

ELECTHER

WOMEN

50:50



ENGENDER

READING INTO THE NEWS:

A review of gendered
representations of politicians in
Scottish election coverage in
May 2022

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1. Introduction

Women's political representation in Scotland is at an interesting juncture. Following a record result for women in the Holyrood 2021 election, there has been a growing sense of optimism about equality in Scottish politics. These results are, of course, to be celebrated. However, when juxtaposed with the lacklustre outcome of the May 2022 local elections, it is clear that the picture of women's representation in Scotland is more complex. Women's proportional lack of representation in the political sphere in Scotland continues to contribute to their exclusion from power and public life.

News coverage of elections plays a key role in providing political information, analysis, reporting results, and contributing to mainstream political discourse. News articles hold up a mirror to societal values and shape them at the same time. Thus, representations of women politicians in the news both reflect dominant attitudes around gendered political power while simultaneously contributing to them.

The local elections in May 2022 offered an opportunity to examine how women and minoritised people in Scotland are represented as politicians in national and regional news coverage. For this report, we coded and analysed a week's worth of print news articles to explore how political journalism continues to uphold exclusive, patriarchal values within Scottish politics.

1.1 Women's Political Representation in Scotland

Following the election of the widely celebrated "most diverse parliament ever" in May 2021,¹ there has been a growing sense of optimism that a more equal politics in Scotland is becoming a reality. A record number of women (45 per cent of MSPs) were elected, including the first two women of colour and the first permanent wheelchair user.

Previously, women's representation in Holyrood has fluctuated from a high of 39.5 per cent in 2003, to 33 per cent in 2007, before stagnating at around 35 per cent.² Progress has not been linear. As Scotland does not have legally binding mechanisms ensuring gender balance in elected representatives, improvement

¹ McCall, C. (2021). Scottish Parliament most diverse ever but more can be done, says presiding officer. *The Daily Record*. <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/scottish-parliament-most-diverse-ever-24259790>.

² Merson, A. (2021). 'Historic': Record number of women elected to Holyrood and first female BAME MSP. *The Press and Journal*. <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/politics/scottish-politics/3124045/holyrood-women/>.

relies on parties choosing to adopt voluntary measures. In Holyrood, there is evidence that the application of voluntary measures (e.g., zipping and twinning) yields more equal results, however, there is no way to apply these consistently across elections and parties.³ Thus, despite recent gains, the danger of regression remains.

Leadership plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of gender equality in politics. There is a dangerous yet common assumption that since Scotland's First Minister is a woman (and other major parties have recently been led by women), that substantial progress has been made. Whilst lauding the "apparent normalisation of equal sharing of executive power,"⁴ Meryl Kenny, Fiona Mackay and Cera Murtagh caution against the assumption of an equality in Scottish politics that does not yet exist. To better understand the true state of equality in our politics, we need to look beyond high-profile successes.

Examining equality and diversity within local politics is key to assessing lack of representation – and any subsequent democratic deficit. In May 2022, women's representation on councils increased from 29 per cent⁵ to 35 per cent.⁶ According to Women 50:50,⁷ this "glacial" rate of change means **we will not see gender equality in our councils until 2037**. This is of particular concern because many key council services disproportionately impact women's lives – for instance, women are more likely to work in education or social care and are more likely to use public transport – but their voices are often missing from decision-making. Additionally, local politics is a key pipeline for national politics; women are missing out on opportunities for experience and progression.

Multiple cultural and structural barriers continue to exclude women and minoritised people from the political sphere. Foremost among these is that women enter political spaces historically dominated by older, white, middle-class men who are considered the 'default' politician. When women nevertheless

³ Engender. (2016). *Equal Voice, Equal Power: The case for gender quotas in Scotland*. Engender. <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Equal-Voice-Equal-Power---the-case-for-gender-quotas-in-Scotland.pdf>.

⁴ Kenny, M., McKay, F., & Murtagh, C. (2015). Has the tide turned for women's representation in Scotland? *LSE Politics and Policy*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/tide-turned-for-womens-representation-scotland/>.

⁵ Kenny, M., McKay, F., & Sijstermans, J. (2017). Here We, Here We, Here We ... Go (Again): Women and the 2017 Local Government Elections. *Gender Politics at Edinburgh*. <https://genderpoliticsatedinburgh.wordpress.com/2017/05/09/here-we-here-we-here-we-go-again-women-and-the-2017-local-government-elections/>.

⁶ Learmonth, A. (2021). Scotland's councils set to be dominated by men until 2037. *The Herald Scotland*. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/20127728.scotlands-councils-set-dominated-men-2037/>.

⁷ Ibid.

participate in public and political life, they encounter gendered barriers rooted in pervasive sexism at a societal level. Women politicians are more likely to experience scrutiny of their physical appearance and personal life⁸ and are also more likely to be perceived by voters as less ‘competent’ than men.⁹ Women politicians are at an increased risk of receiving sexist abuse,¹⁰ risk which is heightened further for Black and minoritised politicians.¹¹ Experiences of misogynistic abuse and harassment – both online and offline – are increasingly being cited by women leaving elected office as a key motivating factor.¹² Together this sends a strong message that electoral politics is not ‘for’ women.

With fewer women in these spaces, political institutions are not compelled to develop conditions and practices which meet their workplace needs - for example, there is no legal right to paid parental leave for councillors.¹³ The councillor role is underpaid and undervalued, factors which disproportionately impact women, who are already likely to be in precarious and lower-paid employment and more likely to have caring responsibilities,¹⁴ which often means the role is not a practicable option.

Clearly, there is work to do across multiple fronts to increase equal representation at local authority level. An important area of focus are the social and cultural attitudes in Scotland which continue to contribute to women politicians’ exclusion. By looking at how women elected representatives are represented in our news media, we can better understand how women’s power and rightful place in local democracy is undermined – and what changes are required to ensure better results in five years’ time.

⁸ Van der Pas, D. J., & Aaldering, L. (2020). Gender Differences in Political Media Coverage: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Communication*, 70(1), 114–143.

⁹ Ditonto, T. (2017). A High Bar or a Double Standard? Gender, Competence, and Information in Political Campaigns. *Political Behavior*, 39(2), 301–325.

¹⁰ Gorrell, G., Bakir, M. E., Roberts, I., Greenwood, M. A., & Bontcheva, K. (2020). Which politicians receive abuse? Four factors illuminated in the UK general election 2019. *EPI Data Science*, 9(1), 18.

¹¹ Hamer, E., & Southern, R. (2021). Women and minority MPs are particularly at risk of experiencing certain forms of abuse on Twitter. *LSE Politics and Policy*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/twitter-abuse-mps/>.

¹² Oppenheim, M. (2019). General election: Women MPs standing down over ‘horrific abuse’, campaigners warn. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/general-election-woman-mps-step-down-abuse-harassment-a9179906.html>.

¹³ COSLA. (2020). *Family Leave Guidance for Councils*. COSLA. https://www.cosla.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/17838/Family-Leave-Guidance-May-2020.pdf.

¹⁴ Close the Gap. (2018). *Women, work and poverty in Scotland: What you need to know*. Close the Gap. <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/1---Women-work-and-poverty-what-you-need-to-know.pdf>.

1.2 Women in the News

As in the political sphere, within the Scottish and UK-based print news media there is a historic absence of women. The Global Media Monitoring Project, which measures gender representation in the news, found that in the UK in 2020, women made up only 28 per cent of the persons heard, read about or seen in newspaper, television and radio news, only four per cent more than in 2015.¹⁵ Women's sheer presence in the "malestream" news media remains low.¹⁶

This effect is starker when the news focuses on a public sphere from which women are disproportionately excluded, such as politics. The impact is a clear distinction between the default, "masculine" pillars of politics and women's place within that. Women politicians are 'othered' by their relative absence from the public sphere – and become perceived as "interlopers".¹⁷ The underrepresentation of women, and particularly women of colour, in positions of power prevents them from being normalised, making the role of political journalists harder – there are fewer women politicians to approach, quote and write about. Yet as Karen Boyle, Talat Yaqoob and Melody House point out in their 2021 study, Scottish news continues to lag behind Scottish politics,¹⁸ with newspapers demonstrating the lowest inclusion of women of all media types.

When women politicians *are* present, the implicit undermining of their power continues in the ways they are talked about. Traditionally, women have been represented in specific, gendered ways, many of which are still prevalent today.¹⁹ Often the focus can be on their personal life instead of policy positions, their appearance and age are described, and there is a sexualised or over-personalised gaze. Even 'unbiased' reports of female politicians can reinforce the incongruity of women as decision-makers. For example, articles which mark a candidate's race or gender consolidate the notion that politicians are usually white, and usually men. The impact of how the media presents women in politics damages politicians' communication with the public; for example, Laura Bates writes, "the

¹⁵ Macharia, S. (2020). *Who Makes the News? 6th Global Media Monitoring Project*. Global Media Monitoring Project. https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GMMP2020.ENG_FINAL20210713.pdf.

¹⁶ Ross, K. (2003). *Women Politicians and Malestream Media: A Game of Two Sides*. Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics.

¹⁷ Eckert, P. (1998). Gender and sociolinguistic variation. In *Language and gender: A reader* (pp. 64–75). John Wiley.

¹⁸ Boyle, K., House, M., & Yaqoob, T. (2021). Where are the women of colour in Scottish election news? *Pass the Mic*. <https://passthemicscotland.wordpress.com/where-are-the-women-of-colour-in-scottish-election-news/>.

¹⁹ Walsh, C. (2015). Media Capital or Media Deficit? *Feminist Media Studies*, 15(6), 1025–1034.

sheer amount of sexism facing Sturgeon is so great it takes valuable column inches away from discussing what she is actually saying.”²⁰

Hearing directly from women in power is key to normalising their presence in the political sphere. How often do we read direct quotations from women politicians of colour, for example, versus from white men? Troublingly, research has found that women politicians are becoming less visible in UK political news coverage despite an increase in numerical representation in Parliament.²¹ When politicians are indirectly quoted, there is more room for journalistic interpretation. Speech verbs have the potential to signal this: to *say* or *tell* something is far more neutral than to *claim* or *suggest*. Generally, the way in which women are described as speaking is gendered.²² The effect, as historian Mary Beard writes, is to undermine the “authority, the force, even the humour of what women have to say”.²³ Caldas-Coulthard also found that women were more likely to have their first names included, a more informal nomination reducing their authority.²⁴ Similarly, titles can play an important role – honorifics denote authority, and the capitalisation of that honorific even more so. The construction of women politicians as less newsworthy, less powerful, and less ‘normal’ perpetuates barriers to their greater participation. Women, and particularly multiply-marginalised women, are less certain of their reception and portrayal in news media should they run for election.

This research explores these portrayals with specific reference to the Scottish local elections in May 2022. The methodology is found in Appendix 1. First, we introduce the data from the news articles, and then we review four research questions around (a) the gender breakdown of journalists, (b) how women politicians are written about, (c) national versus regional coverage and (d) who is being directly quoted. We include evidence-based recommendations alongside.

²⁰ Bates, L. (2015). Ignore what the media would have you think, politics is not a ‘man’s game’. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2015/may/06/ignore-what-the-media-would-have-you-think-politics-is-not-a-mans-game>.

²¹ O’Neill, D., Savigny, H., & Cann, V. (2016). Women politicians in the UK press: Not seen and not heard? *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(2), 293–307.

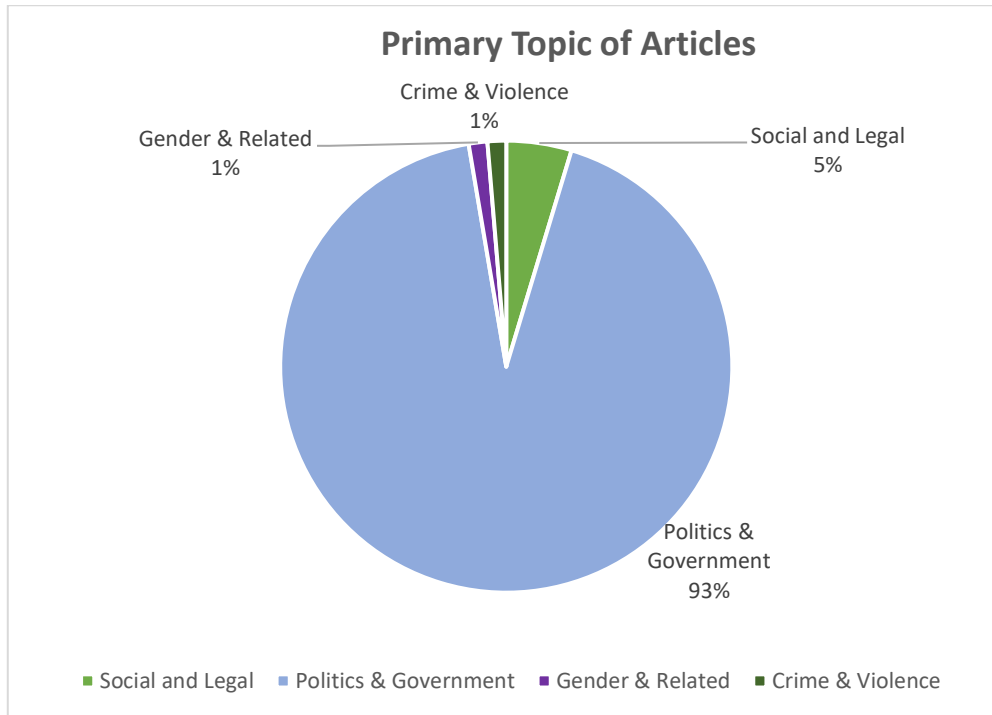
²² Caldas-Coulthard, C. R. (2008). Reporting speech in narrative discourse: Stylistic and ideological implications. *Ilha Do Desterro*, 0(27), 067–082.

²³ Beard, M. (2014). The Public Voice of Women. *London Review of Books*, 36(06). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n06/mary-beard/the-public-voice-of-women>.

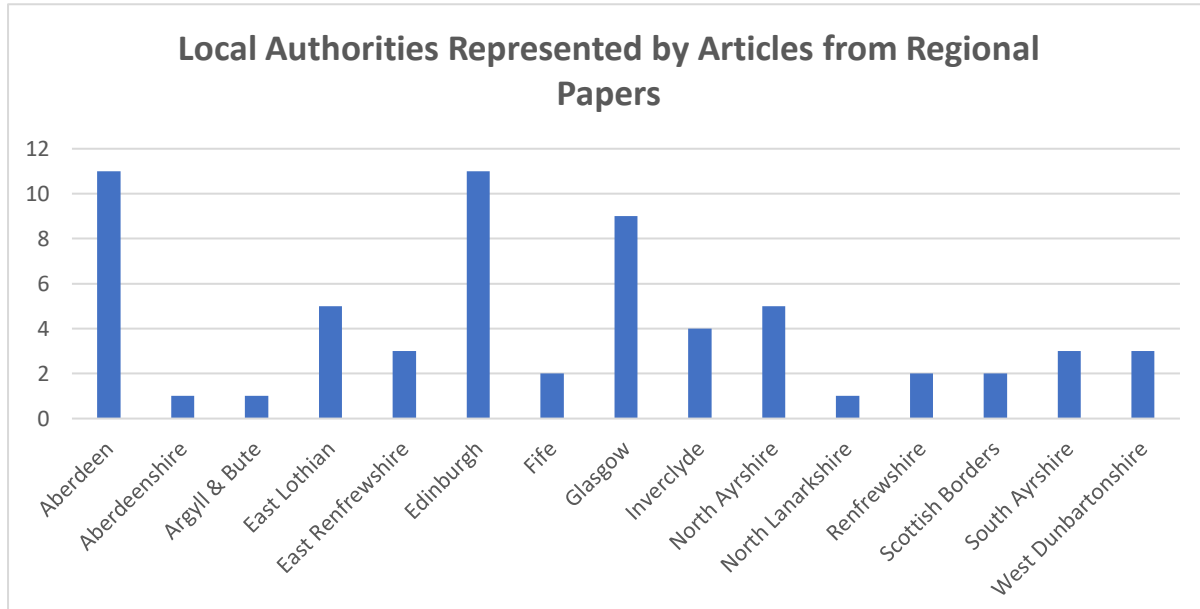
²⁴ Caldas-Coulthard, C. R. (1995). Man in the news: The misrepresentation of women speaking in news-as-narrative-discourse. *Language and Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 226–239.

1.3 Introduction to the Data

In total, 150 articles published over the local election period between 2.5.22 and 9.5.22 inclusive were coded and analysed. Of these, unsurprisingly, the vast majority (93 per cent) dealt primarily with the election (Politics and Government).



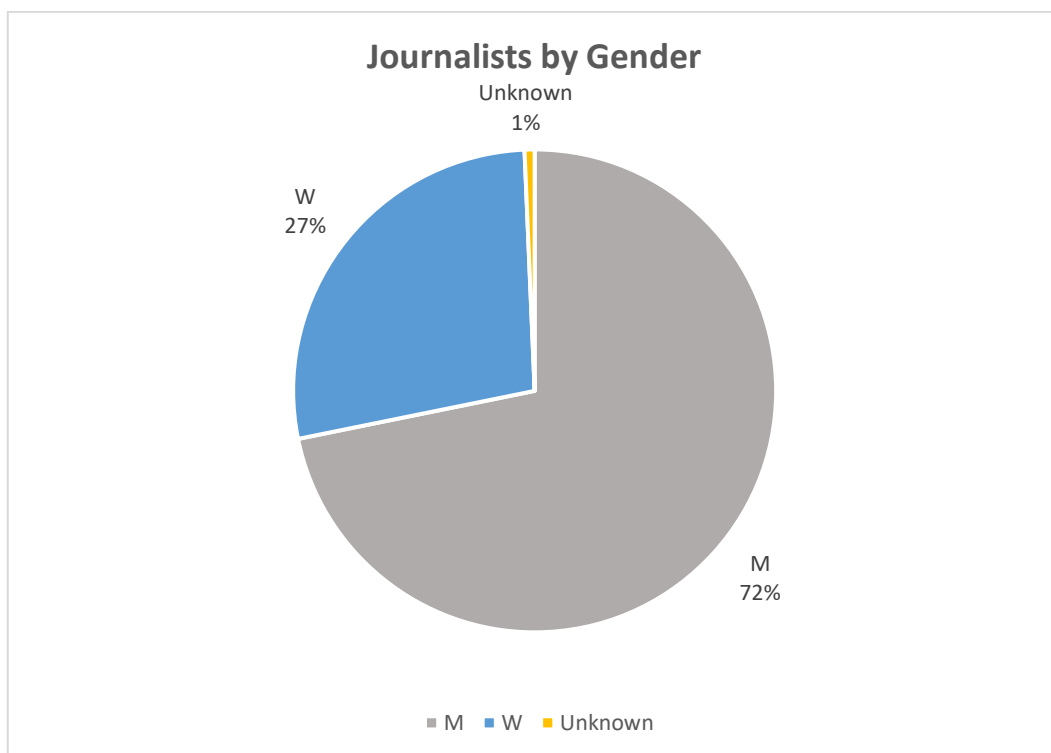
Just over half (87) of the 150 articles appeared in national newspapers: the Herald Scotland, the Scottish Daily Mail, the Daily Record, the Scotsman and the Scottish Express. The remainder were published in regional papers covering 15 local authorities in Scotland. It is possible that Lexis Nexis does not source all regional papers in Scotland, and more articles may have been written elsewhere.



However, that fewer than half of local authorities are represented in this sample suggests systemic underreporting on issues of local government. This may relate to wider challenges of democratic engagement in local elections which have traditionally low turnouts compared to national elections, linking itself to an undervaluing of council services²⁵ and the role of councillors.²⁶ As discussed below, there is a need for greater coverage of local council affairs in all political news, which would engage a greater diversity of candidates to be involved in decision-making at a regional level.

2. What Is The Gender Breakdown Of Journalists Writing About The Local Elections?

Of the 150 articles, 72 per cent were written by men, 27 per cent by women, and two were unknown, demonstrating how journalism as a profession in Scotland remains dominated by men. It also reflects anecdotal evidence from women political journalists working in Scotland that at news desks, they tend to be one in three.



²⁵ COSLA. (2021). Local government services once again undervalued and underappreciated, says COSLA. COSLA. <https://www.cosla.gov.uk/news/2021/local-government-services-once-again-undervalued-and-underappreciated,-says-cosla>.

²⁶ Bradley, J. (2022). Call for local council pay overhaul as survey reveals councillors do not receive Real Living Wage. *The Scotsman*. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/call-for-overhaul-in-local-councillor-pay-3520320>.

Interestingly, this reflects the gender breakdown within councils during the 2017 – 2022 term, with women councillors making up 29 per cent of the total. Initial estimates from the May 2022 election note this has risen to 35 per cent.²⁷ The symmetry between councils and news desks suggests that **men are more likely to be setting both policy agenda and public narrative regarding local democracy.**

2.1 Is there a difference by article topic?

Broken down by topic, the results become starker. Of the 129 articles specifically about Politics and Government, 74 per cent were written by men - and 25 per cent by women. In other words, **if you were reading a newspaper article discussing the election that week, it was three times more likely to have been written by a man.** Scottish political discourse remains dominated by male voices.

This reflects the large body of evidence internationally that women journalists are often confined to working in specific ‘soft’ topic areas, including lifestyle, arts and education, whereas men journalists are more prevalent in ‘hard’ topics such as politics, current affairs and finance.²⁸ Recent research by Kirsty Rorrison into Scottish news media found these distinctions replicated clearly: “women were far more likely to cover stories on public health and the NHS than their male counterparts, whereas reporting of politics and economics was often carried out by men”.²⁹ A survey carried out in 2021 by Women in Journalism found that “81 per cent of female journalists feel that “high status” journalism specialisms such as hard news, business and politics remain male-dominated.”³⁰

Given that the primary topic of articles in the sample was politics, an imbalance was expected; however, the effect was stronger than anticipated. Whether this effect is consistent across all Scottish journalism or specific to political journalism is unclear. This issue has been recognised by Women in Journalism Scotland, who have just launched a new campaign to offer training sessions on giving political commentary via broadcast media.³¹

²⁷ Learmonth, A. (2021). Scotland’s councils set to be dominated by men until 2037. *The Herald Scotland*. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/20127728.scotlands-councils-set-dominated-men-2037/>.

²⁸ Ross, K. (2017). *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides*. John Wiley.

²⁹ Rorrison, K. (2022). Who says what? A breakdown of gender bias in news topics and reporting. *On The Engender*. <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/guest-post-who-says-what-a-breakdown-of-gender-bias-in-news-topics-and-reporting/>.

³⁰ Tobitt, C. (2021). Seven in ten female journalists say newsroom leadership male dominated, survey. *Press Gazette*. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/glass-newsroom-journalism-gender-gap/>.

³¹ WIJS. (2022). *How To Be a Political Commentator – Broadcast Media Training*. Women in Journalism Scotland. <https://www.wijsotland.com/events/how-to-be-a-political-commentator-broadcast-media-training>.

2.2 Is there a difference by national or regional paper?

There was little difference in the gender breakdown between national and regional papers. Roughly the same proportion of articles was written by men and women journalists in the national and regional news.

GENDER BREAKDOWN OF BY-LINES BY PAPER

	National		Regional	
	No.	%	No.	%
F	23	27%	18	29%
M	62	73%	45	71%
TOTAL	85		63	

In one respect, this is encouraging, demonstrating that women journalists are equally active in local and national publications. However, that less than a third of articles at a local level are being written by women indicates an issue with political journalism in general, with a knock-on effect on the political sphere. Many women enter journalism at a local level and work their way into national news. Research in 2020 by Gender Equal Media Scotland and Women in Journalism Scotland found that the pandemic had worsened working conditions for women generally in the sector, and most notably for Black and minoritised women.³² To improve gender balance across Scottish news more broadly, we need urgent action by local publications to improve working conditions and opportunities for women journalists.

Diversifying political journalism in Scotland is an important step towards diversifying the kinds of stories written around local elections – and encouraging more women to see themselves running for office. Of the seven articles examining sexism in Scottish politics in this dataset, all but two were in the national papers. These two were in the same local paper, written by the same woman. Leadership teams within publications must provide opportunities for underrepresented voices in political pieces at both local and national levels, or our political sphere will remain male-dominated.

Recommendations: News desks need to ensure **greater diversity of voices writing about local issues** and political coverage in general. Leadership teams and editors

³² WIJS. (2020). *Where things stand for women in the Scottish media in December 2020*. Women in Journalism Scotland. https://www.wijscotland.com/news/snapshot-survey-where-things-stand-for-women-in-the-scottish-media-in-december-2020?fbclid=IwAR3GjiO9SZTKI6oazLG_AFyAs8-4bd-oCj7k1hPZ89m7HwV6AjxSsjwtq0o.

should provide **clarity on routes to specialisms** and **transparency around criteria for story allocations**. Editors and senior staff **encouraging more women to write about political elections** would not only increase the proportion of women entering and gaining experience in political journalism, but a broader array of topics and interests therein.

Both national and regional newspapers should ensure that there are **paid opportunities, training and mentoring, support structures and flexible enough working conditions** to increase the number of women journalists publishing articles. Where regional papers are being run with minimal resources and staffing, of course, this is more difficult. A significant barrier to more women remaining in journalism is the amount of abuse they face online, with even greater intensity for Black and minoritised women.³³ Robust workplace policies (beyond resilience training) which uphold journalists' right to operate in safe spaces are necessary to achieve this.

Including more diverse voices in election analysis and results in Scottish news would create material more relatable to broader audiences and even increase revenue. With greater coverage of the key role local politics plays in people's daily lives, more women would stand for office.

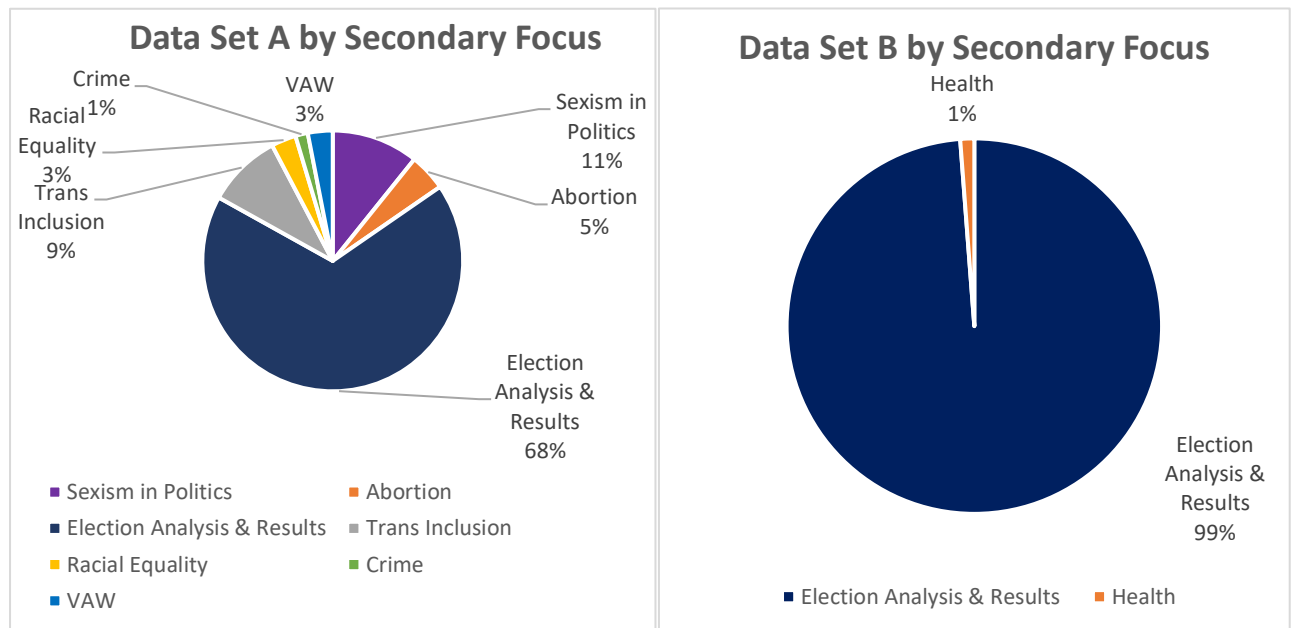
3. How Are Women Politicians Written About In Local Election Coverage In Scotland?

Given the overwhelming dominance of the election, the articles were coded for a secondary framing, allowing deeper analysis of the kinds of articles appearing during the week.

Data Set A, in which articles specifically mentioned women, covered a greater range of topics, including sexism in politics, violence against women, and greater intersectional inclusion of minoritised people in politics. Data Set B, in which articles did not contain the word "woman", exclusively focused on election analysis and results. This means that when women politicians appeared in articles where their gender is explicitly marked, they were more likely to appear in a news story that was not primarily focused on politics and government, but could be

³³ Blackett, L. (2022). The Most Disrespected Group Online Are Black Women—This CEO Is Fighting Back. *Refinery 29*. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/black-women-online-safety-bill-twitter>.

related to health, or violence against women. **Put simply, if the word “woman” appeared in an article, it was less likely to be about politics.**



To some degree, this is to be expected; given that politicians are less likely to be women, when they are written about, their gender is more likely to be mentioned as a note of interest. Indeed, as we see below, seven of the stories from Data Set A did explicitly cover women’s position in the political sphere. However, this finding also suggests that when women’s gender is mentioned in political news texts, the stories are more likely to be framed around topics such as violence against women, abortion, sexism, or intersectional forms of exclusion/inclusion.

There is a notable mirroring of this gendered coding of subjects within the portfolios given to women politicians. The Inter-Parliamentary Union in its *Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments* recognises that globally, women parliamentarians are assigned to committees dealing with so-called ‘soft subjects’,³⁴ such as health, education and social and cultural issues. Committees dealing with ‘hard subjects’, for instance finance, the economy and defence, are disproportionately assigned to men. A 2017 Fawcett Society report found similar evidence within English local council cabinets, with women more equally represented within more ‘feminised’ portfolios.³⁵ More research is required to understand how this phenomenon manifests within Scottish councils, however,

³⁴ Ballington, J. (2008). *Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments*. Inter-Parliamentary Union. <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-07/equality-in-politics-survey-women-and-men-in-parliaments>.

³⁵ Fawcett Society. (2017). *Does Local Government Work for Women?* Fawcett Society. <https://barrowcadbury.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Local-Government-FawcettSociety.pdf>.

the results from news reporting suggest associations of women politicians with softer ‘women’s topics.’

This chapter offers an analysis of how five areas relating to women’s political representation were presented in the media: sexism in Scottish politics, all-male councils, trans representation and rights, politicians of colour, and linguistics. We do not claim to offer an intersectional analysis in this snapshot but have looked specifically at the representations of women of colour and trans women as groups where there was a particular focus at this election. Much more research is needed into how the media portrays women of colour and trans women in politics, as well as disabled women, lesbian, gay and bisexual women, younger and older women, and women who experience multiple discriminations.

3.1 Sexism in Scottish Politics

Seven articles wrote specifically about women’s exclusion from Scottish politics (three by men, two by women, and one anonymised as ‘Record View’). It is encouraging to see men writing about the sexist attitudes and culture which continue to prevent women from entering the political sphere in Scotland. Underrepresentation within our political institutions represents a serious democratic deficit and means that society generally is missing out on richer, more robust decision-making and policy development that better serves the entire community. Rightly, it should be of concern to everyone.

However, the ways in which unequal representation is talked about remain problematic. None of the seven stories quoted or referenced a local political candidate, nor were experts in political exclusion consulted and quoted. Instead, articles quoted national party leaders and political figures, predominantly Nicola Sturgeon, Anas Sarwar, and Ruth Davidson. The issues raised were either general observations of sexism in political parties, or those experienced individually by Sturgeon and Davidson.

The themes covered also fall short. The most common narratives are persuading women to run as a solution and addressing social media abuse. Any broader discussion of the systemic processes within political parties which continue to exclude women and minoritised people from running is lacking. Also missing was any substantive discussion around barriers within councils - for instance low pay, poor access to parental leave or toxic working environments. Research on institutional change indicates that by focusing on the individual (encouraging women to run) as opposed to the structural (rewriting internal procedures), we

place the onus on those *most* disempowered to change the system.³⁶ The only mention of specific solutions is in Article A30, quoting MP Michelle Donelan, who argues against all-women shortlists or quotas, positing that women can achieve equality via their own merit. Discussion of alternative solutions, including the extensively-researched positive impact of quotas, is not covered in any of the articles in the sample.

Only one article (A67) addresses the gender imbalance of council cabinets and leadership teams, themselves a major contributory factor in the dominance of men in the political sphere. An independent analysis by Abbi Garton-Crosbie found that only six out of 32 councils allocated the available leadership roles equally to men and women.³⁷ Discussions in our political news of the reasons behind this data – and actionable changes to internal processes – can help shift towards gender-balanced political spaces.

The reality of the obstacles faced by women and minoritised councillors and candidates and nuanced discussions of how these might be overcome to create a better democracy are notable in their absence from mainstream political news in the week covered.

Recommendations: Articles that **centre perspectives within local politics**, not just national voices, can help push the discussion beyond an acknowledgement of the problem. By talking to local candidates, councillors and expert organisations working to improve representation (e.g., Women 50:50, Elect Her and Engender), articles can better present the range of barriers and solutions that exist so that they may play a more critical, pivotal role in challenging the status quo.

3.2 All-Male Council?

Eight articles either focused on or reviewed the gender balance of councils as a result of the elections, the majority of these featuring the return of women to Scotland's only all-male council in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.

In 2017, five women stood, and none were elected. This year eight women stood; a disappointing increase after efforts from the council, Elect Her and others. Of 29 seats up for grabs, only two were won by women: Susan Thomson and Frances Murray. This was universally framed by the articles as a positive step; for example, in Article A4: "two women have been elected, ending a single-sex monopoly on

³⁶ Meyerson, D. E., & Kolb, D. M. (2000). Moving out of the 'Armchair': Developing a Framework to Bridge the Gap between Feminist Theory and Practice. *Organization*, 7(4), 553–571.

³⁷ Garton-Crosbie, A. (2022). Scotland's councils: The gender balance of each local authority. *The National*. <https://www.thenational.scot/news/20203887.scotlands-councils-gender-balance-local-authority/>.

the authority that began in 2017.” Article A10 alludes to this being a relatively disappointing result: “the islands had been seeking greater female representations, although six other women candidates were unsuccessful.” Given that this was a predictably disappointing outcome based on the numbers on the ballot, it would be reasonable to expect less uncritically positive coverage. In her book *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides*, Karen Ross writes: “Women’s success, even when framed as “against the odds”, is always measured against the male norms so that their exceptionality is privileged and nurtured whilst ignoring the structural inequalities that persist to constrain women’s potential”.³⁸

It is notable that across all the articles, neither Susan Thomson nor Frances Murray was quoted. This was a missed opportunity to ask those succeeding in particularly male-dominated areas what they perceive as being the biggest obstacles.

The impact of this kind of coverage about an imbalanced local council is clear. We need visibility of women role models in political spaces to challenge the perception of those spaces as inherently masculine and to reconstruct what political authority sounds like.³⁹ Articles in local and national publications which champion participation (including photographically, an analysis of which was beyond the scope of this research) contribute to a culture which normalises diverse participation in politics. However, we also need more critical discussion of why we should be concerned about the return of all-male councils and how we can reduce their likelihood in five years’ time.

Recommendations: The news media can play a key role in shifting cultural attitudes around gendered power by **(a) critically discussing reasons for women’s continued exclusion** and **(b) platforming women candidates and elected representatives** who can provide insight from their lived experience of operating in a male-dominated field. This is even more important in areas with especially low diversity in representation, providing role models for women and minoritised individuals and normalising hearing directly from women in power.

How news media chooses to frame progress – or lack thereof – around gender-balanced councils is an important part of its role. None of the articles examined the low number of women on the ballot in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar as a contributory factor. Nor did they discuss measures which should be taken to prevent this predictable scenario from happening again. There is a role here for

³⁸ Ross, K. (2017). *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides*. John Wiley.

³⁹ Young Women’s Movement. (2018). *The Status of Young Women in Scotland 2018*. YWCA Scotland: The Young Women’s Movement. <https://www.ywscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SYWS18.pdf>.

conscientious journalists and editors in mainstream Scottish print news to **maintain scrutiny of women's inclusion in local politics** in authorities across the country. When gains are made toward equality, these should not be framed as a victory but rather indicative of the need for a concerted response to redress.

3.3 Trans representation and rights

Six articles dealt with trans people's place in Scottish society: four covered Elaine Gallagher's election as the first openly trans Councillor in Glasgow (all by women journalists), and two reviewed Nicola Sturgeon's and Ruth Davidson's comments on trans inclusion, respectively (both pieces by men).

Of the four articles covering the success of Elaine Gallagher as Glasgow's first openly trans councillor, two focused on the candidates who had lost their seat in the Southside Central Ward, while two quoted Gallagher at length (along with other trans/non-binary councillors in England) and included discussion of trans representation in politics more generally. Again, the language used can be powerful in framing these results as either a surprising loss for the incumbent or a success for greater diversity in local councils.

Recommendation: Journalists and the news media must understand and take responsibility for the power that they hold in shaping public opinion on this and other human rights issues and **use this power to advance equality and non-discrimination to ensure greater diversity in political participation in Scotland.** In presenting public discourse as an inclusive space, they can signal that the political sphere belongs to – and represents – trans and non-trans people equally.

3.4 Politicians of Colour

Three articles covered people of colour being elected: one about Deena Tissera and two about Gurpreet Singh Johal, though reference was made in another piece to the re-election of Soryia Siddique in Glasgow Southside. Importantly, all three were directly quoted in the articles which mentioned them.

It is welcome to see the election of local candidates of colour given either neutral or positive framing, which was the case in these three articles. It is, however, telling that unlike discussions of the lack of gender balance in the Scottish political sphere, there are no articles which cover the lack of racial inclusion, or any intersectional analysis of the specific barriers faced by women of colour entering the political arena. Only one article, A20, written by a white male politician, specifically celebrates the increase in representation by LGBTQ people, women and people of colour.

Recommendation: There are **opportunities for political journalists to engage more critically with the voices missing from Scottish politics, like women of colour**, and seek out their experiences and understanding of what work still needs to be done to include more diverse candidates moving forward. **Media should also consider what issues it approaches politicians and candidates of colour on**, understanding that issues related to racism and race equality are not their only areas of expertise and that they should be equally approached across policy areas that are relevant to them and their experience. The organisation Pass the Mic provides a directory of women of colour experts for those creating news media to consult.

Further, considering the coverage we have seen which recognises women’s underrepresentation, **there is an urgent need for journalists to assess the vast scale of underrepresentation of people of colour in councils.**

3.5 Linguistic Analysis

Examining the specific ways in which women journalists are constructed in the news can give insight into how powerful women are viewed more generally in the Scottish political landscape. Critical discourse analysts have examined speech verbs, descriptors (including adjectives) and capitalisation to identify how gendered norms are conveyed and continue to uphold specific power structures which undermine women’s authority.

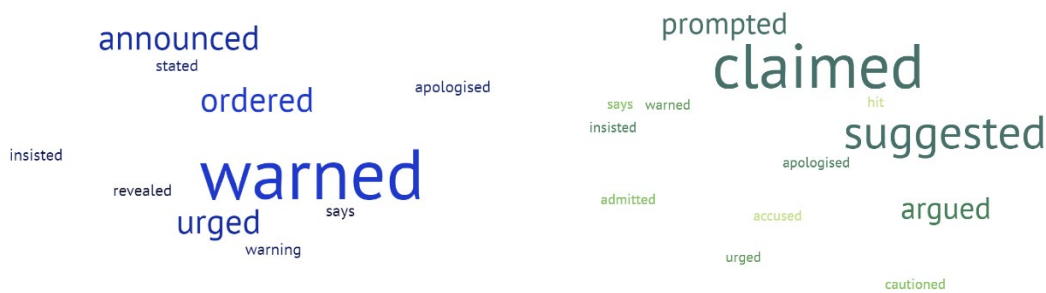
“Institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimise existing power relations”.⁴⁰

Many of the speech verbs identified across the articles to describe women politicians implied lack of authority, certainty – or both. Kirsten Oswald “claimed” (Article B55), as did Nicola Sturgeon (B60), while Susan Aitken “insisted” (B64). This demonstrates the power of indirectly quoting a politician in an article; the journalist can choose the speech verb to use and therefore also frame or represent the speaker in a specific, and often gendered, way.

In Kirsty Rorrison’s recent research examining how men and women politicians were described as speaking in Scottish news, she found clear distinctions: “most of the time, men were “saying,” “asserting,” “warning,” and so on. Women, on the other hand, often “claimed,” “suggested,” or “argued.” When women are described

⁴⁰ Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and Power*. Pearson Education.

this way, they are subtly undermined and questioned; a term like “claim” does not indicate certainty but rather a degree of scepticism about what is being said.”⁴¹



A word cloud of terminology used when discussing male politicians

A word cloud of terminology used when discussing female politicians

Adjectives used to describe women politicians also revealed gendered perceptions of them being incompetent, ineffectual or lacking conviction. “Kirsten Oswald would not say if she was confident” (B55) signals her uncertainty; Susan Aitken was described as “bumbling” and speaking “without much conviction” (B64).

Even where functional honorifics were used, the capitalisation – or not – appeared to be gendered in a few of the articles sampled. For example, in A67 (ironically, an article about women’s equality in politics), two women and one man were asked to comment. Both women’s titles were in lower case (“director of...; chief financial officer”) whilst the man’s title was capitalised (“Director of ...”). The impact of this seemingly minor difference is to diminish the authority of women as decision-makers.

When we start to examine in detail the ways in which women and marginalised people are represented in the election news, we can see a political culture still grounded in masculine authority, norms and power. The impact of the linguistic choices and constructions outlined above is the continuation of a status quo in which women are ‘othered’, their power and authority undermined, and their presence marked as divergent from the norm. Political journalism plays a huge role in strengthening and perpetuating this culture in Scotland.

Recommendations: Journalists have an opportunity to move away from gendered topics (hard versus soft, as described above), to **select framings and constructions which lift up the marginalised and minoritised in our communities**, and to choose the language they use carefully. The words and portrayals in our news are

⁴¹ Rorrison, K. (2022). “Warning” versus “claiming”: The subtle misogyny in media discourse. *On The Engender*. <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/guest-post-warning-versus-claiming-the-subtle-misogyny-in-media-discourse/>.

scrutinised by those interested in the inclusivity of the political sphere in this country.

4. Is There A Difference Between National And Regional Coverage Of Women Politicians?

A clear pattern emerged in articles covering election results, where local numbers became part of a larger story about the rise and fall of each national party. For example, there are 16 articles which reflect on the poor results for the Scottish Conservatives. These articles discuss Douglas Ross' position as leader, the impact on Boris Johnson, and the message being sent by voters to the national parties. There are a number of gendered effects of this national view on local politics.

First, the focus on national issues means that party leaders' views are sought out for comment far more than local councillors. This reduces the chance that a woman or person of colour will be quoted as there are more white men in leadership roles.

A common theme in these articles is the idea that local elections are a chance for voters to 'send a message' to party leaders on controversial national topics. This deflects attention from issues of local importance, turning local politics into a proxy war for national debates. This lack of scrutiny and discussion over local issues disempowers both communities and individuals from taking action or from getting involved in local politics, reducing the likelihood that those who are currently excluded will see a place – or a purpose – for themselves inside formal decision-making structures. The outcome of this for council representation is that the status quo is perpetuated, failing women and other underrepresented groups.

Recommendation: Around the time of elections, there will be greater engagement of the electorate in political news, making it an ideal time to **raise the profile of diverse local candidates and issues**. This will **diversify the kinds of stories being coded as 'political' in local and national news**, which in turn creates a more accessible political sphere.

5. Who is directly quoted in election articles?

Examining direct quotation gives us insight into whose voices are heard from directly and whose are missing from mediated discourse in Scotland. In their 2020 paper, Women In Journalism found that in their sample, out of the 111 people

quoted on the front pages, just 16 per cent were women.⁴² Quoting politicians directly validates their authority in political news and asserts their public power as representatives.

Nicola Sturgeon

Nicola Sturgeon was directly quoted in 15 per cent of the articles; 23 out of the 150. This is unsurprising given the role that the First Minister plays in political journalism as a commentator on issues across the board. However, in 15 of the 23 articles, she was the only woman quoted at all, demonstrating the masking effect of leadership. Highlighting prominent women leaders at a national level at the expense of including more women politicians and councillors belies any progress – or lack thereof – towards gender balance within parties and councils.

Women of Colour

Four women of colour politicians were directly quoted across the 150 articles of the week monitored: Shabana Mahmood, Deena Tissera, Roza Salih and Soryia Siddique. This indicates the continued marginalisation of women of colour in Scottish political news. Indeed, no other women of colour were quoted in the articles; **without these four women having been successful candidates in the election, women of colour would not have been featured at all.**

Men of Colour

Men of colour were directly quoted 22 times, however, 19 times this was the same man – Anas Sarwar, leader of the Scottish Labour Party. The other three were Sadiq Khan, Ravi Govindia and newly elected councillor Gurpreet Singh Johal. This is a clear indication of the impact of traditionally marginalised voices in politics rising to the top; their words are heard or read directly to a far greater extent. Karen Boyle, Melody House and Talat Yaqoob found a similar result in 2021.⁴³ It also demonstrates that when a person of colour does not hold the highest position in a political party, the inclusion of a perspective other than a white person's on Scottish politics would be lost almost altogether.

5.1 Gendered Quoting

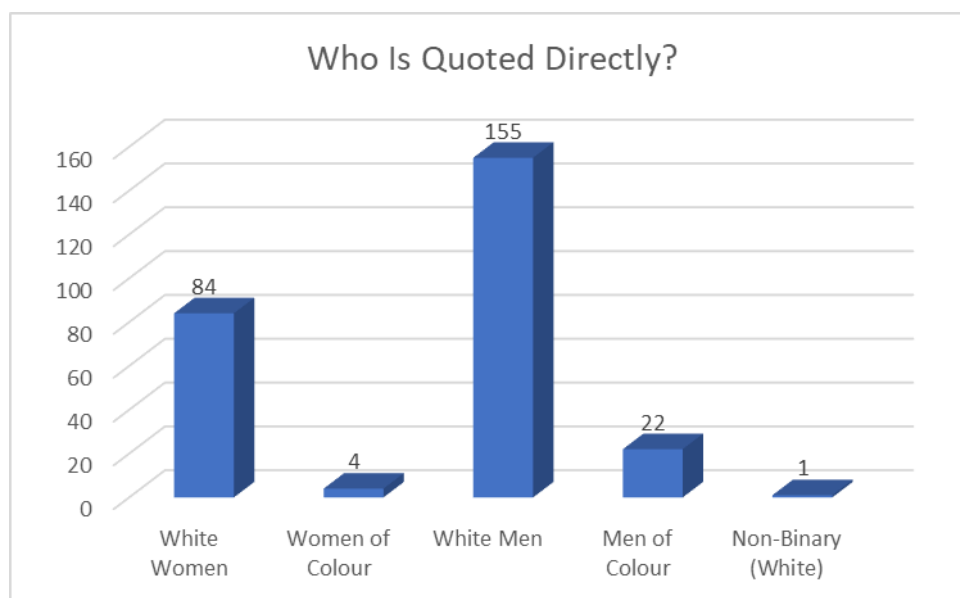
Across the sample, white men were quoted far more than any other demographic, as seen in the graph below. White men were directly quoted 155 times; white

⁴² Darrah, K., & Haddou, L. (2020). *A week in British news: How diverse are the UK's newsrooms?* Women in Journalism. <https://womeninjournalism.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WIJ-2020-full-report.pdf>.

⁴³ Boyle, K., House, M., & Yaqoob, T. (2021). Where are the women of colour in Scottish election news? *Pass the Mic*. <https://passthemicscotland.wordpress.com/where-are-the-women-of-colour-in-scottish-election-news/>.

women 84 times (excluding Nicola Sturgeon as an outlier); men of colour 22 times (although 19 of these are accounted for by Anas Sarwar, as above) and women of colour four times. One non-binary person was quoted.

This unequivocally demonstrates the dominance of Scottish politics by the voices and language of white men and the exclusion of women, people of colour generally, and most acutely, women of colour.



Notably, of the seven articles which dealt specifically with women’s exclusion from the political sphere, three did not quote a woman at all. Across the other four, Nicola Sturgeon was quoted three times, Ruth Davidson and MP Michelle Donelan once each. The Global Media Monitoring Project calls these ‘missed opportunities’, “in which there is a lack of gender balance (and therefore of diversity) in sources, resulting in only one perspective being given on an issue”.⁴⁴ Given that these articles came at the time of – and focused on – local elections and yet did not consult or quote any woman councillors, a pattern emerges of national party leaders and senior figures being approached rather than seeking perspectives from regional candidates.

Due to the nature of articles focused on a specific issue, when a politician is quoted, this can often constitute a large bulk of the story. For example, in Article B13, 210 out of 285 words (81 per cent of the article) was direct quotation from an Alba Councillor who lost his seat. Moreover, nine of the articles were wholly written by current or former politicians:

⁴⁴ GMMP. (2020). *Qualitative News Analysis*. Global Media Monitoring Project. <https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GMMP-2020-Qualitative-news-analysis.docx>.

Angus Robertson	Ian Murray	Alison Thewliss
Christine Jardine	Paul O’Kane	Douglas Ross
Adam Tomkins	Lorna Slater	Douglas Ross

Thus, we are hearing directly from six men and three women in the same period. When women and minoritised politicians are heard from less often than white men in political news, it marks them as ‘other’, contributing to a perception of their being out-of-place. Penelope Eckhart describes this as their being “interlopers” in a world they do not belong.⁴⁵ When taken alongside the disproportionate number of men in local politics, this imbalance in hearing directly from male politicians contributes to the construction of political discourse as male-dominated.

5.2 Live Coverage

Across the articles specifically reporting on live local council election results, patterns emerge about who is directly quoted. This coverage seeks out comments from candidates who have just been elected, immediately meaning more men than women politicians are directly quoted. For example, in Article A7, seven men are quoted – and one woman, all white. The imbalance in the discourse reflects the imbalance in reality – as discussed above, men are vastly overrepresented in local councils.

Article B11 quoted 27 politicians in its live coverage: 16 white men and six white women, three men of colour (including Anas Sarwar) and one woman of colour, as well as Nicola Sturgeon. While there is greater inclusion of politicians of colour here than in any other article, which is to be commended, there is still a vast gender imbalance. Elsewhere there were examples of more equal platforming of councillors’ words; Article B6 quoted eight men and eight women councillors as they were elected, again all white. In part, this was helped by Selkirkshire ward voting in all-women, which demonstrates the interplay between greater political representation at the ballot box and in the papers. How can journalists be expected to report on live election results and include commentary from a balanced range of people when these people are not standing for council in the first place?

⁴⁵ Eckert, P. (1998). Gender and sociolinguistic variation. In *Language and gender: A reader* (pp. 64–75). John Wiley.

5.3 Local Issues

We then looked at the articles covering local issues to see if appropriate local councillors' views were being sought. Only 15 articles of the 150 cover specific local issues affecting people's daily lives, including the closure of the Edinburgh Eye Pavilion, fly-tipping, lollipop crossings, speed cameras and the Scottish International Airshow. The vast majority of these articles did not directly quote any politicians at all. Where councillors were approached for comment (nine times in total, with one piece accounting for five of these), these were all white men.

Clearly, where an article specifically covers leaders' commentary on the local elections, as in A24, which reports party leaders' encouragement to vote, there is scope to solely quote those leaders. It may also be the case that outside of this particular week, a greater number of stories would focus on local issues, but the election results and analysis took precedence.

Recommendation: Approaching local councillors for comment can increase the visibility of the work that councillors can and do achieve to affect lives in their area. Doing so would enrich the stories being covered with local perspectives and demonstrate the impact that individuals can have, both of which create a more inclusive portrayal of local politics and potentially encourage particularly women and marginalised candidates to stand.

5.4 Party Politics

Given the national focus of many of the articles, as discussed above, we examined the identities of those politicians directly quoted in articles predominantly about the different political parties. Quotations by Nicola Sturgeon were not included. Again, some patterns emerged:

- Articles (12) covering the SNP quoted more men than women politicians (18:6), no women of colour, and no men of colour except Anas Sarwar, who was quoted twice.
- Articles (7) covering Scottish Labour quoted more men than women, no women of colour, and again no men of colour except Anas Sarwar.
- Articles (9) covering the Scottish Tories (or written by Douglas Ross) only quoted white men politicians.
- Articles (5) covering the Scottish Green Party (or written by Lorna Slater) quoted more white women than men – but no politicians of colour.
- Articles (5) covering the Alba Party also only quoted white men politicians.

These results are not wholly unexpected, as when writing an article about a specific party's results in an election it is common for journalists to seek comments

from the leader of that party. Given that the Scottish Green Party has a woman co-convenor, it makes sense that articles covering their successes would quote her directly, and these results demonstrate the interplay between political parties mainstreaming gender equality into their structures (in this case with co-convenors) and the knock-on effect of a more balanced political discourse.

6. Conclusion

To address women's endemic underrepresentation in local politics, it is essential to acknowledge that all key actors with power over and access to these structures, including government, parliament, councils and political parties, must take decisive action in their respective spheres. However, as acknowledged at the beginning, news media has a crucial role to play.

The media plays a vital role in helping to shift cultural attitudes and norms around what the political sphere might look like. It reflects our society – but also shapes it. We examined articles which specifically mentioned women, and those which didn't, to explore their presence in Scottish print news around the time of the election. While this study was of a relatively small sample size, we have gained some important initial insights into how women participate and are constructed within reporting of local elections. The findings here warrant further scrutiny and study over a longer period; however, we have identified several issues for immediate consideration, along with recommendations intended to enable editors and journalists to play their part in addressing women's underrepresentation in local councils. If we want to ensure Scottish politics represents the diversity of its population, the news media must critically reflect on the narratives, framing, linguistic features and images chosen to portray women and minoritised people in power.

Positively, we observed some reporting identifying sexism in local politics as a problem, however, this lacked broader critical engagement with experts and often avoided presenting structural solutions. Another clear finding is that far fewer women than men are reporting on political issues, at a rate which mirrors the gender imbalance within local councils. This suggests that it is largely men who are both making the decisions and setting the public political agenda. We see women politicians are quoted less, and when they do appear, they experience associations with 'softer' feminised topics and gendered linguistic framing.

This lack of women's voices in the sample is a glaring issue which must be addressed and is linked to another crucial observation - the lack of coverage of

the local elections generally. Further, within the coverage that does exist, we found a lack of local voices – regardless of gender – in articles specifically covering the local elections. When writing about local elections, the tendency to present local politics through the lens of national narratives means that issues of great local importance – including issues relating to inequality in representation – are not scrutinised. This does a disservice to the public who deserve accountability in the press and particularly to women and others who are already excluded from these spaces, as the lack of scrutiny encourages apathy, serving to perpetuate the status quo.

Recommendations

By following the recommendations made here, news media can ensure a more rounded narrative of local government emerges which increases women's visibility, challenges the status quo, scrutinises inequality, and ultimately improves the overall quality of local democracy for everyone.

News media, editors and journalists should:

- Ensure **greater diversity of voices writing about local issues** and political coverage in general.
- **Encourage more women to write about political elections** - and editors and senior staff should **provide clarity on routes to specialisms** and **transparency around criteria for story allocations**.
- Ensure that there are **paid opportunities, training and mentoring, support structures and flexible enough working conditions at both national and regional newspapers**.
- **Talk to local candidates, councillors and expert organisations working to improve representation** to centre their perspectives within local politics and help push the discussion beyond an acknowledgement of the problem.
- **Platform women candidates and elected representatives** who can provide insight from experience, and critically discuss reasons for women's continued exclusion from local democracy.
- **Develop and maintain scrutiny of women's inclusion in local politics** in authorities across the country.
- **Understand the power held by media in shaping public opinion** and **use this to advance equality and non-discrimination** to help ensure greater diversity in political participation in Scotland.

- **Assess the vast scale of underrepresentation of people of colour in local democracy and engage with women of colour and other voices missing from Scottish politics.**
- **Ensure that politicians and candidates of colour are approached across policy areas relevant to them and their expertise**, not just for coverage on issues of race and racism – **use the Pass the Mic directory to find women of colour experts** to offer comment and engage with media.
- **Choose framings and constructions which lift up the marginalised and minoritised in our communities** and avoid relying on gendered stereotypes of hard versus soft topics and issues.
- **Highlight the profile of diverse local candidates and issues around the time of elections** to diversify the kinds of stories coded as ‘political’ in local and national news.
- **Approach local councillors for comment regularly on local issues** to increase the visibility of the work that councillors can and do achieve to affect lives in their area.

APPENDIX 1: Methodology

Searches were run using Lexis Nexis for articles published between 2.5.22 and 9.5.22 inclusive in order to cover pre-election debate, results, and post-analysis. Given women's exclusion from the political sphere and comparative absence as politicians, we ran an initial search for articles covering the Scottish elections which included the words "woman", "women", or "female". This ensured that all articles (67) where women were specifically mentioned in discussion of the elections were analysed. We ran a second search which did not filter for these words, and randomly selected a comparable 83 articles, totalling 150.

We excluded letters, obituaries and stories not on the Scottish local elections. Included were: political features, pre-election debates, live results, post-analysis, stories on local issues, and issues of import in the wider Scottish political agenda.

Data Set A (filter for women)	67
Data Set B	83
Total	150

Each article was then coded for:

Newspaper Source
Local Authority of Newspaper (or National)
Date
Journalist Gender
Topic (Primary & Secondary)
Direct Quotation by Race and Gender

Topic

Primary topic was coded using the Global Media Mapping Project coding criteria for the following:

Politics & Government	Crime & Violence
Science & Health	Gender & Related
Economy	Celebrity, Arts, Media & Sports
Social & Legal	Other

Given that the time period was the week of the election, unsurprisingly, the primary topic for most articles was Politics and Government. Therefore, a secondary focus was also coded, which provided more information about the subject matter of each article.

Sexism in Politics	Abortion
Crime	Trans Inclusion
Violence Against Women (VAW)	Racial Equality
Election Analysis & Results	

Direct Quotation

In each article, any time a politician (MP, MSP, councillor or candidate) was directly quoted, we coded them as: White Woman, Woman of Colour, White Man, Man of Colour, Trans/ Non-Binary. The exception to this was Nicola Sturgeon, who, due to her position as First Minister, plays a different role in political journalism; she is quoted frequently as a commentator on the issue in the article. Thus, we coded Sturgeon separately. We did not code direct quotations from non-politicians or anonymous sources, e.g., backbenchers or spokespeople whose race and gender were unidentifiable.

Research Questions

1. What is the gender breakdown of journalists writing about the local elections?
 - 1A Is there a difference by article topic?
 - 1B Is there a difference by national or regional paper?
2. How are women politicians written about in local election coverage in Scotland?
3. Is there a difference between national and regional coverage of women politicians?
4. Who is directly quoted in election articles?

Analysis

Alongside key content analysis methods like coding and counting, we drew on Critical Discourse Analysis of the articles, which “focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society” (see Footnote 8). Examining some of the linguistic features – such as titles, capitalisation, and use of speech verbs, allowed a deeper,

more qualitative analysis of how women politicians were constructed in the articles.

ABOUT ENGENDER

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women's social, political and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international level to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

ABOUT ELECT HER

Elect Her is a tiny but mighty organisation that work to motivate, support and equip women in all their diversity to stand for elected office in all spheres of Government, providing them with the knowledge, confidence, and skills they need to do it. We demystify the process of standing for elected office and motivate women to create action plans for standing through free workshops and online resources.

ABOUT WOMEN 5050

Women 50:50 is the campaign for at least 50 per cent representation of women in our Parliament and in our councils.