that it was possible to understand the impact of factors otherwise missed by analysis that solely explores what happens in the political legislature itself.

Coronavirus pandemic, and the choice to interview only women. This is followed by recommendations for future research in this area. Furthermore, as a thesis drawing from feminist research should include and promote emancipatory action to improve women's status in society, this chapter recommends possible practical outcomes and policy implications to tackle gendered institutions and their formal rules and informal conventions. These include actionable policy changes drawn from the findings, as well as a broader recommendation for a wider feminisation and re-gendering of Welsh local government. These are not prescriptive nor exhaustive, yet they address key practical organisational changes which could be implemented to improve women councillors' experiences, the descriptive and substantive political representation of women, and address barriers to women's participation.

Lastly, section 9.5 maps the key findings and conclusions of this research through its original contribution to theoretical knowledge. The links between these findings and the existing literature in the field are summarised to illustrate the original contribution of this study, particularly regarding how the agency/structure theoretical framework (section 2.5) and its drawing together of political representation, feminist institutionalist and gendered political leadership theories created a rich and holistic understanding of Welsh local government as a gendered political workplace. This section establishes the value added by the conceptual framework and how it illuminated the case study, before its wider implications for scholarship in the field of gender and politics studies, and political representation. It is contended here that employing a 'joined-up' theoretical approach, rather than a study focusing on one theoretical element in isolation, has generated a holistic understanding of women local councillors' lived political experiences. Moreover, by reflecting on how combining feminist institutionalism, political representation and gendered leadership theory in this research has been useful for revealing the inner workings of Welsh local government, this section considers the utility, value, and challenges of the current case study and proposes some revisions for future research based on reflections of this case study experience. This section therefore reflects critically on how this new empirical research fits and enhances the literature and theoretical approaches discussed in Chapter Two, establishing how this work is significant beyond this particular empirical case, and could be replicated elsewhere in gender and politics scholarship.

9.2: Attending to the Research Questions

The purpose of this section (9.2) is to showcase the case study findings and conclusions, making links between theory and empirics to provide context and detail which is then built on further in section 9.5. This section takes each research question in turn to explore how the findings in Chapters Four through Eight answered these and related to the theoretical ‘agency/structure’ framework as well as the individual theories of feminist institutionalism, political representation, and gendered political leadership which were all operationalised through the research questions below.

Research Questions:

1. What were women’s first-hand initial and formative experiences of becoming and being local councillors in Welsh local government? And, how were these experiences shaped by gender (in)equality issues?
2. To what extent do participants perceive Welsh local councils as gendered institutions, and how does this affect women’s political participation and representation?
3. What are the unique challenges faced by, and experiences of, female councillors holding and/or seeking senior positions within local government?
4. How do female councillors’ experiences, the culture, and the context of Welsh local government shape the substantive political representation of women in Welsh councils?
 - a. What are women councillors’ views on the role of ‘critical mass’ and ‘critical actors’ in shaping patterns and processes of substantive representation in local government?
 - b. How and to what extent do feminist motivations inform women councillors’ commitments to substantively representing women?

This section therefore discusses how the theoretical concepts set out in the analytical framework played out in the research findings and how this study contributes to and supplements previous work in each theoretical area. This is summarised at the end of this section in Table 9.1.

Research Question 1: *What were women's first-hand initial and formative experiences of becoming and being local councillors in Welsh local government? And, how were these experiences shaped by gender (in)equality issues?*

The feminist interpretivist and standpoint approaches taken here influenced the commitment to foreground women's lived experiences of becoming and being local councillors throughout, following their journeys and centralising their voices. All findings chapters communicate different aspects of women's first-hand experiences of local government. Research question 1 (RQ1) had a specific focus on the initial experiences of women gaining elected positions – both pre-election and in the formative weeks and months after. Given the research question's focus on chronology, it is pertinent to first summarise this thesis' findings regarding women's experiences of *becoming* local councillors.

As explained in section 2.5, when mapping links between theory and empirics, the 'becoming' aspect of this question incorporated concepts of descriptive political representation, feminist institutionalist analysis of political parties, notions of positional power and gendered leadership through acknowledging gatekeepers, and consideration of wider equalities issues which affected women 'getting in' to local government in Wales. We can therefore draw on the evidence presented in Chapter Four which showed that descriptive representation and women's propensity to stand were (as per the theoretical mapping in Figure 2.x) contingent on both agency: women's personal motivations and decisions to contest elected office, the role of critical acts by gatekeepers and mentors, and structure: the influence of institutional rules and norms present in any relevant political party or local council, and broader societal, historical, and geographical, locale-based contexts.

Looking first at agency and the key decision: to stand or not to stand, Chapter Four highlighted how participants' motivations for local elected office were not usually driven by any strong personal feminist motivation or concern around gender equality. Only one participant recognised gendered inequalities in political representation and her desire to see more young women in politics as a key motivator in her decision to stand. Data suggested that (greater) awareness of gender (in)equality issues in Welsh local government emerged after a short time in office. Becoming a local councillor was seen by the majority as an extension of prior community activism, political involvement at local branch level, or was in response to a pertinent local issue. Awareness of local issues and lived or prior experience of

civic activism were therefore central factors regarding agency and women's decisions to stand.

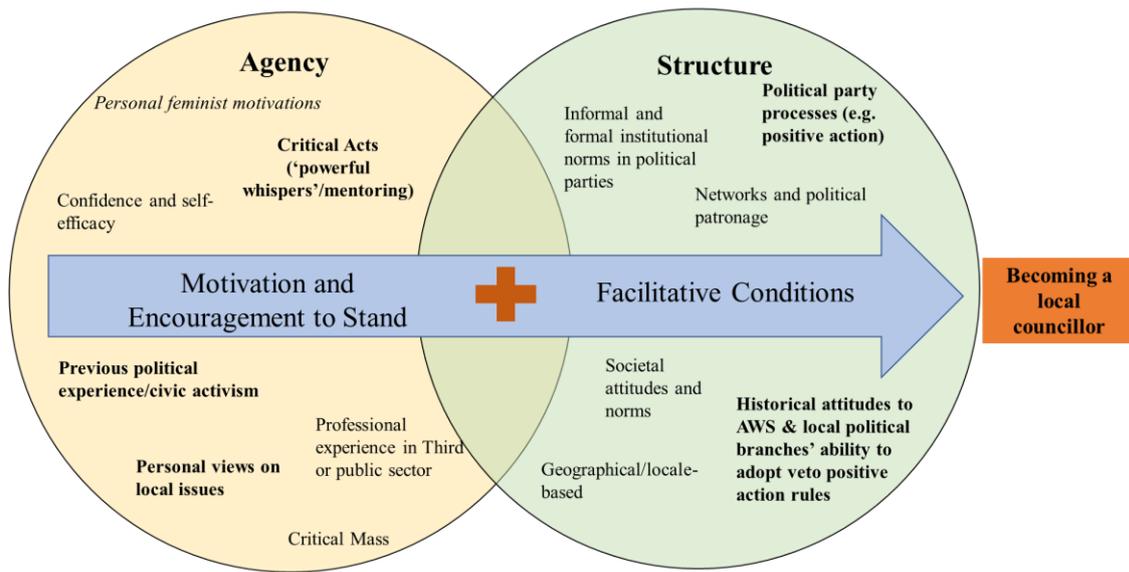
Previous research has highlighted that women, more than men, often lack the necessary self-confidence and self-efficacy to put themselves forward for political office (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988; Zimmerman 1995; Rowlands 1997; Fox and Lawless 2004; Narayan 2005; Hibbs 2022a). This was echoed here with women's decisions to stand being heavily dependent on external validity from peers, sponsors, and mentors both within and outside of their political parties (Fox and Lawless 2004; Lawless and Fox 2005; Crowder-Meyer 2013; Dittmar 2015). Being asked to stand was a pivotal moment in most interviewees' decisions to contest elections. Individuals within political parties – often elected political peers (councillors, MSs, MPs, and MEPs) or branch members – were a facilitative force here as they commonly acted as critical actors and feminist champions by encouraging and asking women to consider standing. Becoming a councillor was therefore not only contingent on factors regarding agency of the women councillors themselves (self-efficacy, and personal motivation to stand), but also, as noted, by the agency of other individuals and their decision to validate this through encouraging them. Underlying the need to look at both structure and agency, those with positional power were therefore important for championing women and were central figures in interviewees' decisions to run for election. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Eight, the women interviewed often carried on this tradition and were conscious of a sense of responsibility to ensure a legacy of women's presence in politics, using their own 'locally elite' positional power once elected to encourage, recruit, and persuade other women to stand.

Whilst this was not a feminist institutionalist analysis of political parties and their internal processes around local government elections, this research and its theoretical framework highlight the importance of understanding political parties' formal and informal norms, structures and rules as contingent factors which impact women's access to elected local office. Analysis of political parties through a feminist institutionalist lens shows that structural 'formal' procedures have the potential to be facilitative but currently are not universally applied and are often constraining. Looking at how these can be facilitative, one interviewee mentioned benefitting directly from positive action implemented by her local Welsh Labour party branch which chose to run an all-woman shortlist for her ward. However, overwhelmingly, applying this study's core theoretical framework to political parties uncovered how the agency that local Welsh Labour branches had over these structural

procedures was problematic. Having local agency often meant that structural rules around positive action techniques – otherwise implemented and supported in national and devolved elections – were commonly not honoured and were often breached. This usually occurred as a result of local dissatisfaction with the process or approach but women themselves also rejected them in favour of winning ‘on merit’. There was further evidence here of the impact of other structural historical political factors as decisions to undermine national rulebooks were perceived as the consequence of historical distrust of such tactics (see footnote 45 on page 59 for commentary on Welsh Labour’s history with all-women shortlists). This original research contribution underlines the need in local government studies and in feminist political science generally to look beyond the headline successes in national and devolved governments, where there is perhaps more straightforward use of positive action measures, and to examine the effectiveness and popularity of similar implementations at the local level, as well as to ensure robust monitoring procedures are in place. Assessing agency and structure within political parties would therefore be a useful framework for future work on local political party branches and positive action.

More informally, there has historically been an issue with political patronage and the masculine nature of informal networks in local elections – men often hand positions over to other men, sometimes from within the same family (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Schwindt-Bayer 2005; Kittilson 2006; Kenny and Verge 2016; Maguire 2018; Kantola 2019). This study found that it was often the case here that women were elected to seats which men had chosen to abandon without naming a successor, thus leaving an ‘empty’ seat for a woman. As with much of politics, who one knew or having an extensive presence in the local branch, and often having held a position of responsibility, were all necessary preconditions to women’s electoral contestation. Therefore, a key recommendation from this study would be that further research and in-depth feminist institutionalist analysis of political parties and their impact on women’s descriptive political representation at the local level is required. In order to graphically depict this aspect of the links between theory and empirics emerging from this study, Figure 9.1 (below) maps the findings of this research question onto the diagram (Figure 2.5) – first introduced in Chapter Two. Specifically, highlighting key elements of structure and agency aligned with representational theory (for example, critical actors) and feminist institutionalism (such as institutional norms and expectations). In Figure 9.1, those factors highlighted in bold were most mentioned by interviewees, whilst those in italics were findings which appeared in very few or single cases.

Figure 9.1: Theoretical mapping of findings under RQ1 - agency and structural factors that affected women’s experience of becoming a local councillor



The latter half of RQ1 sought to understand the ‘political socialisation’ and formative nature of women’s first few weeks, months, and even terms in elected office and how these reflected or were shaped by gendered (in)equality issues. Previous research has discussed how politicians undergo a socialisation process through which they ‘learn the ropes’ and ‘how things work around here’. Other feminist institutionalist analysis has contended that this process and the ‘rules of the game’ are themselves highly gendered (Ostrom 1999). The present study supports this, as the learning of ‘*how things work around here*’ during first weeks and months in office was perceived by study participants as a steep learning curve with rules (written and unwritten, formal, and informal), norms, and cultures perceived as largely obscured and made opaque, with (local) procedural traditions often feeling like ‘*red tape*’. This was exacerbated by a perceived paucity of training from local councils and organisations such as the Welsh Local Government Association. Accordingly, training was considered insufficient in preparing participants for their first few months or term in council chambers. The participants’ accounts suggested that even prior political experience in town or community councils did not fully equip women for City or County Borough Council rules and procedures.

Consequently, participants identified that there was a reliance on peers in the chamber to explain procedural tradition and how things worked or the usual norms. This, at times, constrained and frustrated women, and occasionally prevented them from contributing to debate thus limiting the substantive representation of women. There were examples of women’s newness in the chamber acting as a positive factor and key (conscious and

unconscious) site of resistance to gendered rules but this was very rare. Improvements to mentoring and training were suggested by all participants as necessary solutions to ensure that future women councillors can effectively contribute at an earlier point in their councillor journeys.

In direct response to RQ1, women's formative experiences of (s)elections, and of being in elected office were found to be highly gendered and significantly influenced by gender (in)equality issues. Chapter Four extended previous related literature and research (Ostrom 1999; Lowndes 2014; Lowndes 2020), finding that gendered rules of the game play out similarly in local politics as they do in other political arenas, and women undergo political socialisation which can initially constrain and limit their political behaviours to fit into androcentric norms – a key example of institutionalised yet informal resistance to women's political presence. Evidence suggested that formal rules were inadequate in inducting new councillors into gendered practices and cultures, with women forced to rely on informal practices and ad hoc advice. These, in turn, were reliant on an established and willing councillor being present to show new women councillors the ropes – something that was not a guarantee across councils, especially in Council C where a substantial critical mass (to balanced group levels) was present, and men were fiercely resisting the loss of their political majorities. This reliance on informal practices of new women councillors being extended support and ad hoc advice from established women councillors further underlines the importance of agency (on the part of the established, incumbent women councillors) in women's journeys to becoming councillors. The feminist institutionalist analysis here thus reveals that the formal structures of local councils, alongside individuals' agency and propensity to ask questions and establish informal networks and a culture of generosity of longer-serving peers to answer questions, interact to create formative and initial experiences of being a woman local councillor characterised by barriers and constraints on one's opportunity to substantively represent women.

Research Question 2: To what extent do participants perceive Welsh local councils as gendered institutions, and how does this affect women's political participation and representation?

Research question 2 (RQ2) continued the feminist institutionalist analysis of the research site, centring the importance of uncovering the gendered nature of Welsh local government institutions and how this, in turn, has an impact on women's political participation and

representation. Feminist institutionalist analysis has recognised the importance of the interplay of formal structures and rules with informal networks and cultures, and findings here reflect this assertion. The focus on agency and structure here, as per the theoretical framework, further allows for consideration of how positional power and leadership may alleviate structural inequalities, or how it can be a key driving force for institutional change through layering or conversion tactics. Following on from the data regarding women's induction into Welsh local government as a gendered political workplace discussed in Chapter Four, Chapters Five and Six both discussed the specific aspects and examples of Welsh local councils mentioned by interviewees which were perceived as being gendered and which affected the representation and participation of women. These two chapters focused on the perceived gendered aspects of *formal* organisational practices (primarily discussed in Chapter Five), and *informal* norms (Chapter Six), as well as how these played out within the councils, and how they intersected to create a gendered political workplace.

Influenced by feminist institutionalist literature and Dahlerup's 'politics as a workplace' approach, Chapter Five explored how Welsh local councils were perceived as institutions permeated by rules which, although they may not appear necessarily gendered on first inspection, were subject to gendered 'rules-in-use' and this often fettered women's political participation. The theoretical framework adopted here helps us to understand that the internal structures of Welsh local councils here interacted with informal political norms as well as wider structural gendered inequalities and traditions in society to create a 'triple-duty' for women local councillors. These findings highlight the value added by this theoretical approach as they would otherwise not be uncovered through an analysis solely focused on political representation or, indeed, feminist institutionalism alone. Women's full political participation was prevented by the intersection of formal, written rules with informal norms, which created gendered political workplaces unfriendly to councillors with caring responsibilities and/or jobs outside of politics. Poor remuneration, excessive expected time commitments and regular events at unsociable hours, the timings of and macho presenteeism around council meetings, as well as a lack of understanding, support, and engagement with relatively simplistic organisational solutions, combined to create a gendered political workplace. This was perceived as fit for purpose only for those retired, older councillors with little to no caring responsibilities, those with good support networks, or those able to make significant financial and personal sacrifices. Echoing previous research (Briggs 2000; Johansson Sevä and Öun 2019), without support from employers, families, or partners,

women councillors with jobs and/or young children faced institutional sexism in the form of gendered institutional policies and practices which systematically excluded them from politics. Feminist institutionalist analysis thus revealed here that Welsh local councils could be considered to contravene equalities legislation, including the Equality Act 2010, through indirect sex discrimination through their gendered rules-in-use by, for examples, requiring women with children or caring responsibilities to work ‘long or inflexible hours’.

Evidence presented in this study therefore contrasts that from other *newer* political settings in Wales and the rest of the UK (i.e., Senedd Cymru and Scottish Parliament) which have been praised for more women- and family-friendly working practices, and the data suggest more similarity can be found with research on *older* institutions, with many of this study’s findings showing commonalities with Childs’ ‘Good Parliament Report’ at Westminster (Childs 2016). This thesis thus adds weight to the feminist institutionalist arguments that older institutions are harder to re-gender or feminise and that gendered rules can ‘stick’, becoming firmly embedded. Moreover, evidence here regarding attempted solutions to counter this showed that incremental layering or conversion tactics were, as found elsewhere, vulnerable to veto or resistance (Streeck and Thelen 2005b; Lowndes and Roberts 2013). This veto or resistance often played out through the interaction of formal rule changes with masculinised informal norms, cultures and traditions which were perceived as notoriously more difficult to overcome and change. For example, informal norms which privileged macho presenteeism undermined the implementation of layered¹⁰⁹ solutions around remuneration for childcare expenses,¹¹⁰ as well as calls for wider implementation of remote meeting attendance to alleviate aspects of the triple duty. As is discussed later in this chapter (section 9.3), this provides evidence that softer tactics of structural change through layering and conversion have not, to-date, been sufficient for re-gendering or causing significant institutional change in Welsh local government. This thesis therefore contributes original empirical evidence from local politics to the feminist institutionalist argument that

¹⁰⁹ Layering refers to the attachment of new rules to existing rules to change how the original rule affects behaviour – it often takes the form of amendments or revisions to existing institutional rules and practices. For a full discussion, see Chapter 2.3.3.

¹¹⁰ One key example of this here was the layering tactics recently employed around changes in caring expenses whereby councils are now not required to report caring expenses as attributed to specific councillors. As per Chapter 5.3, however, this author believes that this will not address the underlying stigma which exists within and outside of the political institution around claims for caring expenses, and further fails to consider the identifiability of those councillors with young children in councils due to their general underrepresentation.

small alterations to formal institutional practices are insufficient because longstanding convention and agency of male councillors to resist gender equality through informal norms and cultures interact to exclude women.

Chapter Six turned the feminist institutionalist gaze towards the informal norms and cultures of Welsh local government, as well as interactions women councillors have *outside* of institutions themselves in wider society through their constituency work. Firstly, whilst longstanding councillors perceived that the overt sexism and harassment they had experienced at the start of their councillor careers was now less common in contemporary councils, something previous authors attribute to increasing presence of women in politics (Lovenduski 2014; Trenow 2014; Krook 2018), interviewees still identified a culture of machismo and ‘ambivalent sexism’ (Krook 2018). As in previous feminist institutionalist analysis in national level politics (Och 2020), this study reveals that women local councillors had experienced resistance to their political presence through tactics such as patronisation, sexist comments, being ignored or denigrated in meetings, and being silenced by individual committee chairs. Echoing previous studies in other legislatures, the importance of personal resilience and strength was emphasised by interviewees as necessary to deal with constant micro-machismos and sexist treatment (Briggs 2000; Charles and Jones 2013; Charles 2014; Farrell and Titcombe 2016). Including feminist institutionalist analysis in the theoretical framings of this thesis therefore reveals that small-scale and daily interactions within Welsh local government are key sites where agency of women to speak and contribute can be constrained which, in turn, could prevent the substantive representation of women. This constraint plays out through the ‘micro-foundations’ of gendered institutions (Lowndes 2020) and is largely scaffolded around the agency and choices made by men councillors to participate in a culture of micro-machismos against their women counterparts. These were permitted by failures of men to properly chair meetings which may have otherwise prevented the reported interrupting, talking over, and stealing of women’s ideas. Welsh local councils were therefore perceived as gendered environments within which men had the agency to employ subtle forms of resistance to undermine any formal codes of conduct and consequently limit women’s agency, presence, and opportunities to substantively represent women.

The feminist institutionalist strand of analysis further uncovered how political styles and ways of ‘doing’ politics were also perceived as gendered and interviewees were clear that councils were characterised by masculinised political cultures (Norris 1996a; Shaw 2000,

2002; Bicquelet et al. 2012). Women adopted various strategies to deal with or try and overcome aspects of their gendered political workplace, with some interviewees discussing how they approached politics with a kinder, more pragmatic style or preferred to be less combative. Echoing findings elsewhere, some women preferred a way of doing politics that exemplified the ‘different voice ideology’ (Cameron and Shaw 2020) to resist what they viewed as adversarial or grandstanding masculine political styles otherwise present within the chamber. As in von der Fehr et al’s (2005) work, feminised political language at times was perceived to cut through the ‘pompous male rhetoric’, and women further saw the value of using lived experience or substantive framing approaches to outline their political priorities (Bicquelet et al. 2012; Hargrave and Langengen 2021). However, there was also evidence here of a significant interaction with agency regarding political styles and positional power insofar as it was senior women who, because they had more power and designated space to speak in council proceedings¹¹¹, were more confident to use that space and power to resist assimilation and avoid being silenced. In turn, it was senior cabinet women who often had more opportunity and space to substantively represent women through their portfolios. Combining feminist institutionalist analysis with gendered political leadership and political representation theory here uncovers how positional power and ability to employ agency regarding political style can overcome some aspects of a gendered political workplace and facilitate the substantive representation of women.

Whilst RQ2 asked specifically about perceptions of local councils as gendered institutions, being a local councillor does not just entail work within the political institution but further requires interactions outside of council chambers and offices. The theoretical framework here allowed for exploration of the impact of agency and structure outside of councils by others and in wider society on women’s experiences of being councillors in the broader sense: inside and outside of the institution itself. Council *work* was again perceived as being considerably gendered and the structural expectations of councillors regarding community and constituency-based engagement meant it was apt to explore the experiences of councillors in public and digital spaces. Participants were clear about the importance of being visible to their constituents to ensure that they would be considered a ‘good’ councillor and stand the best chance of being re-elected. Interaction within public space and constituencies, however, brought its own gendered issues as women discussed feeling

¹¹¹ Cabinet members often answer questions about their portfolios during council meetings where they have the opportunity to outline their plans and responses to queries from fellow councillors.

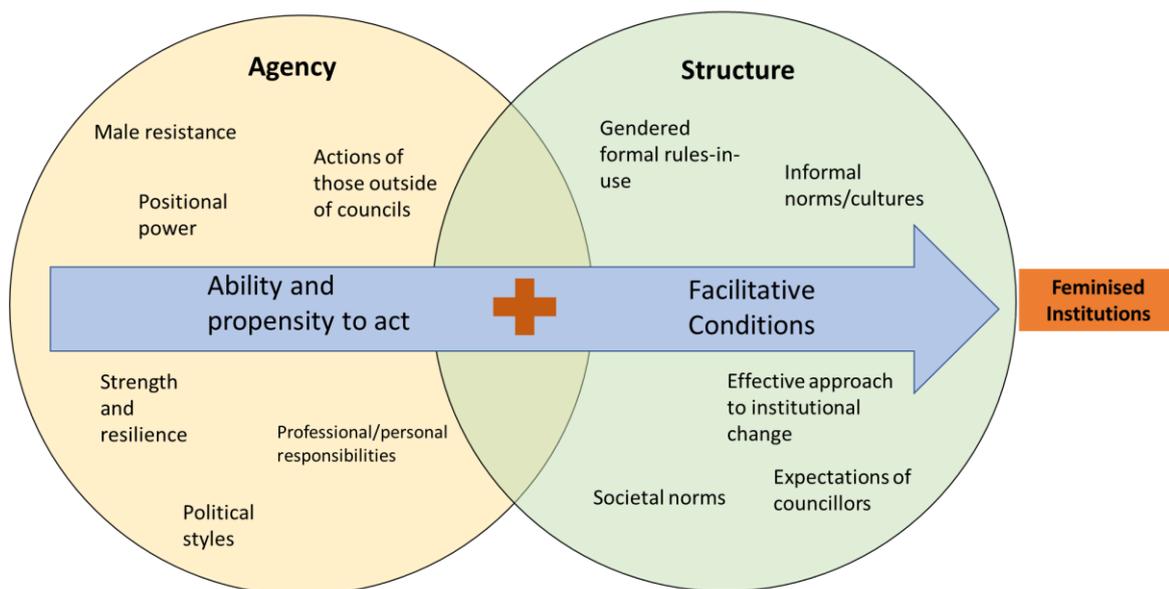
apprehensive and vulnerable when carrying out some councillor duties. Attending the homes of men constituents, for example, was mentioned by three interviewees as something which had made them feel exposed or had them mentally planning ‘escape routes’ (Theresa). Other interviewees had, because of the publication of councillors’ personal home addresses, experienced disgruntled residents on their own doorsteps which agree with findings elsewhere at the local government level (Turner and Swaine 2021). As with previous studies in other political institutions, however, women would downplay these experiences, attributing them to simply the “cost” of being a woman politician (Krook 2017, 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020; Turner and Swaine 2021). Alternatively, women discussed how they might adopt tactics to avoid these situations altogether by, for example, opting to take a companion or asking residents to attend drop-in public surgeries.

Being a local councillor now further requires a digital presence and data here suggest that, whilst being present online was considered important to participants, it also left them vulnerable to online trolling, harassment and, at its most severe, death threats. Findings echoed recent research into violence against women in politics (Krook 2017; Childs and Campbell 2019; Krook 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020; Wagner 2020; Fuchs and Schäfer 2021) which has found that online spaces are now key platforms for abuse of women politicians. Women’s agency to carry out their councillor duties in digital and public space was therefore constrained by actions of certain members of the public – particularly men – and, even if they did not have their own lived experience, participants were all concerned about the rising gendered abuse and specific vulnerability experienced by women local councillors. This, as elsewhere (Collier and Raney 2019), was considered by participants as a crucial barrier for prospective women, and they often discussed how they recommended local politics to women with the caveat and awareness that they may be placing themselves at risk¹¹². Future research into the abuse of women local councillors in offline and online public spaces is required, but this thesis adds weight to the argument that feminist institutionalist analysis and empirical research into factors affecting women’s descriptive representation must be cognizant of gendered interactions within the wider ‘civil’ society setting.

¹¹² Safety of politicians has recently become a salient issue in the media and political arenas themselves following the murders of Jo Cox MP in 2016 and, more recently, Sir David Amess MP. Priti Patel MP has, for example, proposed giving MPs police guards at local meetings and offices (BBC News 2021).

It can thus be concluded that Welsh local councils are significantly gendered political workplaces. The feminist institutionalist analysis here highlighted the pivotal role of contextual, structural factors to representational theory such as in the intersections between formal and informal rules of the game, organisational practices, and informal norms – and between agency and structure. The present study findings showed that organisational solutions (such as changing meeting times or the way that caring expenses are claimed) had not yet been comprehensive enough to cause any significant re-gendering of institutions, and layering tactics for institutional change had been insufficient in addressing and were commonly undermined by underlying informal tradition or norms. There were instances of men resisting women’s presence (largely older male councillors), and it is thus important to be cognizant of individual agency in enabling and resisting women’s representation, as well as the powerful influence of formal institutional structures, rules, and norms. Moreover, other elements of agency (actions of men in public and online) and structure (expectations of councillors’ online presence) interacted to make Welsh local government a hostile and tough place to be a woman politician, and an environment which necessitates strength, resilience, and resistance to micro-machismos and sexist treatment. Figure 9.2 (below) maps the findings for RQ2 onto the theoretical framework diagram, specifically highlighting how acts of agency by both women and men actors within and outside of councils, alongside council and wider structural elements, affect the extent to which institutions are or can become feminised.

Figure 9.2: Theoretical mapping of findings under RQ2 – agency and structural factors which influence the extent to which institutions are feminised or re-gendered



Research Question 3: What are the unique challenges faced by, and experiences of, female councillors holding and/or seeking senior positions within local government?

Research Question 3 (RQ3) was influenced by the previous studies and literature within the field of gendered political leadership theory discussed in section 2.4. In terms of structure, it drew on these to understand under what conditions women gain positional power in local government, the impact of positional power on women's experiences, as well as how seniority affected women's agency to substantively represent women and feminise institutions. Chapter Seven specifically explored the experiences of those who had sought and held senior positions, and Chapter Eight also discussed how this affected the substantive representation of women.

In agreement with extant studies, senior women councillors' journeys to seniority were found to be gendered (Eagly and Carli 2007; Farrell and Titcombe 2016). Women's journeys to leadership were perceived to be much longer than their male counterparts. Interviewees saw men appointed to committee chair positions soon after election and to senior cabinet positions after serving a single term, whilst they been councillors for much longer and had all held a range of lesser leadership positions in their councils or their political parties before being eventually chosen for cabinet positions. Evidence suggested that women did indeed face a 'labyrinth to leadership' (Eagly and Carli 2007; Carli and Eagly 2016) and felt frustrated at this inequity. This research therefore finds evidence which shows that Lovenduski's (2005) lag hypothesis¹¹³ may be accurate if applied to individual women, but does not apply to women as on a whole-gender level. Moreover, other assertions (Curtin 2008) about the gender-neutral or universal necessity for political leaders to build political careers before attaining seniority can be questioned here, given that men did not have to undergo the same lengthy career-building period as women interviewees here. Seeking a senior position as a woman in Welsh local government can therefore be considered to require extended presence in the chamber across multiple electoral terms¹¹⁴, as well as determination, patience, and a willingness to hold lesser positions in preparation for eventual seniority.

¹¹³ Lovenduski's lag hypothesis contends that women will eventually 'catch up' to men in terms of representation in senior positions after being present lower down on the political ladder.

¹¹⁴ This is something which has been identified as a key barrier to improving women's descriptive representation in seniority as women, and particularly those who face a double or triple duty, are more likely to drop out of politics after one or two terms.

Echoing findings in relation to RQ1 around women deciding to seek election, agency factors including women's self-confidence and self-efficacy, as well as structural aspects such as others' positional power as well as propensity, agency, and opportunity to act as critical actors or feminist champions were once more crucial to women seeking seniority. Women had to consider themselves capable of holding a senior position and this often meant being reassured of their own capabilities through being appointed to or asked to consider taking on a chair or senior cabinet role. Obtaining a senior institutional position was therefore often contingent on external validity through encouragement and direct recruitment by gatekeepers (women and men) who already had positional power themselves, particularly council leaders (Dowding and Dumont 2007; Goddard 2017). Women reflected on the importance of feeling valued and supported in their decision to seek seniority which, for longer-serving councillors, was identified as reliant on the individual making appointments to their cabinet (Htun 2005; Rhinehart et al. 2022). Women's journeys to seniority were dependent on the presence of those critical actors or feminist champions who would reach down and "pull them up the ladder" and, as with previous research, this was a role often played by women leaders (in Councils A and D) but also by men council leaders (Councils B and C). Evidence here did therefore agree with previous empirical work which suggested that women in senior positions often appoint other women (Jacob et al. 2014). There was also evidence here that the Welsh Labour Party and Plaid Cymru had tried to ensure good descriptive representation of women in their controlled councils, corresponding with evidence elsewhere that left-leaning parties more commonly have "female-friendly opportunity structures" and 'soft' rules to ensure women obtain seniority (Matland and Studlar 1996; Beckwith 2000; Stockemer and Sundström 2017). However, underlining the need for institutionalist analysis, this can, as was the case in Council B, be undermined by the council's culture which was perceived to be more loyal to traditional gendered norms, evidencing again the use of agency of individual councils in resistance to political party norms and rules.

Linked to RQ2, feminist institutionalist analysis of the impact of councils' institutional structures on seniority found that women perceived the gendered barriers to participation and representation created by formal and informal gendered rules-in-use detailed above to be exacerbated and felt more keenly by women senior councillors. Seniority meant an inability to build one's career outside of politics (thus foregoing building a pension and security for retirement), comes with job insecurity at every election cycle (with no

financial ‘safety net’), heightened women’s visibility and likelihood to suffer from abuse and harassment, and required more time commitment, including events during unsociable, non-working hours. The interaction of these norms meant that older, already-retired women were overrepresented amongst the senior women in this sample (and amongst women in seniority across councils in Wales), with only one younger senior councillor interviewed. Feminist institutionalist analysis of gendered rules-in-use which specifically affected those holding or considering seeking senior positions further found that layering approaches to solving these gendered organisational barriers, such as job-shared cabinet positions, were insufficiently and poorly engaged with across the case study councils which maintained a ‘male and stale’ dominance of seniority. This was the case despite job-share being made permissible by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and evidence of successful implementations in councils elsewhere in Wales, across the border in England, and in other political arenas (Graham 2013; Campbell and Cowley 2014; Bristol City Council 2015; Anderson and Jones 2018).

Institutional factors were again important because, as previous research has suggested, committee or leadership position does ‘make a difference’ (Norton 2011; Curtin et al. 2014) to women’s substantive representation through changing content of policies and debate in political chambers. Senior women in this study both perceived themselves and were considered by others to be critical actors who shaped debate, policy agendas, and implemented policies in the interests of women. Moreover, senior women were seen as playing a key role in feminising and re-gendering institutional practices and rules – for example, Ffion immediately changed the timings of meetings once she became council leader to better suit those facing a double or triple duty. Additionally, in contrast to O’Brien et al. (2015) who found evidence of women political leaders ‘shutting the door behind them’, women leaders were self-identified feminist champions who would support other women into seniority and put considerable effort into encouraging women in their communities to stand.

Holding a cabinet portfolio offered heightened opportunity to substantively represent women, contradicting assertions elsewhere that it is distance from the front-benches which increases support for policies affecting women (Thomson 2019). Institutional position was important for substantive representation and senior women can be considered critical actors, championing specific policies including: Periods in Poverty schemes, menopause campaigns, women’s history murals, and campaigns against violence against women and girls. Senior women interviewees were disproportionately responsible for ‘feminine’ portfolios which

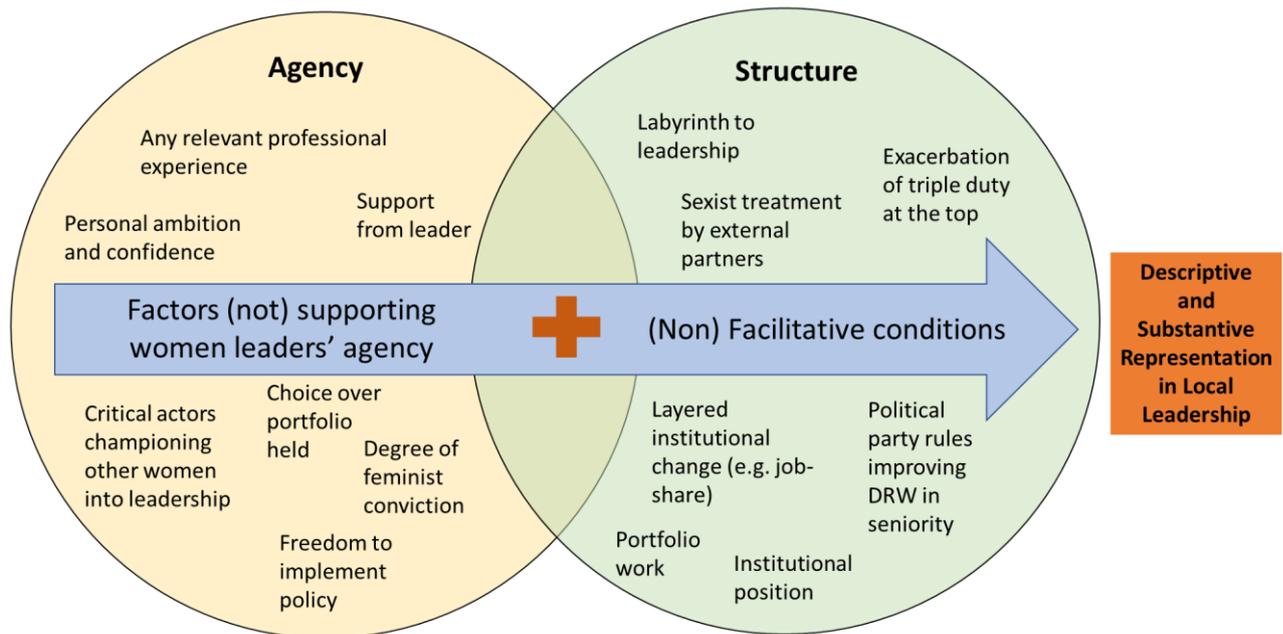
others have argued can restrict the substantive representation of women and women's senior career paths (see Krook and O'Brien 2012; Goddard 2017). Conversely here, however, women were clear that this reflected their own personal professional expertise (teachers being allocated education portfolios or nurses being allocated adult social services, for example) or was negotiated with the leader rather than a process of stereotyping or pigeonholing. Lived experience was commonly highlighted as influential on portfolio work and on how women used this positional power and knowledge to substantively represent women. Cabinet women often spoke about having a different perspective on their portfolio than their male colleagues, and were keen to defend the importance of portfolios often seen as traditionally 'soft' such as education and social services which often held the biggest budgets in local councils.

Attaining seniority consequently placed women in the best stead to become critical actors and to symbolically and substantively represent women through bring other women up the ladder, introducing women-targeted policies, and feminising institutions. Positional power was perceived by participants to increase agency and help to mitigate some of the structural barriers faced by non-senior women in Welsh local government, such as the micro-machismos and 'manterruptions' (Och 2020) faced by women in political meetings. Despite this, senior women discussed experiences similar to those found in extant literature on gendered leadership traits (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011), finding they had to work hard to prove themselves as competent leaders and having to be more than 'mediocre' to succeed and be taken seriously, unlike a man. Women in seniority were those who most commonly mentioned needing a 'thick skin' or 'resilience' to be a woman Council Leader or cabinet member.

This thesis therefore contributes empirical evidence to assertions in the field of gendered political leadership theory which argue that women face tougher routes into politics and a gendered 'labyrinth to leadership'. Moreover, combining gendered political leadership analysis with feminist institutionalism has highlighted how seniority can exacerbate gendered institutional barriers, some of which are unique to local government such as electoral insecurity coupled with the lack of a financial safety net, as well as the necessity to be present at many community evening and weekend events. Positional power, whilst giving women more agency to substantively represent women through portfolio work and improve councils through introducing changes to re-gender the chamber, therefore does not fully assuage the structural constraints faced by non-senior women and can actually heighten their impact. There is a mapping of findings related to this research question and the theoretical framework

below in Figure 9.3. This diagram shows the relationship between factors which do or do not support women leaders' agency and (non)facilitative structural conditions within councils and other relevant institutions on the descriptive and substantive representation of women in leadership in local government.

Figure 9.3: Theoretical mapping of findings under RQ3 - agency and structural factors influencing the descriptive and substantive representation of women in local leadership



Research Question 4: *How do female councillors' experiences, the culture, and the context of Welsh local government shape the substantive political representation of women in Welsh councils?*

- a) *What are women councillors' views on the role of 'critical mass' and 'critical actors' in shaping patterns and processes of substantive representation in local government?*
- b) *How and to what extent do feminist motivations inform women councillors' commitments to substantively representing women?*

RQ4 and its sub-questions sought to bring together the strands of the theoretical framework and map the impact of findings explained throughout this section in response to the other research questions on the substantive representation of women. RQ4a additionally explores the impact of cognate ideas within political representation theory – critical mass and critical actors – to ascertain under what conditions the substantive representation of women occurs

and, along with RQ4b, how this is affected by individual women's agency and any feminist motivation or identity.

As outlined in Chapter 2, political representation literature has argued that critical mass is not a guarantee of substantive representation or that there is a direct relationship between gender and substantive representation of that gender (Childs 2001a, 2002, 2006; Mackay 2008; Celis and Childs 2012), and that we need to abandon critical mass theory in favour of an approach which centres the importance of individual agency with emphasis on critical actors. Notwithstanding this, it was important here given the paucity of research into women's political representation in local government to ascertain whether critical mass was perceived as having an impact on improving women's substantive representation or feminising the council chamber. Moreover, from a feminist institutionalist perspective, critical mass may be integral to setting or challenging gendered institutional norms. Interviewees from the three councils with critical masses (Councils A, B and C), including those from council C which had the most substantial critical mass nearing gender parity, all identified gender issues within their institutions. One of the original contributions of this thesis is offered through interviewees' historical perceptions of changes experienced first-hand in Welsh local government which allows for some charting of institutional change and by which factors it is driven. Positively, long-serving women councillors contended that they had witnessed longitudinal improvements over the past twenty to thirty years and often attributed this to increased political presence from 'token' women to 'tilted' or nearly 'balanced' representation in the chamber. Having more women caused a reported shift towards more flexibility in some organisational practices and a move away from overt sexist remarks, discrimination, and exclusion. Women felt empowered and emboldened by being a member of a larger group of women in the chamber and argued that increased presence helped to escape the stranglehold of the 'old boys' club' in some councils. This was achieved by re-gendering of some rules-in-use (for example, raising hands to speak) which previously interacted with informal preferential treatment of men by men to silence women. Improving women's presence to critical mass levels was thus perceived as a facilitator of gradual erosion of structural barriers to women's agency in local government through causing shifts in informal norms or cultures and the layering of some solutions to the triple duty. This thesis thus shows some evidence in agreement with Dahlerup's (1988) early predictions about the shifts caused by achieving critical mass which listed 'changes in the social climate of political life (political culture)' as one of the six aspects of expected change.

Councils remained far from wholly re-gendered though and councillors who were newer and younger, and thus perhaps more acutely aware of remaining inequities, noticed remaining gendered norms and rules and wanted to see more progress. Moreover, data from interviewees in Council B provided evidence that suggests critical masses below ‘balanced’ levels (40:60 ratio as per Kanter 1977) are not enough to make a tangible difference to re-gendering organisational structures and working practices, and were easily undermined by strong resistance through informal traditional norms and cultures. Furthermore, despite a general sense that having more women was beneficial for institutional cultures and contexts, women also highlighted the role of individuals in ‘trailblazing’ change. Critical actors with lower thresholds for radical political action were thus considered instrumental in changing political cultures, particularly (as discussed above) those holding senior or leadership positions. Echoing previous research (Chaney 2006; Childs and Krook 2006b; Mackay 2008; Childs and Krook 2009), this thesis contributes to the argument that achieving a critical mass is not a *guarantee* of the substantive representation of women through the feminisation of political institutions. There was perceived to be an interplay between critical mass and improvements in women’s presence, alongside the reliance that interviewees highlighted critical actors with positional power to make change.

Substantive representation of women through changing policy *content* was primarily achieved through women-targeted policies concerning biological issues (menstruation or menopause), or violence against women. Women were often central in the creation and implementation of these policies, but interviewees also recognised that men councillors played a crucial role through supporting women’s policy suggestions in meetings and committees. RQ4b asks whether women had feminist motivations which influenced their propensity to substantively represent women. Women here did not usually mention feminism as being behind their creation or support of a woman-targeted policy, but one could argue that they were attitudinally feminist even if not explicitly feminist. There was a consensus amongst interviewees, that lived experience and situated knowledge of ‘being women’ was vital and also heavily influenced their approach to policy solutions (especially with biologically-focused issues) and their political priorities. Women here stated that their political priorities were distinct from men councillors’ because they were more concerned by gendered issues with housing, education, social services, and health. Whilst some therefore could not name a specific policy, they did consider themselves to be critical actors through embedding women’s interests and being an ‘authentic voice’ for women in their approach to

politics. These findings echo both the shift towards women's 'interests' over 'issues' (Childs and Lovenduski 2012) and also away from the collusion of substantive representation with a 'femin-*ist*-isation' of politics in political representation theory literature (Celis and Childs 2012; Celis and Erzeel 2015; Gwiazda 2021b), but also reflects the wider moves towards understanding women as heterogenous (Ahrens et al. 2021), gender mainstreaming and 'gender in all policy' approaches (UN Division for the Advancement of Women 2005; Celis 2008).

Chapter Eight also explored the influence of other constraining or facilitating factors on the substantive representation of women. Women in cabinet positions were considered to be best placed to implement and lead the substantive representation of women through their portfolio work. Agency and personal motivation to represent women was considered contingent on positional power (underlining the need for a complementary, institutionalist view) and, as discussed in Chapter Eight, being closer to the decision-making process through seniority or simply through one's political party being 'in power' afforded more opportunity to shape policy content and substantively represent women. Political party power was therefore both a facilitator and a barrier to substantive representation in this case. Those in opposition were further away from the decision-making process, and often faced frustration or open exclusion from policy debate or creation. Extant research has offered mixed conclusions on notions of cross-party women's caucuses or networks as solutions to majoritarian politics (Sawer 2012; Johnson and Josefsson 2016) and this study offers an original contribution regarding how these play out at the local government level in Wales. Across the sample, there was generally a feeling of reticence towards cross-party women's networks of caucuses, even amongst women in political parties which can be considered ideologically closely aligned such as Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru (who have a history of co-working in the Senedd). There was more openness towards such tactics among women in parties which either held a smaller majority (such as Welsh Labour in Council B) or those from parties in opposition, but no councillor mentioned the presence of, or had engaged with, an established women's network. Within the scope of this study, the assertion that critical mass would lead to women's networks and cross-party caucuses is therefore unfounded in Welsh local government which echoes national politics in its reliance on political party whipping and majoritarian politics (Höhmman and Nugent 2021).

Another key structural influence outside of councils themselves which interviewees identified as negatively affecting the substantive representation of women was austerity. Cuts

to councils' budgets were perceived to curtail spending and delivery of services which councillors would otherwise have prioritised or delivered for women. As has been found on a national scale (Durbin et al. 2017), budget cuts within councils and decisions made to remove funding for services was also recognised by councillors as disproportionately negatively affecting women in their communities.

The empirical data generated in this study provides evidence, from Welsh local government, that critical mass and descriptive representation alone are not sufficient for total feminisation of political institutions and the substantive representation of women. Interviewees revealed how the cultures, contexts, and norms of councils, and the wider socioeconomic context of local government limited the existence of women-specific policies, as well as the propensity of women councillors to work together across political divides. Moreover, lived experience and situated knowledge, rather than feminist motivations, were seen as crucial for the mainstreaming of women's interests into all policy, and individual women critical actors (often those with positional power) played a significant part in promoting any women-specific policy passed by councils. This thesis therefore adds empirical evidence for the necessity to shift beyond assumed links between critical mass and substantive representation, to consider how agency interacts with institutional, political party, and wider socioeconomic structures which act to constrain or facilitate the substantive representation of women. Figure 9.4 below shows how this relates to the theoretical framework and maps the elements affecting the substantive representation of women discussed throughout this section onto the agency/structure theoretical diagram. It is clear that having the ability and propensity to act as well as the correct facilitative conditions will lead to greater success in the substantive representation of women.

Figure 9.4: Theoretical mapping of findings related to RQ4 - how agency and structure affect the substantive representation of women in Welsh local government

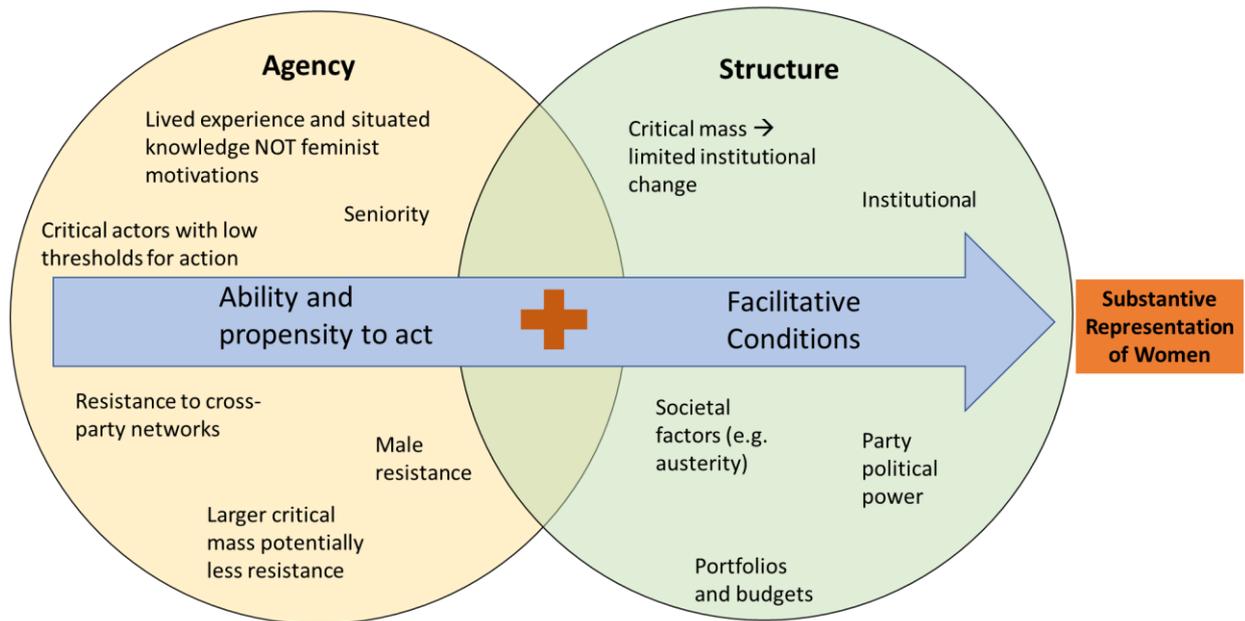


Table 9.1 summarises the responses to the research questions through the lens of agency and structure as operationalised in the previously outlined theoretical framework. It underlines the importance of this study’s original complementary analysis that not only draws on representational theory but also feminist institutionalism. It is argued that this matters because the two fields are not discrete but, as this study’s empirical findings reveal, they are intertwined. Inter alia, this case study of Welsh local government shows how women political actors’ agency to represent is at once constrained and enabled by a series of institutional factors including formal and informal rules and norms, power and positions of influence – as well as tactics or methods for institutional reform (such as conversion and layering).

Table 9.1: Summary of research findings as related to the four research questions and the theoretical framework.

<p>Research Question 1: <i>What were women’s first-hand initial and formative experiences of becoming and being local councillors in Welsh local government? And, how were these experiences shaped by gender (in)equality issues?</i></p>	
Agency	<p><i>Becoming a local councillor</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal feminist ideology was not a key motivator for women to run for political office but local issues and previous civic activism or political experience were significant predictors alongside, in some cases, a professional career in the public or Third sector • Confidence and self-efficacy were key to women feeling they were able to stand BUT nearly all interviewees needed some form of external validity or ‘powerful whisper’ to make the final decision – usually this occurred through women critical actors championing prospective women. <p><i>Political Socialisation/Initial Experiences</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliance on confidence and previous knowledge to understand how things work – relies on the generosity of colleagues. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Did allow for one interviewee to make an impact via harnessing their newness in the legislature and unfamiliarity with the procedural norms to substantively represent women and raise a gendered policy issue
Structure	<p><i>Becoming a local councillor:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political parties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Could be facilitative if they implemented positive action tactics (all-women shortlists) BUT these were often undermined by the autonomy of local branches (gatekeepers) who could choose whether to follow national rules in local elections. ○ Evidence of informal political networks as more available for men and a tradition of political patronage in some political parties – women commonly filled empty or abandoned seats. • Local councils: current women councillors felt that the organisational practices and expectations of councillors (and lack of engagement with layered solutions) exemplified through analysis in RQ2 formed key barriers to encouraging women to become councillors. Institutional norms and cultures were hostile to new women councillors • Wider structural factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Social attitudes and norms regarding traditional divisions of caring/domestic responsibility as still influential on the age at which women decide to become councillors (e.g., not entering politics with a young family)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Geographical issues: harder for new prospective councillors to campaign in rural areas as tends to be a reliance on ‘who you know’. Councillors from Council D also discussed problems with campaigning in evenings in rural areas and women’s safety. Harder to recruit women given this and the relative ease to become town or community councillors instead. <p><i>Political Socialisation/Initial Experiences</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Training seen as insufficient ● Rules and norms are often opaque and based on informal tradition, rather than any rulebook and are thus only available to women if passed down by other members
<p><i>Research Question 2: To what extent do participants perceive Welsh local councils as gendered institutions, and how does this affect women’s political participation and representation?</i></p>	
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Intersectionality – women’s individual experiences were affected by intersecting personal characteristics and responsibilities – balancing the ‘triple duty’ was something which formed a barrier to political participation for younger councillors, for example. ● Male resistance – men used their agency and networks to resist institutional change achieved through layering techniques (e.g., using inability to attend inaccessible meetings or claims for caring expenses as political ammunition). ● Positional power <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Granted more agency over political styles because more space and time to be listened to. ○ Those in seniority often acted to implement institutional change to feminise legislatures. ● Political styles – some women felt able to do politics differently to men (different voice ideology) but this was dependent on positional power and ability to resist male resistance/micro-aggressions

Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal rules-in-use <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Not necessarily overtly gendered but interacted with wider societal norms to have gendered effects (meeting times, expectations regarding time per week commitment etc.). • Informal norms and cultures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Actions of those outside of councils – gendered discrimination and sexism/harassment online and feelings of vulnerability when carrying out duties in constituencies. ○ Sexism and sexual harassment is less overt but plays out through micro-machismos and ‘manterruptions’ as well as a culture of patronisation of younger women. • Wider norms regarding gendered nature of caring responsibilities interact with other structural factors to form barriers for women • Institutional change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Layering approach to institutional change often deemed insufficient as they were easily undermined by resistance and informal norms or traditions privileged by men • Political power <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Structural barriers often exacerbated for those at the top (male leaders/ council cabinet?) (e.g., insecurity and increased time commitment)
<p>Research Question 3: <i>What are the unique challenges faced by, and experiences of, female councillors holding and/or seeking senior positions within local government?</i></p>	
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key role played by gatekeepers and external validity (particularly by council leaders given their role in choosing cabinets) – can exclude women if a male leader ‘only sees’ (Mared) the men <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Senior women often acted as critical actors themselves and ensured women’s presence through appointments and recruitment – pulling women up the ladder • Necessity for self-confidence and belief in ability to be a senior councillor to put oneself forward and accept a senior role • Heightened agency to substantively represent women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Often achieved through portfolio work ○ Specific policies (Periods in poverty campaigns; menopause awareness; women’s history murals etc.) ○ Bringing lived experience/ situated knowledge to the role • Women had agency over their portfolio allocations – did not feel pigeonholed – often chosen based on professional expertise or their personal interest. • Seniority requires a “thick skin” and resilience – have to re-prove yourself again and again.
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labyrinth to leadership – men often given positions straight after being elected, women having held a range of positions before being chosen for seniority

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural issues faced by all councillors are exacerbated by seniority (job insecurity, harassment and heightened visibility, higher time commitment/unsociable working hours and event attendance) • Solutions to gendered ‘rules-in-use’ not properly engaged with across case study councils (e.g., job-shared cabinet roles) • External partners were not always supportive and sometimes women senior councillors experienced sexist treatment
<p>Research Question 4: <i>How do female councillors’ experiences, the culture, and the context of Welsh local government shape the substantive political representation of women in Welsh councils?</i></p> <p>c) <i>What are women councillors’ views on the role of ‘critical mass’ and ‘critical actors’ in shaping patterns and processes of substantive representation in local government?</i></p> <p>d) <i>How and to what extent do feminist motivations inform women councillors’ commitments to substantively representing women?</i></p>	
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical mass not a guarantee of substantive representation of women but women felt emboldened by numbers and having more women in the chamber – more likely to speak up on issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Smaller critical masses more easily undermined by male resistance • Critical actors as key for introducing and implementing policies targeted at women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Senior women as having more agency to act and be critical actors • Substantive representation generally achieved through women having a different perspective on politics / lived experience and situated knowledge which they employed in their daily political interactions • Women did not want to form cross-party women’s networks and groups
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical mass was considered to have some impact on institutional structures and contexts (longitudinal change perceived by longer-serving councillors) • Younger councillors saw councils as less progressive and wanted to see more change • Portfolios as beneficial structural elements for the substantive representation of women • Wider societal factors limiting women’s substantive representation include austerity and a shift towards gender mainstreaming, as well as the need to implement cuts in/after economic crises • Being ‘in power’ a key predicting factor of ability to substantively represent women – opposition women felt frustrated at lack of opportunity to contribute

9.3: Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Reflections on the methodological process and researcher positionality within the interviews themselves were discussed in Chapter 3.4. Therefore, this section concentrates, instead, on general limitations of the research, as well as retrospective considerations regarding the study design. Some of these limitations and considerations were identified through useful and insightful comments and questions about the research from a wide range of audiences at various conferences and seminars between 2017 and 2022, and from anonymous reviewers of my recently published articles (Hibbs 2022a, b).

Difficult methodological choices were made in designing this study, which reflect its positioning at the intersection between the academic fields of social science and political science. One methodological and analytical decision which was afforded much time for consideration was whether to anonymise case study councils and interviewees. As a research study drawing from qualitative and feminist social science, anonymisation of data and case study sites was pitted against the understandable preference in democratic society for accountability and transparency of our political institutions. The decision to anonymise was, as discussed in Chapter 3.3, scaffolded around a concern for participants regarding reputational harm given that the interviewees were asked about treatment from other councillors and any experiences of sexism and harassment.

Researching politics which is inherently public and where information can be unearthed (though perhaps less easily at the local level than for national institutions), meant that anonymisation was never presented to participants as a guarantee. The consequences of any degree of anonymisation, however, is that it can place limitations on the presentation of data and findings by removing indirect identifiers (Kapiszewski and Karcher 2021) or, simply, contextual information which would enrich analysis – for example, councils' specific statistics regarding women's descriptive representation were not revealed here, and any defining characteristic of councillors (specific portfolios for senior members, for example) have been consciously avoided. Consequently, anonymisation techniques throughout have, at times, obscured indirect identifiers which would have been otherwise-interesting to include. Notwithstanding this, preventing harm to participants was crucial to the ethical considerations of the study (as required by Cardiff University's ethics policy, and that of the ESRC funding body) and the data presented retained the voices and journeys of interviewees and their personal gendered experiences. An avenue for future study would be to employ alternative, large-scale qualitative or quantitative methods to generate further data on the themes

discussed here, which would allow for an expansion of the evidence base for women's political experiences, gendered institutions and a wider sense of views regarding women's political representation in Welsh local government.

As previously discussed in Chapter 3.3, which explained and reflected on the move to online interviewing and its effect on nuance and body language in the digital interview, the Coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on this research. Aside from changing the interview context, the pandemic also restricted the number of interviews completed, with recruitment delays as councillors organised and prioritised community response to the virus meaning the originally desired twenty-five interviews were reduced to nineteen. However, data saturation was still achieved and, as has been argued throughout, the impact of the pandemic on this research was also positive; engendering in-depth and non-hypothetical discussions of the possibilities posed by remote meeting attendance, for example, and enabling comparison between pre-pandemic hypotheticals and the reality of virtual council chambers. The pandemic and its long-term impacts on local councils' organisational practices around meeting times constitute a key area for further study. As discussed further in my journal article on this subject (see Hibbs 2022b), remote meeting attendance introduced possibilities for women's political participation in Welsh local government and a follow-up study of whether local councils have continued to engage with and encourage remote attendance would be particularly pertinent in the next five years.

For this thesis, beginning as it does from the theoretical understanding explored in the literature on descriptive representation that women representatives are best placed to represent women, men were deliberately not interviewed. Common comments and questions from peers have also centred around this choice to only interview *women* local councillors. In response, this thesis' epistemological approach was drawn from feminism, interpretivism, and from feminist standpoint theory (see Chapter 3.2), and the research subsequently centred women's voices, their journeys, and only women's gendered experiences. The study's primary focus on women's lived experiences – of barriers, of discrimination, of being local leaders, of doing politics, and of representing (or not) women – and not men's perceptions of women's experiences, barriers, and representation engendered a research design which excluded men. As with wider debates in feminism, it could be contended that this methodological choice ignores half of the 'problem'.

Others have previously sought to understand men's perceptions of women in local government. For example, Farrell and Titcombe (2016) interviewed both men and women in their study of gendered councillor experiences in Welsh local councils, and found distinctions between the perceptions of male councillors regarding the gendered nature of local councils, and how, in reality, women experienced inequality resulting from this gendered difference. Nonetheless, the likelihood that interviewing men would have achieved as frank and open discussion or data as rich as that discussed in previous chapters is contestable. As illustrated through the work of Farrell and Titcombe (2016), male councillors either may not experience or notice gendered issues and subsequently will not perceive councils to often be discriminatory environments for their women counterparts. Moreover, following a feminist epistemological approach the *raison d'être* of this study is to further understandings of women's experiences.

Furthermore, steps taken to improve the political representation of women could lead to some loss of power for the current majority group. Therefore, men could potentially underplay councils' gendered inequality issues to retain control and maintain masculine hegemonic norms. Male councillors, as such, have more to lose by participating in a research study which provides evidence of gender inequality in local government, whilst it is more likely that women are more committed to the study's principles. The women interviewed here (even those who held more traditionally conservative views) were all interested in the study and its emerging findings, often asking whether their views were shared across the cohort and making general comments that they hoped things would improve for future women entering politics in the future. Notwithstanding this, there is scope for future studies including men at the local level in Welsh local government, particularly those men who also experience the 'triple duty' discussed in Chapter 5.2 to contribute more evidence towards the incompatibility of organisational practices of Welsh local government with younger politicians' lives and to encourage modernisation.

Finally, as explained in Chapter Four, this thesis was not an in-depth exploration of gendered political party selection processes nor the barriers to women's political representation *pre-election* or the electoral process. Findings outlined in Chapter Four suggest a gap for further study of the inner workings of political parties and selection processes at the local level, incorporating the supply and demand model allowing us to identify where exactly women on this journey fall off 'the ladder of recruitment' (Lovenduski 2016). There is also scope for a deeper exploration of how and when political parties employ positive action

techniques at the local level¹¹⁵, for example, as well as research into the softer tactics for encouraging women to stand. Crucially, as the foregoing analysis reveals, there is scope for study of the implementation efficacy of positive action measures as this study revealed national policies are not always followed at the local level with significant implications for women's representation. Additionally, it has been shown elsewhere that women 'fall off the ladder' in local government (Allen 2012a) and therefore, with the next election cycle, it would be pertinent to speak to those women who stood down and chose not to re-contest their seat to ascertain whether any of the foregoing findings on gendered institutions and representation had a considerable impact on this decision.

9.4: Recommendations for Policy and Institutional Change

Given that this thesis is situated at the intersection of social policy and political science, and given its nature as a feminist study, which must engender emancipatory action, it is important to outline some succinct recommendations drawn from this work. There is a distinction here between high-level, systemic recommendations, which focus broadly on a general re-gendering of local government institutions, and secondly, those which address more specific and discrete policy-focused solutions to detailed aspects of the androcentric norms and organisational practices identified by interviewees in the foregoing findings. Feminist institutionalism has previously contended it is harder to re-gender or feminise older, established institutions than it is to design a new political institution enshrined in and constructed around gender equality (Mackay 2014; Mackay and Waylen 2014), and this is recognised here. Both sets of recommendations suggest changes to the institutional cultures and environments of Welsh local government to address the androcentric procedural traditions. However, as earlier discussion has highlighted, often incremental 'layering' (see earlier footnote) or 'conversion'¹¹⁶ tactics for institutional change can be subverted and undermined by resistance from the majority representative group (Streeck and Thelen 2005b; Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Therefore, a higher-level and systemic overhaul of local

¹¹⁵ As Chapter Four explained, data here showed that the Welsh Labour Party, which has otherwise strict party rules about positive action measures to improve women's political representation in Westminster and Senedd elections, did not implement such rules similarly in Welsh local elections, leaving the choice about whether to do so in the hands of local party branches.

¹¹⁶ Conversion is when rules formally remain the same but are interpreted or enacted in new ways or "redirected to new goals, functions, or purposes".

government is considered vital to feminising Welsh local government and re-gendering organisational practices.

Broadly, women's descriptive political representation in Wales is poor and requires attention. Gender quotas are proven to be one of the most successful techniques for improving women's political presence (Squires 2003; Krook 2006a, 2010; Franceschet et al. 2012; Rosen 2017) and, as such, must be a tactic that is given thorough consideration for future electoral cycles in Welsh local government. As the table in section 1.1.3 showed, there are significant differences in descriptive representation across councils, with the best-performing councils achieving 40 per cent and above, whilst others have less than 20 per cent women represented in their council. Therefore, one high-level recommendation to the Welsh Government (which has legislative powers on this matter under the Wales Act (2017)) is to introduce legally binding gender quotas for Welsh local government. Furthermore, there is a need for better pro-action and enforcement of the Equality Act 2010 (and the associated Welsh statutory regulations stemming from this Act), and for compliance checks by the EHRC to ensure that local councils are not contravening any aspects through institutional sexism in their gendered working practices.

Getting women into elected office in local councils, however, has been shown throughout this thesis to not be enough to guarantee any change in institutional practice, or in policy if institutions remain gendered and place constraints on would-be critical actors. It is therefore recommended that all councils undergo a significant process of re-gendering to, firstly, ease the burdens of the triple duty and bring Welsh local government into the Twenty-First Century. To include and encourage younger councillors, and those councillors with caring responsibilities or other professions, councils must be modernised through changes such as those detailed in Table 9.2.

More broadly, there needs to be a general reduction in reliance on procedural traditions that exist primarily for prosperity's sake. Welsh local government stands to learn a lot from both the changes engendered through the pandemic, but could also usefully learn from other political institutions such as the devolved parliaments (Senedd Cymru and Scottish Parliament) to feminise its approaches. Local government, as an institution comprised of smaller political arenas (Wales has 22 local authorities and boroughs), is perhaps less easy to change than a single institution (like Senedd Cymru, or the Scottish Parliament) given the difficulty in ensuring universality. Notwithstanding this, Table 9.2

outlines some clear recommendations for a re-gendering of organisational practice, culture, and rules. To achieve justice and equity across councils, these would ideally be implemented universally through the Welsh Local Government Association and any required inquiry or compliance check carried out by EHRC on behalf of Welsh Government or independently by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. This second set of specific policy recommendations is arranged under thematic headings for ease of access.

Table 9.2: Recommendations

<p><u>Getting Women in:</u> R1: Limit incumbency and the maximum number of terms possible for councillors to serve to either: a) two terms of five years, OR b) three terms of four years. R2: Use incentives to encourage political parties to engage with positive action techniques such as twinning, zipping, gender quotas, or all-women shortlists.</p>	<p><u>Remuneration and Time Commitments</u> R6: Review and increase councillor remuneration in line with either a) Inflation b) That received by Scottish councillors R7: Require all councillors to record hours spent on their role as standard on a flexi sheet. R8: Review councillors’ recorded time spent on an annual basis and award payment if necessary R9: Review the advertised expected hours per week remunerated for by the IRPW and adjust payment/expectations accordingly</p>	<p><u>Councillor Safety</u> R13: Stop publishing councillors’ full home addresses on council websites. If locality of the councillor or candidate is raised as a concern during elections, make proof of residency in the council borough/city a precursor to running in the election. R14: Regularly monitor the social media accounts of all councillors, and ensure that any/all instances of online violence, trolling, or other gendered harassment is reported and taken seriously by councils and, if of sufficient severity, referred to appropriate policing authorities as standard.</p>
<p><u>Training and Political Socialisation</u> R3: Modernise council meetings, rulebooks, and publish accessible training documents/guides. All councillors must take mandatory training on council rules each term. R4: Ensure that all Chairs, Leaders, and other senior members who take charge of meetings receive diversity and inclusion training [as noted – factors like this on training are presumed in the Welsh Equality Act Statutory regs – but, as this study shows, they are not adequately publicised/enforced] R5: Take reports of unfair chairing/issues with meetings seriously and remove Chairs if needed</p>	<p><u>Meeting Accessibility and Expenses</u> R10: <u>EITHER</u> no longer require councils to publish childcare expenses totals separately to those other expenses claims, for example, amalgamate travel and caring expenses <u>OR</u> publish total childcare expenses at the regional level (using Senedd Cymru electoral regional wards)¹¹⁷. R11: Encourage and maintain the use of remote meeting attendance and voting in a hybrid manner for councillors at all meetings and enable those who cannot attend in person to attend through virtual means. R12: Implement an appropriate pension scheme for councillors in senior leadership positions (Leader/deputy and Cabinet Members) who are not of retirement/pension age.</p>	<p><u>Leadership and Senior Positions</u> R15: Advertise and encourage job sharing roles for committee positions, spokespeople, cabinet members, and council deputies and leaders. R16: Require that the two most senior leadership roles – Leader and Deputy – must be gender balanced. If a Council does not have a gender-balanced leadership, they must make an appropriate case of justification to the WLGA or face cuts in funding. R17: Introduce mentoring/shadowing schemes within councils for those interested in obtaining a senior position.</p>

¹¹⁷ In Senedd Cymru elections, Senedd Members are elected either in Senedd constituencies, or as ‘regional’ Senedd Members. The five electoral regions (originally based on MEPs’ constituencies) are: Mid and West Wales, North Wales, South Wales Central, South Wales East, and South Wales West.

9.5: Reflections on this Thesis' Original Theoretical Contributions and Utility of the Analytical Framework

This section considers the theoretical contributions made by this thesis both through the case study and its empirical findings within an under-researched locale, and in relation to the value of the analytical framework in this case and its applicability for future research. Firstly, the original contribution of the thesis is outlined (section 9.5.1), situating it as an in-depth study of a relatively ignored political institution in the field of gender and politics. It is contended that by attending to this gap in academic research and focusing on the local government level in Wales, this thesis contributes key empirical evidence to extend the research landscape in women's political representation and studies of participation in UK politics. Accordingly, it provides a foundation for future comparative links to be made between levels of governance across the constituent countries. Section 9.5.2 then details the value added to the case study through employing the conceptual framework detailed in section 2.5. This considers how the case study and wider object of analysis have been illuminated through this conceptual approach, discussing why combining feminist institutionalism, political representation, and gendered political leadership theory into an agency and structure framework was beneficial.

The final part of this section considers what this case study has revealed about the utility, value, and challenges of the analytical framework both for this thesis and the implications for future research in the field of politics and gender studies. Thus, this section draws on the discussion in Chapter Two to assess the usefulness of this framework in light of this case study. It also examines the extent to which this framework connects with the theories and cognate ideas explored earlier in the thesis (Chapters Two to Eight). Finally, the implications of this analytical framework for future scholarship in the field of gender and politics and political representation scholarship are addressed. This final section considers the benefits and possibilities this 'joined-up' theoretical and conceptual framework and approach poses for the field, and also reflects on its usefulness in light of the current case study. Lastly, it considers replicability across other levels of governance and any revisions which may be necessary for application and operationalisation of the framework for future research into different gendered political contexts.

9.5.1: The Original Contribution of the Thesis

Feminist political science and social policy have long been concerned with women's political representation and whether political institutions are democratically representative, However,

as documented in Chapter One, much extant research has focused on national legislatures in Westminster and the devolved nations, leaving local government relatively under-researched. Local councils have, since their inception, been key players on the political stage, and make crucial decisions affecting everyone's daily life but are now also responsible for implementing austerity cuts to services, which are proven to disproportionately negatively impact women (Wakefield 2019). It was therefore considered important to research and examine the gendered structures and contexts affecting these decisions and who makes them within local government in Wales.

Wales constitutes an interesting research site given the juxtaposition of the near-gender-parity achieved in Senedd Cymru [currently 43%] with the continuing poor political representation of women in some local councils [28% during the 2017-2022 electoral term], suggesting that successes in national legislatures have not cascaded down and do not guarantee a contagion effect (McAllister 2020). Moreover, the relative stalling of progress regarding women's descriptive representation and presence in Welsh local government between 2004 and the 2017-2022 electoral term suggested that there may have been issues *within* local government which were limiting women's political participation, or were making Welsh local councils unwelcoming and hostile to women.

Reviews of the literature found that very few studies offered holistic understandings of women's gendered daily experiences *within* local political institutions, with an overwhelming focus in extant research and policy on getting women into council chambers and not on what happens to them next. The present research contributes an original understanding of why women may, as per previous findings, 'fall off the ladder' (Allen 2012a, b) quicker in Welsh local government, revealing the conditions within councils which were not as inclusive or conducive to women's participation as they may otherwise appear. This thesis has made an original contribution to the field by applying those theories and analytical lenses commonly employed in feminist political science research at other levels of governance – feminist institutionalism, political representation, and gendered political leadership theories – to the local level in Wales to understand how women's lived experiences within local government condition their political participation and representation. The key original contribution of this thesis is its utility in attending to a recognised gap in academic research to understand the experiences of women in Welsh local government.

This research has centred on women councillors' perceptions regarding the gendered inequalities of the inner workings of local government in Wales and has foregrounded the lived experiences of women in local government to create a comprehensive picture of life within the local legislature from selection through to seniority. By employing a previously underutilised in-depth qualitative methodological research design and undertaking a feminist institutionalist analysis of local government, this thesis has highlighted the importance of first-hand accounts to understand gendered experience throughout women's political careers in Welsh local government. Moreover, the study has explored the influence of informal norms and cultures, inside and *outside* the local government institution itself, as well as on formal rules-in-use – to create a holistic analysis of how political experience is gendered and affects women whilst carrying out all expected councillor duties in chambers, online, in public in constituencies, and in seniority. The sampling technique employed further enriched the study through undertaking interviews with as wide a range of women as possible within the limits of the case study sites. This research was not limited to the experiences of women from a single political party as in some previous research (Childs 2001a, b, 2002, 2004a, b; Celis and Childs 2012; Webb and Childs 2012), as it successfully recruited across the political spectrum, achieving an intersectional sample. The thesis includes data and experiences from Plaid Cymru, Welsh Labour, Independent, Welsh Liberal Democrat, and Welsh Conservative women who held a range of positions within councils, and were from different generations, ethnicities, professional backgrounds, personal situations regarding caring, and languages. Whilst, as discussed, local government is not as representative as it should be, which limited the availability of women with some protected characteristics, this research and its diverse sample have offered an original contribution to empirical knowledge through assessing how gendered (in)equalities, political participation, seniority, and institutional working practices are felt differently by women councillors with distinct backgrounds.

In summation, this thesis has contributed to the field by creating a holistic study which details women's first-hand and diverse experiences across their local government careers from the decision to stand to becoming a councillor and, for some, to reaching and holding a senior position. It has extended the landscape of the gender and politics field to include empirical evidence from an under-researched set of political institutions in the UK: Welsh local government and, as the next sections consider, illustrates the value of extending

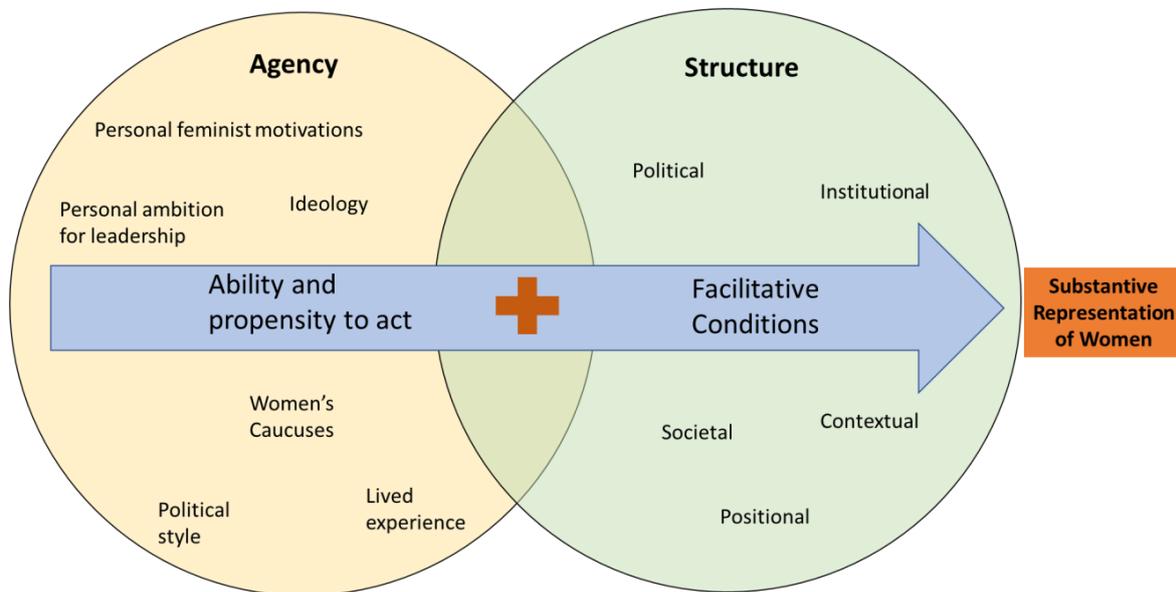
research beyond studies in silos through employing a conceptual framework broadly constructed around agency and structure.

9.5.2: Value of the Conceptual Framework for Illuminating the Case Study

As explored in Chapter Two (section 2.5), this thesis employed a theoretical framework scaffolded around agency and structure to reveal the nature of Welsh local councils, their gendered organisational practices, and the subsequent impact of this and other contributory factors, including positional power, on women's substantive political representation. This section considers whether combining the three strands of theory discussed in Chapter Two (political representation, feminist institutionalist, and gendered political leadership theories) into an overarching framework of agency and structure successfully resulted in research which illuminated the case study and wider object of analysis.

The conceptual framework adopted here responded to previous work which had called for a shift in studying the substantive representation of women which includes a focus on *how* substantive representation occurs and what *specific actors* do to represent women. This case study thereby adopted this 'joined-up' approach to understanding women's political participation and representation (Childs and Krook 2009), and arguably was effective in establishing who, how, and when the substantive representation of women in policy content and contexts occurs. By approaching the analysis of the four case study councils through embedding all three strands of theory outlined in Chapter Two, this case study achieved a comprehensive understanding of how women's political representation is conditional on agency and structure. The diagram below (Figure 9.5), repeated from Section 2.5, reminds readers of the agency and structure factors which emerged from the research interviews and were understood to have an impact on women's propensity and ability to act and the facilitative conditions needed to encourage women's substantive representation.

Figure 9.5: (Repeat of Figure 2.3 showing) the theoretical framework and relationship between agency and structure and the conditions needed to achieve the substantive representation of women



As noted, the aim of this research case study was to address the gap in political representation literature regarding local politics and local government institutions. Given the relative lack of attention paid to Welsh local government in comparison to national and devolved legislatures, this case study aimed to achieve a broad understanding of the gendered equality issues affecting women's political careers in Welsh local councils and, subsequently, the substantive representation of women. A lack of extant research meant that this thesis had to provide new empirical evidence and an extension of research conducted in other political legislatures to women's political participation and representation in local government to map experiences from election to seniority in this understudied context. As such, this thesis' conceptual framework and theoretical approach with its shift away from research within one of the separate silos of political representation *or* feminist institutionalism *or* gendered political leadership, towards understanding women's political representation as broadly conditional on agency and structure was beneficial for providing rich data on the political lives of women in Welsh local government. The case study findings explored throughout have highlighted and illustrated the value of this comprehensive and joined-up theoretical approach to exposing the range of structural factors which facilitate or constrain women's agency, their political representation and participation, and women's experiences whilst seeking and holding positions in the Welsh local government.

As outlined in section 2.5, the theoretical framework aimed to understand how the following three aspects of agency and structure played out in Welsh local government:

1. Whether women do or do not act to represent women in situ in local government and under what structural conditions this does (not) occur;
2. How and whether groups act to enact substantive change in policy content and contexts, how this occurs, and the nature of that change;
3. The role of individuals' institutional positioning and power in shaping agency and transforming structures.

The conceptual framework has been beneficial for this case study by engendering research into the impact individual choice, agency, and personal ideology had on women's propensity to participate in Welsh local politics (on the most basic level of seeking election) but further on whether, when, and how they substantively represented women. For example, the theoretical framework illustrated that women in the four studied Welsh local councils were not openly motivated by personal commitment to feminist ideology either in their decisions to stand or in their actions within council chambers. They perceived instead that representing women was something implicitly achieved through bringing their own lived experience to their political role. Analysing women's actions and perceptions through the concept of agency and escaping limited questions about critical acts¹¹⁸ indicated that women believed that they *were* representing women, but this was shaped almost exclusively by situated knowledge and lived experience and bringing an 'authentic voice' for women's interests.

Agency is also not just individual but can further be applied to group action. The analytical framework here was valuable insofar as it uncovered that, whilst 'groups' in the micro-level application of the term were not engaged with at the local level – women's networks or caucuses were not popular with study participants across the case study councils – assessing this aspect through the broader sense of the term found that women (when understood as a heterogenous gendered group) were regarded as causing institutional change and shifts in political organisation. Having more women present, specifically to critical mass and balanced levels of representation (Kanter 1977), was viewed as important for

¹¹⁸ Women were asked for examples of policies which could be critical acts and whether they considered themselves to be critical actors, but they were also asked for their thoughts on how being a woman broadly influenced their political priorities or whether they thought they approached politics from a different perspective to men councillors.

longitudinal changes in institutional contexts. This study's conceptual framework also captured a sense of how individual women made their mark through individually championing institutional shifts (e.g. by pushing for more flexibility and layering or conversion forms of change) and encouraging others, thereby ensuring their own legacy for women's political presence. By operationalising a theoretical framework based on agency and structure, this thesis identified where and how women, as individuals (critical actors) and when understood as gendered 'groups' with a political presence within chambers (critical mass), caused substantive representation and political change.

Analysing agency and not being prescriptive about what constituted a critical act for participants avoided some of the more problematic generalisations seen in parts of the extant literature about defining 'women's issues' and recognised that, for this context, the substantive representation of women and critical acts were more diffuse, often perceived as achieved through a gendered political perspective rather than proposing a new policy for women. The current theoretical framework thus helped the case study to move beyond the binary assumptions often found in other political representation literature, which distinguishes between feminist and non-feminist (or conservative) women's political actors claims to represent women, and avoid collusion of women's substantive representation with *feminist* substantive representation. It instead reflected more recent theoretical moves towards the actions of individual 'critical actors' (Childs 2001a; Celis and Erzeel 2015). In summary, by concentrating on agency, the case study enabled an examination of how women assessed their own and others' perceived impact on the political content. It understood women as heterogeneous political actors who make their own choices about when and how to substantively represent women within their individual political and institutional contexts.

The conceptual framing of this thesis around structure, as well as the in-depth qualitative methodological approach, enriched the case study through the centring of women's experiences in institutional contexts, producing data which privileges first-hand accounts of how rules-in-use played out for individual women. This approach informed a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing women's political careers in Welsh local government. Through focusing on structure, which combined exploration of the formal and informal architectures as explored in the discussion of feminist institutionalism (Kenny 2014), *alongside* a wider application of structural influences (societal, political, and geographical) and an assessment of the influence of positional power, the conceptual framework allows for a holistic understanding of what being a woman looks and feels like in

Welsh local government. Given the relative lack of knowledge and research in this municipal political context, it was key to explore any and all elements – institutional, political (within political parties and Welsh political landscape), geographical/local-based, and beyond – which interacted to impact women in the four case study councils. Whilst feminist institutionalist analysis alone may have usefully illuminated the institutional formal and informal rules and norms affecting daily political life within the councils, the concept of structure extends this to the gendered aspects of the Welsh context and other political institutions (political parties, for example) which equally affected women’s political experiences and journeys from (s)election to seniority. This illustrated how seemingly gender-neutral rules-in-use as well as informal masculinised council cultures and traditions within councils and layered approaches to institutionally feminise rules with gendered effects (Lowndes 2014, 2020) interacted with and were undermined by wider gendered societal, geographical, and contextual norms to prevent women’s full political participation in this context.

The theoretical and methodological approaches further added value through allowing for an exploration of intersectionality and the influence of individual characteristics such as age, parenthood, and other caring responsibilities, language, geographical location (specifically regarding rurality), and, to a limited extent, ethnicity¹¹⁹ on being a woman councillor in Wales. Intersectionality has become an increasingly valued part of feminist research (Childs 2006; Hoffman 2006), and this study’s conceptual framework was once again beneficial as it allowed the differential impacts of agency and structural factors to be differentiated in terms of women’s intersectional experiences within Welsh local government. As exemplified by discussions on the triple duty and informal norms in Chapters Five and Six and in response to RQ2, this case study has shown that younger women felt intersections between gender and age often led to patronisation from men councillors. Intersections with caring and/or professional responsibilities and rurality also created unique barriers which require different facilitative conditions and solutions. For example, changing meeting times to 5pm may be a sufficient layered solution for a working younger woman councillor, but may not be suitable for a woman with young children or a woman who must travel over an hour each way to the council chamber. Moreover, feminist institutionalist analysis assisted in revealing where and how any solutions to address such inequalities were undermined or

¹¹⁹ This was limited by the nature of Welsh local government as ‘pale’ and dominated by white councillors which restricted the availability of ethnic minority councillors within the sample.

resisted through informal norms and traditions (Streeck and Thelen 2005a; Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Lowndes and Roberts 2013), or did not alleviate barriers for all women. To continue with the example of meeting attendance, the privileging of macho presenteeism was an example of how men councillors would operationalise informal tradition and use this as political ammunition to attack women with competing responsibilities who could not attend meetings at inaccessible times. The implementation of remote meeting attendance *alongside* generally more accessible meeting times was therefore recommended by interviewees as a shift which would lead to a more inclusive chamber. This theoretical and methodological approach added value to the case study and the wider object of analysis, as it revealed that women's institutional experiences are not one-dimensional. This means that structural change and institutional re-gendering should not be based on an assumed homogenous 'woman' experience.

Finally, positional power and notions of gendered political leadership were employed to assess the reciprocal relationship between seniority and the factors related to agency and structure and how this affected the substantive representation of women. Literature on gendered political leadership cited in Chapter Two primarily drew on empirical evidence in national level governments and executive cabinets (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 2011; Kelly 2011; King 2011; Norton 2011; Curtin et al. 2022), however, local elites are similarly closer than those on council backbenches to the important decisions made at the local level. Operationalised alongside feminist institutionalism and political representation, including gendered political leadership analysis in the conceptual framing of this case study added value by illustrating how positional power can increase agency and ability to substantively represent women through influence over the policy-making process and, in the case of council leaders, over institutional working practices. Disappointingly, however, the case study demonstrated that seniority can often exacerbate structural barriers, particularly for younger women, as it resulted in insecurity and solidified the triple duty faced more widely by those with caring and other professional responsibilities. This, in turn, meant that even where leadership was female, it was often 'pale and stale'. This study's findings revealed how navigating the labyrinth to leadership required determination and resilience, but this case study does support previous research which finds that committee position can make a difference to increasing agency, feminising policy content and institutional contexts (Norton 2011).

The theoretical framework illuminated the case study and women's political experiences in Welsh local government by including consideration of the iterative and reciprocal impact of positional power on agency and structure (and vice versa). This was beneficial as it meant that this research could explore how women's political representation and participation changes based on the stage of a given councillor's political career. Indeed, positional power did play out similarly on most occasions at the local level as seen in previous research – i.e., senior women did make more specific claims of critical acts to substantively represent women – but there were also key differences, including how women in local government enacted agency over choosing portfolios and did not feel pigeonholed. The theoretical framework benefitted the case study by creating new empirical evidence of the interactions between women's seniority, their experiences within and impact on institutional structures, and positional agency to substantively represent through critical acts and feminist championing. A study which solely focused on back-bench councillors and ignored the gendered nature of leadership would not have fully understood how substantive representation occurs, or the impact of 'local elites' on political content and contexts in Welsh local government.

Findings and contributions here outline how the agency and structure conceptual framework illuminated the case study by unearthing exactly how and under what conditions the substantive representation of women occurs. All three theoretical strands operationalised under 'structure' and 'agency' were important to assess what can cause women to fall off the political ladder after fewer terms, continue the legacy of local government as being dominated by those who are 'male, pale, and stale', and prevent women's full political participation and representation. This study's theoretical framework has implications for wider scholarship on politics and gender as, in the manner it has been employed here, it can generate empirical findings which allow for a detailed assessment of a political institution, especially in understudied contexts. Overall, as this section has concluded, the conceptual framework enables an understanding of how, for participants, being a *woman* councillor was considered concurrently a burden and a blessing. Some women encountered obstacles and negativities attributed to both structure and the agency of others who resisted feminisation, yet there were instances where women were also able to free themselves from non-facilitative structures, capitalise on their seniority, or harness their presence as part of a critical mass, to re-gendering their council, its practices, and its politics.

9.5.3: Utility, Value, and Challenges of the Analytical Framework and its Implications for Wider Scholarship and Future Research

This thesis' case study has revealed that there is a clear necessity to move away from studies which focus solely (and discretely) on one of the theoretical strands of political representation, feminist institutionalism, or gendered political leadership towards an analytical framework which encompasses all three. Findings and contributions in this case study expose how, to understand exactly where and under what conditions the substantive representation of women occurs in any political legislature, it is important to consider the broader interrelation and interplay between structure and agency, and how this plays out both through institutions as influenced by wider structures and norms (Mackay et al. 2010). There is clear utility offered by this conceptual framework for achieving a macro-level and comprehensive understanding of political institutions, how they are gendered through internal and external institutional structures, how women are politically substantively represented, and the impact of positional power.

In section 2.5, it was contended that this study's theoretical and conceptual framework would apply a joined-up analytical approach, as called for by Childs and Krook (2009, p. 144), to study "all aspects of the legislative process" and to delineate gendered legislative contexts which "may be gendered [and] affect the behaviour of representatives". One of the challenges encountered whilst carrying out this case study however was the reliance on women's knowledge and explanations of the legislative process, self-reported incidences of substantive representation, and understanding of how structure affects individual women. As stated in Chapter Four, women (especially when new to local government) faced confusion and uncertainty about political processes, arguing that rules-in-use and institutional norms were often relatively opaque¹²⁰. The holistic framework and reliance on interview data did not adopt Childs and Krook's (2009, p. 144) 'fourth step' which generates mapping of all formal institutional norms and processes within individual councils and the "specific procedures required [...] to formulate, debate and pass policy". Consequently, although this case study's methodological approach produced interesting and comprehensive data on individual women's political experience within contexts, the breadth of the theoretical framework did limit the depth of findings which may otherwise be achieved by empirical research that concentrated discretely on conceptual precision regarding critical mass and

¹²⁰ This was identified as an attempt to limit women's awareness of procedure, and their political participation in the chamber, and was a perceived form of masculine resistance to institutional change.

critical actor theories. This did pose a challenge for the case study as the framework did not, in current form, enable in-depth mapping of institutional rules, rather it offered key insights by examining how they play out for individual women in individual councils under certain circumstances. On doing this it was crucial to ensure that the sampling technique enabled study of intersectional experiences and perceptions which, arguably, was achieved in this context.

In a similar vein, research into women's substantive political representation and where (and when) it occurs in legislatures often adopts a policy content analysis approach to avoid assumptions made about where substantive representation of women does and does not occur. This is primarily due to the reliance of interview-based research as a methodological choice on participants' honest recollections of current and previous experiences or events. In this context, this carried the risk of deliberate or unconscious omission or overstatement of acts to substantively represent women – there was a reliance on women to be honest about controversial or unusual views and about the influence of structure upon their agency and propensity to represent women. Despite this, however, the case study participants' views often contrasted findings in other political institutions¹²¹ which could suggest that this study's women interviewees were honest. If they had not implemented or championed any women-targeted policy, they shared this, and often discussed opinions which contradicted those of their political party or which did not mesh with current feminist thinking about societal norms.

In response to the potential limitations of the framework detailed above, future research employing this theoretical framework may benefit from complementary ethnographic, longitudinal and documentary analysis as a means of methodological supplementation. This would allow for comprehensive mapping of institutional contexts and tracking of successful and unsuccessful attempts to substantively represent women over the course of one or more electoral terms. For example, by tracking a cohort of women councillors from selection to re-election one could observe and generate data to ascertain exactly how women are inducted into institutional norms, the barriers within and any re-gendering of institutional structures, and a policy content analysis to identify exactly where and when the substantive representation of women occurs and by whom. However, given the

¹²¹ For example, some Welsh Labour women shared views on, and had even personally challenged, all-women shortlists and other positive action tactics which undermined their party's general commitments and actions regarding improving women's political presence.

lack of extant research within this context and the temporal limitations of the thesis, it was not possible or a priority here, and the epistemological feminist interpretivist approach undertaken further privileged a project – and original research contribution, which was scaffolded around women’s lived experience and their own interpretations of how their realities are constructed in gendered contexts. The study does map selected and appropriate interviewees’ accounts about specific procedures required to formulate, debate and pass policy - but, in large measure, this study’s research aims were different to mapping policy decisions, rather seeking to understand social constructivist, lived experience, and first hand councillors' accounts of local government.

A key utility of this study’s conceptual framework for the case study, and which could have positive implications for future research, was its ease of implementation and suitability to studying factors influencing women’s political participation and representation in a range of contexts. The findings discussed throughout Chapters Four to Eight and above in section 9.2 demonstrate that the theoretical framework was flexible and could be applied to different political institutions. For example, although this was not a thesis which aimed to open the ‘black box’ of political parties’ selection methods or institutional structures, the findings related to the ‘becoming’ aspects of RQ1 exemplify how the framework could also successfully be operationalised for research solely focused on agency and structure processes within and on individual political parties. As noted, political parties have their own opportunity structures which are influenced by positional power and wider societal, historical, and geographical norms to condition women’s experiences and agency within the party. Similarly, with adaptations, this framework could be applied to other decision-making contexts to explore the substantive representation of women – these could span the breadth of what constitutes an institutions (with their inherent structures, norms, cultures, and rules), be they legislative in nature (for example, central state parliaments, or supranational political institutions such as the European Parliament), or non-legislative (such as NGOs or public agencies). This illustrates the utility of the theoretical framework in its applicability in political institutions beyond local, and even national or devolved legislatures.

The flexibility offered by this analytical framework and its applicability to all contexts and cases within and across different political legislatures was also made clear by incidents within the research process which proved that it was easily moulded and altered to cope with sudden change or alteration to research plans. Two changes to the selection of case study councils had to be made at short notice during this research. This was due to changes in

political party control of councils which meant they no longer met the requirements of the purposive sampling framework. The conceptual framework's broader understandings of structure and agency meant that these changes could be adopted seamlessly. Political science research must be responsive to change within ever-changing political landscapes which, even at the local level, can shift dramatically within electoral terms. A key utility of this framework for the case study was thus its malleability and ease of application to different contexts. Additionally, as seen with the limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic on the research design (see Chapter Three, section 3.3.6), it was further responsive to shifting academic research environments. Had the study been reliant on observation and ethnographic work to achieve the policy-mapping exercise discussed above, the Covid-19 Pandemic would have caused severe research delay and an inability to continue the project.

This case study focused solely on experience and representation amongst women councillors, and did not “move beyond an exclusive focus on the actions of female legislators” (Childs and Krook 2009, pp. 144-145). Despite this, a key value of the theoretical framework for the wider gender and politics field and political science more generally, is that it could easily be used in research on a range of marginalised groups. It would be possible, because of the conceptual emphasis on agency and structure, to replicate this conceptual framework in research on the substantive representation and political participation of ethnic minorities, younger people, people with disabilities, the LGBT+ community, and other marginalised groups in politics. Furthermore, as it is not prescriptive, it could be widened to research which included male political actors to “explore gender effects that may operate among women and men, both as groups and individuals” (Childs and Krook 2009, p. 144), and establish how men act to constrain, support, or facilitate the substantive representation of women through their own critical acts or forms of resistance, and the role of non-elected bureaucrats on the substantive representation of women in local government and elsewhere.

Overall, the theoretical contribution of this thesis' analytical framework can be attributed to its call for and successful implementation of an approach to studying women in politics which marries together analytical approaches usually operationalised discretely. The conceptual framing and analysis undertaken answers the calls within the field of gender and politics for research which analyses “gendered political processes, institutions and interactions” (Ahrens et al. 2021) and extends this to an understudied political context in the UK. Moreover, it responds to calls in the feminist institutionalist literature that we need to look at issues of women's representation and gendered institutional contexts (Mackay et al.

2010; Krook and Mackay 2011; Mackay 2011), and extend the work done outside of political science (by Kanter and in other early works regarding Critical Mass) into the discipline. The analysis presented in this thesis illustrates the current debates and conversations within the three fields of political representation, feminist institutionalism, and gendered political leadership, but further blends these to present a holistic understanding of how agency and structure influenced women's experiences and the substantive representation of women in Welsh local government.

As a final reflection, conducting this research has enshrined the importance of turning our gaze towards the local – local government is the level of politics with which most of the population has the most direct contact and it makes crucial decisions about women's lives – and the women interviewed expressed their passion and enthusiasm even if, at times, begrudgingly admitting its remaining gendered issues. The Covid-19 pandemic has further improved the public's awareness of the vital work done by local authorities in Wales. It remains clear that women's political representation must remain firmly on the agenda and actions must be taken to increase women's political presence at *all* levels, especially as the 2021 Senedd elections saw only one more woman Senedd Member elected (compared to the previous term) meaning that the representation of women stood at 43 per cent – a considerable slip backwards since the early 2000s (Thomas et al. 2021). The May 2022 Welsh local elections positively have seen some improvements for women's descriptive representation and political presence in local government, with the average statistical presence of women across councils rising to 36 per cent (for a full reflection on this see Addendum 1 on next page). However, as argued throughout, this case study and its analytical framework have reinforced the assertion that electing women is not enough. We must move beyond research and policy which solely tackles the electoral barriers, towards that which uncovers and addresses the inner workings of local government and how these interact with external societal gendered norms and contexts. This thesis contributes significant evidence that change is urgently required to feminise and re-gender local politics in Wales, making it an institution and political workplace which attracts and retains women on the backbenches and promotes them to seniority, enables their agency and full participation, and subsequently, creates a local politics that is representative of and responsive to women's political interests.

Addendum

Addendum 1: Reflections on the May 2022 Local Council Elections in Wales:

Following the May 2022 Local Elections in Wales, the proportion of women present in Welsh local councils rose to 36 per cent, and Wales achieved its first gender-balanced local council in Monmouthshire. The lowest proportion of women councillors present in any Welsh council now stands at 18 per cent – an 8 per cent improvement on the lowest in 2017. This overall improvement for women’s descriptive representation is welcomed by many across Wales and the author recognises this as a significant achievement – an increase of 8 per cent since 2017 shows a rapid rate of progress compared to previous electoral cycles. Although full analysis of the factors which led to these results is yet to be carried out, it is recognised here that the continued success of and, indeed, key gains in some areas for the Welsh Labour Party across Wales has been a crucial factor. 44 per cent of Welsh Labour councillors are women, with the next best political parties – Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats – almost 10 per cent behind this figure, and only 29 per cent of Welsh Conservatives are women.

Furthermore, the efforts of critical actors, including Catherine Fookes (Director of Women’s Equality Network Wales) in Monmouthshire, have also contributed to significant wins and improvements for women’s descriptive representation across the country. This considerable improvement in women’s statistical representation in Welsh local government must not engender complacency, however. Parity across Wales has not yet been achieved, and as this thesis has argued, getting women into council chambers is only an initial transformation – fully feminising Welsh local government must be achieved through changes to the fabric, rules, and cultures of local councils as political institutions to address the issues discussed in this research and fulfil its recommendations for wholesale change.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Start with basic profile questions (age; ethnicity; political party; caring responsibilities; length of service; role as a councillor (any previous roles)).

Motivations

1. What motivated you to stand for election as a local councillor?
 - a. How/to what extent did feminist/gender equality concerns motivate or inform your decision to become a councillor?
2. What were your expectations of the role? Which aspects were you looking forward to the most?

Experiences

1. Tell me about your experiences as a female local councillor
 - a. If you were talking to a prospective female local election candidate, how would you describe your overall experience of being a local councillor? E.g. positive experiences vs negative experiences.
 - b. What aspects of being a local councillor do you enjoy the most?
 - c. “As a woman” – Do you think your experiences as a councillor are any different to your fellow, male councillors? If so, how? What are the implications of this? Are there any things that you think you experience that they don’t?
 - d. Have you encountered any barriers/things that have made you feel uncomfortable as a woman councillor? Any experiences of bullying or harassment from other councillors/the community? Can you talk me through this?
2. What do you consider to be the role of a LC? Describe to me your typical day/week as a local councillor.
3. What do you consider the most important part of being a LC? The most enjoyable? Your preferred aspects/areas of policy?
4. Have you found the council to be welcoming to female councillors?
5. Have you experienced any sexism/male culture whilst being a local councillor? If so can you tell me about this? Give examples?

Work-Life Balance

1. Childcare/Caring responsibilities: how/has this had any impact on your experiences as a local councillor? How have you found balancing the two?
2. How accessible have you found the working practices of the local council?
 - i. Are meetings at times that are accessible/appropriate?

- ii. Do you feel you have enough time to carry out your role alongside other duties/work commitments?
- iii. Is there any/enough provision for childcare/other caring responsibilities? What is provided? What improvements would you feel would help you carry out your job better?

Institutional Factors

1. Have you faced any barriers to fully taking part in local council activities/in the chamber? Can you give me some examples?
2. If you had to describe the culture of ___ local council to someone, what sort of words would you use?
3. How/ to what extent do you think that the language of council business is gendered? Can you give examples? What are the implications of this?
4. (If long-service LC) Have you noticed any changes (good and bad) in the council environment/culture in relation to women's representation/ gender equality since you first became a local councillor? Have things changed at all for female local councillors? Is it easier now? Are changes linked to a rise in number of female local councillors? In your view is a "critical mass" of women necessary to address gender inequality? Explain your answer?
5. What do you personally think needs to change or progress to make local councils more welcoming to female councillors/in general?
6. How/Do women councillors link or network with women and women's organisations in civil society? Does this inform your actions/your representational role? Do you feel in any way accountable to these organisations?

Substantive Representation and deliberation

1. As you know, the academic literature talks about "critical actors" (key women that, compared to their peers, take the lead/ have a disproportionately large impact on advancing women's representation/ tackling gender inequality) – How/ to what extent would you say CAs are important in this council? Can you give examples?
2. What are your thoughts on the wider situation of women's representation in Welsh Local government?
 - a. What are their thoughts on Welsh Government policies on the issue? The robustness of the EHRC Wales' handling of the issue?
 - b. What do you think about the Diversity in Democracy programme? Can you give me any examples of how it's had an impact on your council/your decision to run for office/increasing diversity of councillors?
3. How and to what extent are women councillors' experiences and thoughts on gender equality issues in their council shaped by equalities laws/policies?
4. What are your thoughts on gender equality in the bureaucracy of local government/officials?

5. Do you think the way you carry out your role as a LC is influenced by gender in any way?
 - a. Is there anything that you feel you (are expected to) do more of or have a bit more focus on than your male colleagues?
 - b. Do you feel that there are any policy areas/areas of the community that you engage with on a more regular basis because you are a woman?
 - c. In your opinion, is your representational role shaped in any way by the UK's international treaty obligations? For example: CEDAW, Beijing Dec, human rights conventions etc. How/ with what implications?
6. Do you think your political priorities differ to your male counterparts – if so how – with what implications? Are there policy areas that you feel you focus more on/are asked to focus more on as a woman? What are they? How and why do you give greater emphasis to them? What are the implications of this?
7. Acting for women?
 - a. Would you consider yourself a feminist? Do you consider/see yourself as a representative of your gender/women's interests in the local issues?
 - b. How big a role does representing women's interests play in your job as a LC?
 - c. How do you go about including women's views/interests in your day-to-day work as a councillor? Can you talk me through this? Give examples?
 - d. Is the concept of gender mainstreaming something that you recognise in their work as a councillor? If so how does this happen? Can you give me examples? What are the implications of this for social policy etc?
 - e. Are there specific parts of the council or certain proceedings where you feel it is easier to represent women? E.g. committees versus plenary debates etc.
8. How/ do you see yourself as a role model that may encourage future women councillors? Also, were you yourself influenced/ inspired by women role models? If so, who?
 - a. What are your views/ experience on mentoring women/ girls to encourage more women councillors?
 - b. Would you consider having female representatives as important symbolically? E.g. is just seeing women in these positions enough of an encouragement for next gen female councillors/politicians
9. Do you think that your style of politics e.g. how you act or speak in the council chamber differs from the male LCs? E.g. feminisation of politics as kinder/more cooperative/more action-driven.

Party Factors

1. Political Parties:
 - a. How do party groups within local government address/ prioritise SRW/ gender equality issues? Who decides what is made a priority? / how are such issues

decided? In your opinion, how does the gender composition of the party group influence this?

- b. How does your political ideology have an impact on your role in terms of representing women? Do you ever link/network with female representatives from other political parties/from the opposition and work in cross-party ways to discuss/create policy that may disproportionately impact women in the community? Do you think these cross-party networks are important? Do they play a role for anything else other than policy creation? E.g. sharing experiences etc.
 - c. If not available/a technique they use – would you consider working in a cross-party network to achieve women-friendly policy? How would you envisage this working?
 - d. Can you think of any times when you may have wanted to share experiences with fellow female councillors (not just from your pol party) in a safe women-only space?
2. How well do you think your political party does in terms of gender equality/encouraging women to become candidates/councillors?
- i. Is gender-based discrimination an issue in the local grass-roots of your political party?
 - ii. Can you give me any examples of good/bad things your political party does/has done/you've experienced within the party in terms of women's representation/experiences?
 - iii. What are your views on the response of the political parties to the issue of women's political representation at a national Welsh and UK level? What do they think parties need to do to make more progress?
3. How do party dynamics impact the gendering of debate/policy deliberation? Is there such a thing as a "cross-party sisterhood" – women working across party divides working to advance the SRW/ gender equality?

Senior Positions

If in a senior position:

1. Can you tell me about your experiences in the senior role that you hold?
2. Tell me about your journey to that role – were there any barriers to you holding the position? Do you feel that this journey was any different to men in senior positions?
3. Do you think being in such a senior position allows you to champion other women/represent women? Can you give me examples of times when you've done this?
4. Tell me about your attitude to gender-balanced cabinets in local councils. Where do you think the responsibility should lie for achieving this?
5. Portfolios:
 - a. How did you get allocated your portfolio?

- b. Why do you think you chose (or were given) this portfolio? Was it an area that you are interested in?
- c. Do you think working in this area allows you to promote women's interests in your council work? How do you do this? Are there any barriers to promoting women's interests in this area? Are committees open to discussion of gender mainstreaming in this area?
- d. Have you used your role to champion other women in the council e.g. encourage them to strive for/show interest in senior positions?
 - 1. How have you done this? Can you give examples?

If not in a senior position:

- 1. Would you like to have a more senior position in the council? If so/no, why/why not?
- 2. Tell me about whether you think it's important to have women represented in council cabinets/as leaders. What, in your opinion, is preventing women from getting into these positions?
- 3. Is there anything that puts you personally off trying to gain a senior position in the council? What barriers could you foresee?
- 4. What would be your motivation for seeking a more senior position? Would you use the position to champion more women/help them up/represent them? What committees/portfolios would you be interested in getting involved with/leading?
- 5. Would you say senior positions would give more opportunities to represent women?

Appendix B: Ethical Approval Letter



School of Social Sciences
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18 June 2018

Our ref: SREC/2775

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Dear Leah,

Your project entitled '*A critical exploration of the representation of women in Welsh local government*' has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project should all necessary forms of approval been received.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

All ongoing projects will be monitored and you will be obliged periodically to complete and return a SREC monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Professor Alison Bullock
Chair of School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Cc: Paul Chaney, Dawn Mannay, Corinda Perkins



Registered Charity, no. 1136855
Clusen Gofrestredig, rhif 1136855

Participant Information Sheet

I am inviting you to participate in an interview for my research exploring the experiences of female local councillors and the impact this has on the representation of women in Welsh local government. The following will give you a brief overview of what this will mean for you as a participant. Before you decide whether you would like to participate, please take the time to read the following information carefully, so you can understand why this research is being done and what it will involve.

A brief description of the project:

My thesis explores the impact of various factors on the representation of women in Welsh local government. Namely: the numbers of women elected, the political styles, culture and context in local government, as well as working patterns/practices, and leadership opportunities. Whilst a lot of research has focused on barriers women face to *getting in* to politics, in this research I am interested in what happens when women become local councillors, their experiences, and any challenges they face. In turn, I wish to gain some understanding of how women councillors' experiences influence the representation of women in council debate, deliberation and, ultimately, policy.

Who can take part?

Female local councillors in my 4 chosen councils - I have selected councillors based on the length of their service as a councillor, their political party membership, and their role in the council (e.g. any senior position/leadership role).

What would be involved?

If you choose to take part, you can expect to participate in an hour-long (approximately) interview with myself where you will be asked about your experiences of being a female local councillor, as well as your views on representing women in politics.

¹²² This was altered following the implementation of online interviews during Covid – subsequent additions are emphasised through italic text.

The interview will take place in a quiet venue of your choice – for example, in the council building, a quiet coffee shop, or in your own home – wherever you would feel most comfortable. *Alternatively, given Covid-19, the interview will take place over the phone, or via Skype or Zoom – whichever means is easiest.*

The interviews will be semi-structured, allowing you to fully discuss your experiences of being a local councillor in a relaxed and conversational manner. Interviews will be recorded (unless otherwise requested beforehand) and then transcribed by myself.

What will happen with my information/data?

All interview data will be anonymised upon transcription. Any personal data will be accessible only by the researcher and project supervisors and all consent forms/other identifiable documents will be kept securely in a lockable storage cabinet in my office, entry to which is by access card only.

All data will be anonymised and kept in password-protected folders, accessible only by the researcher, on the University's network. This includes interview transcripts, recordings, analysis documents, research diaries, etc. The transcripts of interviews will not include any identifying information with participants being given unique ID numbers/fake names, and any names/places we discuss changed for pseudonyms. A list detailing the identity of particular ID numbers or names will be kept in a password-protected folder again accessible only to the researcher.

All data will be kept for 5 years (or 2 years post-publication) and then destroyed as detailed in the Data Protection Act.

Will everything I say/write be kept private?

Yes. All interviews will be anonymised and kept privately, accessible only by myself.

As I'm sure you are aware, if you do take part and consent for your data being used, there is a potential risk of identification due to the small number of female councillors in Welsh local government (combined with information regarding the case study site, your political party membership, and your position in the council). In order to try and uphold complete anonymity, therefore, information regarding the case study sites (your local council) will be kept vague in terms of location, nature of demographic, and exact percentage of female councillors/senior councillors. In addition, if you are a council leader

or hold a senior position in the council, I will attempt to ensure that your anonymity is upheld by excluding any identifying information regarding specific portfolios held or length of time in position and any other information that may cause your anonymity to be breached. If I include your exact position in your council, I will not identify which of my 4 council sites you are from.

For example, interview data will be presented thus in the final thesis:

“I like dogs and cats” *Labour councillor, Council A.*

Or

“I like dogs and cats” *Plaid Cymru councillor; Cabinet Member for Education.*

What if I change my mind about taking part?

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary and you are able to withdraw from this study at any point, without giving a reason. Any data already provided will then be destroyed.

Who am I?

My name is Leah Hibbs, and I am a PhD student at Cardiff University School of Social Sciences. More information about my ESRC-funded project can be found here:

<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/research-students/view/1057529-hibbs-leah>



I am being supervised by: Professor Paul Chaney (Professor of Policy and Politics at Cardiff University School of Social Sciences, and Co-Director of WISERD); and Dr Dawn Mannay (Senior Lecturer in Cardiff University School of Social Sciences).

This research has been approved by the School of Social Sciences’ Research Ethics Committee (ref. number SREC/2775). If you have any questions concerning this research, please contact me at Tel: 07584693778, or email: HibbsL@cardiff.ac.uk. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Appendix E: Scanned copy of colour coded key created during thematic analysis:

ANALYSIS KEY:

-  motivations for standing
-  work-life balance
-  organisational practices (e.g. meeting times)
-  political language + informal norms + political culture
-  critical mass
-  critical actors / feminist champions / role models
-  senior positions
-  substantively representing women
-  external factors (social media abuse / engagement with constituents)
-  feminist institutionalism
-  barriers to women standing / becoming chairs.

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