



WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEES

**— A GENDERED ANALYSIS
ACROSS SCOTLAND'S
COUNCILS**



This paper was written in 2025 by Jessie Turbitt for Engender as part of a research placement from the MSc Applied Gender Studies and Research Methods course at the University of Strathclyde. These research placements are designed in collaboration with academics and students and aim to identify a gap in existing research and highlight areas requiring further study and robust data-gathering.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Women hold just 34.36% of council seats across Scotland but are overrepresented in feminised policy areas and underrepresented in strategic committees.
- Political parties significantly influence which committees' women are placed on, with notable ideological differences.
- Rural and northern councils often show weaker proportionality and lower levels of female representation in key decision-making committees.
- Committee assignments reflect and reinforce gendered norms about leadership and influence.
- Recommendations include proportional gender quotas, party reform, intersectional data collection, and further feminist research.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents a gendered analysis of local government committees across Scotland, undertaken during a placement with Engender, a feminist policy organisation working for women's equality in Scotland. It builds on the findings of Engender's Sex and Power (2023) report and supports the organisation's campaign, *'Making it Happen for 2027: Transforming Local Democracy for Women'* (2023), which aims to achieve women's equal representation across all levels of local political life.

Despite women comprising 51% of Scotland's population, they remain chronically underrepresented at all levels of democratic decision-making (Engender, 2023). As of 2023, only 34.7% of councillors, 26.6% of council leaders, and 31% of committee conveners (Engender, 2023) are women. This

systemic underrepresentation reflects long-standing structural and cultural barriers, from the design of political institutions to the gendered division of labour, which disproportionately exclude women, particularly those from minoritised communities (Engender & Elect Her, 2023).

This research investigates the gendered composition of local government committees, examining both policy and regulatory committees across all 32 Scottish local authorities. While headline statistics on council membership are important, it is within committee structures that much of the substantive policy development and decision-making occurs. This makes it vital to understand not only how many women are present, but where they are, and whether their representation is concentrated in traditionally feminised areas such as care, education, and equalities, or whether they hold influence in economic, infrastructure, and strategic portfolios. It is also crucial to note that across committees, fair representation does not mean an assumed 50/50 gender split, but rather representation that is proportional to the number of women in each council (Elect Her and Engender; GIWL, 2023).

In addition to a gender-based analysis by committee, the research explores political parties influence on committee representation as a factor in women's representation, asking whether certain political parties are more likely to select or support women for committee roles. In line with feminist research and Engender's ongoing work, the project considers how power operates within local councils and what this means for equitable and inclusive governance in Scotland.

Furthermore, it explores whether geographical or structural factors impacts women's representation across local council committees.

This report aims to provide Engender with clear, accessible insights into the current state of women's representation within local government structures, while contributing to wider efforts to challenge exclusion, transform institutional cultures, and build feminist leadership at the local level.

METHODOLOGY

This project involved the collection and analysis of data on the gender composition of local government committees of 1,196 councillors across all 32 Scottish local authorities. I identified and categorised committees into thematic areas, then recorded gender and party affiliation of committee members, which was organised in Excel. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to identify patterns, gaps and disproportionalities. The research focused on both policy committees (e.g. Education, Social Care, Finance) and regulatory committees (e.g. Planning, Licensing, Audit), with the aim of identifying patterns in women's representation and exploring whether gendered divisions exist in committee assignments.

Participant demographics

Data was gathered primarily from publicly available information on council websites, including committee membership lists, council minutes, and organisational charts. Where councils listed both full committee members and substitutes or observers, only primary committee members were recorded to ensure consistency. No FOI requests were necessary for this phase of the project.

An initial pilot review of a small number of councils helped determine the average time needed to extract committee data and informed the decision to include all 32 councils in the final dataset. This approach allowed for a comprehensive, national-level snapshot of gender representation in Scottish local government committees.

In addition to committee data, the project also collected information on:

- The overall gender makeup of each local council.
- The gender and party affiliation of councillors serving on committees.
- The presence or absence of women in specific thematic policy areas, such as education, infrastructure, or finance.
- Council-level representation proportionality in relation to the gender composition of elected members.
- Geographic and political trends affecting the distribution of women across councils and committees.

Not all councils publish complete or consistent information on committee membership, and in some cases, committee structures or member lists were not fully accessible at the time of data collection. As a result, 30 councillors are not captured in the dataset. While this represents a minor proportion of

the overall total, it should be noted that the findings reflect the most comprehensive dataset available rather than a complete census of all elected members.

The final dataset was compiled using Microsoft Excel, with separate sheets for committee breakdowns, party affiliation, and gender representation. The data was then analysed to identify quantitative trends and support qualitative reflections on patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

I applied a feminist approach to data collection, drawing on Haraway's (1988) concept of 'situated knowledges' to recognise my own positionality and the political nature of how knowledge is produced. I also engaged with intersectional critiques (Collins, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2006), remaining aware that this project could not account for overlapping axes of identity beyond binary gender, such as race, class, and disability, due to lack of available information.

Limitations

While every effort was made to ensure accuracy and consistency, several limitations should be noted:

- Not all councils use the same committee structures or naming conventions. Some committees had overlapping remits or were organised differently depending on local context.
- Councillor gender was determined based on publicly listed names and photographs, which may not always accurately reflect gender identity.
- No disaggregated data on race, disability, sexuality, or other protected characteristics was available, limiting the ability to explore intersectional inequalities.
- Councillors' levels of influence within committees (e.g. convener roles) were not systematically analysed in this phase.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust foundation for understanding how gender shapes participation in local government at the committee level and supports Engender's broader objective to map and challenge democratic inequalities across Scotland.

GENDER BREAKDOWN ACROSS LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEES

The overall gender composition of Scottish local councils is significantly imbalanced. Across all 32 councils, men hold 65.64% of council seats (785 councillors), while women occupy just 34.36% (411 councillors). This disparity sets the tone for further analysis of gender representation within council committees, where patterns of exclusion and concentration become even more apparent. Women were consistently more likely to appear on feminised committees, while strategic and technical committees remain male-dominated:

Women councillors' representation on council committees in Scotland in 2025		
	Committee Areas	Women's Representation Rate
Feminised Policy Areas	Education and Children's Services	39.7%
	Social Work/Health and Social Care	43.2%
	Equalities/Fairness/Diversity	41.5%
Strategic/ Technical Policy Areas	Finance and Resources	28.6%
	Infrastructure	27.8%
	Transport	26.9%
	Planning and Licensing	30.2%

These patterns are consistent with feminist political research that reveals women are often confined to 'soft power' spaces, while men dominate areas that control budgets, infrastructure, and legal authority (Mackay, 2004: Duerst-Lahti, 2002). Research produced by Engender and Elect Her (2024) similarly argue that political representation must be measured not by presence, but where influence is exercised.

This division reflects what Duerst-Lahti (2002) refers to as 'gendered governing', where institutions replicate gender hierarchies by assigning different types of responsibilities to men and women. These assignments have real consequences: committees that control financial legal and strategic levers hold disproportionate power over local decision-making.

The term *feminised* or *soft committees* typically refers to those in local government that focus on areas traditionally associated with caregiving or community well-being – such as education, health, social work, equalities, and culture. These roles are often perceived as less prestigious or influential compared to *hard* or *masculinised* committees, which deal with strategic decision-making, infrastructure, finance, or economic development (Bochel and Bochel, 2008). The problem lies in the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes and assumptions about leadership. Assigning women disproportionately to these committees reinforces the notion that women are best suited for nurturing or supportive functions, limiting their access to positions of substantive power and narrowing the scope of their political influence. As Pini and McDonald (2011) argue, such gendered expectations not only shape which roles women are appointed to but also marginalise their voices within decision-making processes that define the strategic direction of local governance. This division of political labour contributes to symbolic rather than transformative representation, with long-term consequences for women's empowerment and the diversity of local leadership.

Across committees, there is a clear gendered division of political labour. Men dominate committees responsible for finance, infrastructure, and decision-making oversight, while women are more represented in social and care-focused areas, though even these remain male-majority.

The **Finance & Resources / Policy and Resources committees** are the most male-dominated of all, with **71.39% male representation**, indicating a persistent masculinisation of financial and strategic governance spaces.

- Similarly, **Infrastructure (72.19% male), Transport (73.13% male), Planning and Licensing (69.77% male), and Audit and Governance (68.58% male)** reinforce this trend of male dominance in areas of power, control, and development.
- The **Pensions committee (66.67% male)** and **Emergency Planning (70.83% male)** reflect further underrepresentation of women in administrative and crisis response roles.

Committees more closely associated with care, inclusion, and cultural life are somewhat more gender-balanced, though still skewed:

- **Education and Children's Services** is **60.23% male** and **39.77% female**, while **Social Work / Health and Social Care** sits at **56.82% male** and **43.18% female** – among the highest levels of female participation.
- **Equalities, Fairness and Diversity committees**, perhaps surprisingly, are still male dominated at **58.54% male**, despite their remit for inclusion.
- **Community Wealth Building**, and committees aimed at economic justice and reform, are **55.47% male** and **44.53% female**, showing more potential

for inclusive representation.

- **Events, Tourism and Culture** is nearly gender-equal, with **51.06% male** and **48.94% female** – the closest to parity across all committee types.
- The **Appointments Committee** is also relatively balanced, with **53.33% male** and **46.67% female**, though this may reflect smaller committee size rather than structural parity.

These patterns are echoed in wider UK research, which shows that even when women are elected, they tend to hold fewer leadership roles and are more likely to lead portfolios in education or equalities rather than finance or infrastructure (Bochel and Bochel, 2008). This gendered allocation of power impacts not only individual councillors but also the substance of local decision-making.

These findings reflect broader feminist critiques of institutional politics: women are underrepresented in core decision-making spaces and overrepresented (yet still in the minority) in 'soft' or traditionally feminised policy areas. This reaffirms long-standing structural barriers that reproduce gendered hierarchies of political power within local government.

GENDER BREAKDOWN BY POLITICAL PARTY ACROSS ALL LOCAL COUNCILS

	Women	Men	Women	Men
Scottish National Party	150	216	41%	59%
Scottish Labour Party	85	155	35%	65%
Labour and Co-operative Party	4	2	67%	33%
British Unionists	0	1	0%	100%
Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	27	82	25%	75%

Independent	41	107	28%	72%
Scottish Liberal Democrats	19	33	37%	63%
Reform UK	2	5	29%	71%
Scottish Green Party	12	13	48%	52%
Progressive Change North Lanarkshire	0	7	0%	100%
Highland Independent	6	10	38%	62%
Highland Alliance	1	7	13%	87%
Alba Party	0	2	0%	100%
Conservative (non-aligned)	0	1	0%	100%
Scottish Socialist Party	0	1	0%	100%

Figure 1: Gender breakdown by political party

Gender representation also varies significantly between political parties, with clear ideological patterns. Among major parties:

- The **Scottish National Party (SNP)** shows the highest female representation of the three largest parties, with **41% women** and **59% men**.
- The **Scottish Labour Party** fares slightly worse, with **35% female councillors**, while the **Scottish Conservatives** show the most significant imbalance: **75% of Conservative councillors are men**, and only **25% are women**.

Other parties show mixed results:

- The **Scottish Green Party** is the most gender-balanced overall, with **48% women** and **52% men**, reflecting its explicit commitments to feminist values and inclusive politics.
- The **Scottish Liberal Democrats** have **36.5% female representation**, while **Reform UK (28.6% women)**, **Highland Independent (37.5%)**, and **Highland Alliance (12.5%)** show notable imbalances.

- **Some parties have no women councillors at all**, including **Alba, British Unionists, Progressive Change North Lanarkshire, Scottish Socialist Party**, and **Conservative Non-Aligned** – although these parties tend to be very small.

Independents - who play a particularly influential role in rural councils - are **73.2% male** and only **27.7% female**, reflecting the particular challenges women may face in standing for office without party structures or support.

These disparities underscore the gendered nature of candidate selection, support, and success across Scotland's political spectrum. While progressive parties tend to perform better, parity remains elusive across the board. Notably, parties that promote feminist values - such as the Greens - show stronger female representation, suggesting that intentional commitments to equality can translate into more representative local institutions.

PARTY INFLUENCE ON COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The role of political parties in shaping committee appointments is critical. While overall gender representation varies by party (e.g., Scottish Greens: 48% women; SNP: 41%; Conservatives: 25%), this research looked at whether women from different parties are appointed to powerful committees or mainly placed in feminised policy spaces.

Women councillors from the Scottish Greens were present across a wider range of committees, including Finance and Climate, indicating a more balanced internal distribution. In contrast, Conservative and Independent women, where present, were often concentrated in committees like Education or Equalities, and were largely absent from Planning, Finance, and Infrastructure. The SNP, while fielding the largest number of women councillors, also showed gendered placements: women appeared frequently on Social Work and Education committees but held fewer roles in Finance or Audit. These ideological patterns reflect each party's approach to gender and leadership. Feminist-aligned parties like the Greens are more likely to share decision-making power, while parties with more traditional hierarchies tend to replicate gendered norms (Childs, 2008).

These trends are consistent with wider political science research that links

party ideology and gender outcomes. For example, Krook and O'Brien (2012) highlight how left-leaning or green parties tend to adopt internal equality measures, while others rely more heavily on incumbency and informal power networks. This reflects broader insights from feminist institutionalist theory, which emphasises that internal structures like committees are key sites of gendered power - and that reform often depends on feminist actors pushing change from within (Childs, 2022). This reinforces that committee assignment is not neutral: it reflects internal power dynamics and political values, not just electoral outcomes.

COUNCIL-BY-COUNCIL TRENDS AND REGIONAL PATTERNS

Analysing committee membership in relation to each council's gender makeup reveals notable disparities in proportional representation. Fair representation should reflect the proportion of women elected to a given council, rather than assuming a universal 50/50 split. For instance, in urban councils such as Edinburgh and Glasgow-where women make up over 35% of councillors-committee appointments more closely reflect this distribution, suggesting more conscious efforts toward equitable participation.

By contrast, rural and northern councils (e.g., Argyll and Bute, Orkney, Highland) often display wider gaps between women's presence on the council and their participation in committees. These areas frequently have high numbers of independent councillors, the majority of whom are men, who tend to occupy roles on powerful and strategic committees. Women councillors in these authorities are more commonly assigned to community-focused or equalities-related committees, further distancing them from influence over budgetary, planning, and infrastructure decisions.

This reveals how geography, political culture, and council structure intersect to produce unequal outcomes. Councils with more structured party systems and larger urban populations tend to perform better in terms of gender proportionality, while looser or less regulated political environments can reinforce existing gender imbalances (Childs, 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research confirms that significant gender imbalances persist within Scotland's local government committees. While women make up 51% of the population, they remain underrepresented across all levels of local governance - holding just 34.36% of council seats and consistently occupying a minority of positions within key committee structures. Even where overall representation is improving, power remains unevenly distributed.

The data reveals a clear gendered division of labour within council committees. Women are more frequently assigned to *traditionally feminised* policy areas such as Education and Social Work, while men dominate *masculinised* and higher-status domains like Finance, Infrastructure, Audit, and Planning. Committees such as Transport and Finance & Resources are over 70% male, while only a handful, like Events, Tourism and Culture, approach gender parity. These trends reinforce long-standing critiques within feminist political analysis: women are often included in political spaces, but rarely in positions of real power.

Party affiliation also influences gender representation. The Scottish Greens are closest to achieving gender parity, while the Scottish Conservatives, Independents, and smaller right-leaning or unaffiliated groups show the most significant gender gaps. Even among the better-performing parties, parity remains aspirational. Furthermore, political parties play a major role in either reinforcing or challenge gendered dynamics, requiring a feminist approach to representation to address both election outcomes and internal governance structures (Krook and O'Brien).

These patterns reflect systemic and cultural barriers to women's full political participation, including exclusionary institutional norms, unequal caregiving responsibilities, and the persistent undervaluing of women's leadership. As highlighted by Engender (2023a) and Engender & Elect Her (2023), meaningful change requires structural transformation, not just individual effort.

Recommendations

Based on the data and Engender's wider analysis, this report offers the following recommendations:

Proportional gender quotas for committee assignments based on the gender makeup of each council.

Greater transparency from councils about how committee appointments are made.

Encouragement of party-led interventions to support balanced distribution of women across all types of committees.

Intersectional data collection beyond binary gender to understand the experiences of all marginalised groups.

Further feminist research into how women councillors experience participation and leadership once appointed.

As highlighted by the King's College London Global Institute for Women's Leadership, greater diversity in political decision-making improves democratic legitimacy, enhances public trust, and leads to more effective policy outcomes (GIWL, 2023). If local democracy is to work for everyone, women must not only be present - but they must also have power.

Furthermore, research has shown, women face both structural and cultural barriers to entering and succeeding in local government roles, including lack of support, hostile environments, and the time demands of council work (Maguire, 2018). While this project focused on quantitative committee data, further qualitative work could explore how these barriers influence committee appointments and progression.

By addressing these structural inequalities, Scotland's local governments can move toward a genuinely inclusive democratic process - one that not only represents the diversity of its population but is strengthened by it.

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