

To what extent are parliamentary questions in Holyrood gendered?

Advocates of Scottish devolution made promises for a ‘new politics’, one aspect of which would entail a parliament that was more gender-representative than its Westminster counterpart (Hansard Society, 2010). Numerically-speaking, Holyrood has indeed long-remained a front-runner in terms of women’s parliamentary representation. The 2021 election saw a record 58 women (45% of the overall body) voted into Holyrood, placing it ahead of Westminster, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Welsh Parliament. Critical mass theorists of women’s political representation predict such a high number of female representatives inevitably leads to a greater representation of women-related concerns (Norris, 1996: 90). However, many scholars have evidenced a multiplicity of possibilities regarding the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation. This paper aims to explore some of these hypotheses by examining the extent and nature of women’s representation in Scotland’s parliamentary questions.

Literature Review.

The following section outlines some of the existing debates between critical mass theorists of parliamentary representation and those who posit the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation to be more complex. Then, it presents a brief summary of Karen Bird’s (2005) paper, *Gendering Parliamentary Questions*, from which this paper takes its methodological framework.

I. Critical Mass Theories.

Scholars holding that an increased number of female representatives in parliaments will directly affect the propensity of legislatures to address ‘women’s issues’ are commonly labelled as ‘critical mass theorists’ of political representation (Childs & Krook, 2008a: 725-26).

The concept is based on the work of Rosabeth Kanter (1977), who in her book, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, explored the dynamics between men and women in large corporations. The general assumption held by Kanter is that as relative numbers of women increase, they eventually enable the creation of a woman-friendly (rather than “male-dominated”) company culture – creating more opportunities for women (pp. 309-16). She does, however, grant that the direct relationship between numbers and positive change may be skewed by additional factors; namely, the choices and gender-identities of individual women (Childs & Krook, 2008a: 727-28). The central thesis of Kanter’s concept has since been employed by advocates for the increased parliamentary representation of women and campaigns for gender-quotas (Krook, 2015).

II. *More complex than composition?*

There exists a commonly-held sentiment, however, that such an analysis – even with its grant to individual identities – over-simplifies a more variable dynamic (Childs & Krook, 2008b; Mackay & McAllister, 2012).

Based on existing theories, Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook (2009) developed five categories of enquiry regarding women's parliamentary representation; the anticipated effects of increased numbers of women, constraining or enabling legislative contexts, the identities and interests of individual legislators, the definitions of women's issues, and, finally, the policy-making processes themselves (pp. 127-28). Each consideration may work to either hinder or further enable the predictions made by critical mass theorists as to the effects of an increasingly female legislature. Whilst it is not within the remit of this paper to explore each aspect of these categories, I hope to draw on a number of existing perspectives to evaluate the implications of its findings.

III. *Karen Bird's 'Gendering Parliamentary Questions'.*

This paper extends an existing study by Karen Bird (2005), which analysed the make-up and content of written and oral questions asked in Westminster during the 1997/1998 parliamentary session. Overall, her findings evidenced a positive relationship between increased female parliamentary representation, and women's concerns being "...granted a higher priority in parliament" (p. 368). Furthermore, questioners' sex and party-affiliation were shown to have a significant impact on propensities to address women-related concerns. By utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods, Bird's framework offers a way of exploring the impact of numbers, as well as some of the other aspects of representation highlighted by the literature.

As noted by Bird, parliamentary questions offer members a direct avenue by which to represent the perspectives of others, thus it provides "a valuable focus for examining whether, and how, women MPs [or MSPs] attempt to substantively represent their female constituents" (p. 354). Despite this, they remain relatively understudied (Martin, 2011: 259). Paul Chaney's paper, *Critical Actors vs. Critical Mass* (2011: 451-52) remains the only body of research that explores women's representation in Scotland's parliamentary questions – his research covers 1999 to 2010. As noted, 45% of Members of Scottish Parliament (MSPs) are now women. Considering this background, the current gender make-up in Holyrood offers a valuable and, as of yet, under-utilised case-study by which to examine the arguments discussed above.

Data and Methodology.

As stated, this paper follows the methodological framework employed by Karen Bird (2005). The data-period includes all written and oral questions asked between 7th May 2021 and 28th February 2022. A period of time after the election and before the introduction of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill (i.e. 2nd March 2022) was chosen to avoid too much ‘political noise’ (The Scottish Parliament, 2022). That is, debates often cited concerns of its impact on “women’s safety and equality” (Engender, 2022: 2).

All of the data presented in the tables below were sourced via the Scottish Parliament’s (2023a) website, using their ‘Questions and answers’ search engine. The terms men, women and gender (and all variations such as male, female etc.) were searched for within the time-period. The results were then cross-examined to ensure that all results met the criteria for inclusion. For example, questions relating to animals – such as, “pregnant hinds” (Rachel Hamilton, *Scottish Parliament*, 24 February 2022, S6W-06738) – were removed. Questions were then organised into themes relating to ‘men’, ‘women’, or more generally to ‘gender’. For the purposes of this paper, the term gender was taken to refer to those that apply to both men and women.

This paper remains aware that the examination of a single time-frame and parliament does not necessarily allow for further generalisability to other data-periods, other parliaments, and to other sites of representation such as parliamentary committees and chamber debates (Childs & Krook, 2008b: 119). Due to the limited data-period, the insights of this paper aim to offer provisional conclusions that may be substantiated by further research.

Analysis.

The analysis is divided into two sections. The first identifies how many questions were asked relating to women, men or gender, and which MSPs made up the body of questioners. The second examines how questions were framed.

1. Questioners.

Over the data-period, 6, 712 written and 175 oral questions were asked (6, 887 in total), and 2.3% were made in relation to men, women or gender (see *Table 1*). 31.8% of all MSPs lodged these questions (see *Table 2*). Moreover, the majority of written questions focused on women’s issues (i.e. 69.4%), whereas men’s issues were addressed only twice (see *Table 3*). This points to some degree of substantive representation, in which women are both present in Parliament, and their concerns and perspectives integrated “into the mainstream political agenda” (MacKay, 2010: 370).

Table 1: No. of questions relating to men, women and/or gender.

	No. of questions asked by male MSPs	%	No. of questions asked by female MSPs	%
Oral	0	0%	3	100%
Written	71	45.2%	86	54.8%
Total	71	44.4%	89	55.6%

Table 2: No. of MSPs who asked a question relating to men, women and/or gender.

	No. of male questioners	% of male MSPs	No. of female questioners	% of female MSPs	Total
Oral	0	0%	3	5.2%	3
Written	22	31%	17	29.3%	39

Female MSPs contributed 55.6% of the questions identified (see *Table 1*) – a significantly higher proportion than their parliamentary share of 45%. In the context of women-related questions, female MSPs asked 52.3% (see *Table 3*). Significantly, Chaney’s analysis of written questions between 1999 and 2010 found that female MSPs asked “exactly two-thirds” of women-related questions (2011: 452). This is despite female representation in Holyrood peaking at 37.2% during this time. This suggests that female parliamentarians continue to be more inclined to address “issues linked to their sex” (Bird, 2005: 355), as well as indicating a positive relationship between the increased presence of female parliamentarians and the likelihood of male parliamentarians to act in the interests of women – at least in the context of parliamentary questions (Hohmann, 2020: 32).

This paper remains aware that despite such a perceived relationship, “personal factors” of a male parliamentarian may impact their propensity to represent certain issues (Saalfeld & Bischof, 2013: 306). Further investigative research (i.e. interviews with male MSPs) would be necessary to explore the perceptions of male parliamentarians in this regard.

Table 3: No. of written questions relating to men, women or gender.

	No. of questions relating to 'women'	% (of total)	No. of questions relating to 'men'	% (of total)	No. of questions relating to 'gender'	% (of total)
Male MSPs	52	47.7%	2	100%	17	37%
Female MSPs	57	52.3%	0	0%	29	63%
Total	109		2		46	

Three oral questions were identified, all were asked by female MSPs and related to women’s issues (see *Table 2*); namely, the protection of women within football, the prevention of sexual violence against teenage girls, and measures to ensure early endometriosis diagnoses. Research regarding other legislatures has highlighted the degree to which oral questions are often underpinned by “a logic of public masculinity”, thus creating a barrier to female participation (Lovenduski, 2014: 158). Correspondingly, the *Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit* conducted by the Scottish Parliament (2023b) highlighted that female MSPs, relative to their parliamentary share, make fewer contributions during oral questions (p. 26). In this data-period, 65% of all oral questions were lodged by men and, as such, this finding bolsters existing research.

Due to the lack of oral questions identified, however, the remaining analyses pertains only to written questions.

Table 4: No. of written questions asked by each MP relating to men, women and/or gender, according to Party.

Party (Total MSPs)	No. of MSPs	% of questioners	% of group
Scottish Labour (22)	17	43.6%	77.3%
Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party (31)	14	35.9%	45.2%
Scottish National Party (64/39*)	4	10.3%	6.25/10.2%*
Scottish Liberal Democrats (4)	2	5.1%	50%
Scottish Green Party (7/5*)	2	5.1%	28.6/40%*
Total (129/112*)	39	100%	30.2/34.8%*

**Excluding MSPs with ministerial responsibilities.*

Table 5: No. of written questions relating to ‘women’.

	Labour (Total MSPs)		Conservative and Unionist (Total MSPs)		Scottish National (Total MSPs)		Liberal Democrats (Totals MSPs)		Scottish Green (Total MSPs)	
	Male (12)	Female (10)	Male (22)	Female (9)	Male (30/16*)	Female (34/23*)	Male (3)	Female (1)	Male (3/2*)	Female (4/3*)
No. of questioners (% of group)	6 (50%)	9 (90%)	8 (36%)	4 (44%)	2 (6.7/12.5%*)	0	2 (67%)	0	0	1 (25/33%*)

No. of questions (% of questions)	17 (15%)	40 (37%)	26 (24%)	16 (15%)	2 (1.8%)	0	7 (6.4%)	0	0	1 (0.9%)
Average	2.8	4.4	3.25	4	1	0	3.5	0	0	1

**Excluding MSPs with ministerial responsibilities.*

Labour MSPs made up the majority of questioners (see *Table 4*). This excluded those holding ministerial positions, who cannot table parliamentary questions (Bird, 2005: 356). Additionally, Labour questioners were equal to 77.3% of their overall membership in Parliament – a significantly higher share than any other party. Much like findings in Bird’s paper, this remains in line with the “historical associations between the women’s movement and the left”(p. 367).

To explore this further, questions relating to women were further disaggregated by questioners’ sex and party-affiliation (see *Table 5*). Whilst the proportion of female Labour questioners (as a percentage of their own Party) was substantially higher than that of their Conservative counterparts, the average number of questions lodged by both Labour and Conservative women was relatively similar. Moreover, the average number of questions lodged by Conservative men was higher than that of Labour men. This finding might suggest that notions regarding the increasingly “feminised” Conservative Party in Westminster, may have some application in the context of Holyrood too (Childs & Webb, 2012: 231).

It is difficult to ascertain why such a shift might occur. Scholars have evidenced that women’s issues have become more ‘electorally competitive’ – offering politicians an avenue by which to secure wider electoral backing (Childs & Webb, 2012; Hohmann, 2021). The existence of a cross-sex and cross-party focus on women’s issues also points towards the partial establishment of a ‘new politics’ in Scotland, which moves away from “traditional adversarial politics” to one of cross-party cooperation (Cairney, 2011: 244). This may be more indicative of the fact that addressing women’s issues is largely uncontroversial (Bird, 2005: 364), though current debates regarding the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill do point to their ability to become so in certain settings. Furthermore, the independence-unionist debates points to a much more adversarial parliament (Simpkins, 2022).

It should be noted that despite holding the highest parliamentary share, members of the Scottish National Party (SNP) made the second smallest contribution overall, and SNP women made none. This finding is in line with notions of question time being “the principal and most public way to hold government to account” (Parker, 2018: 1).

Table 6: No. of written questions asked by each MSP relating to men, women or gender.

No. of questions.	Male questioners	Female questioners
1 – 2	13	8
3 – 4	1	4
5 – 6	5	2
7 – 8	2	1
9 - 10	1	0
11 +	0	2

If the contributions of the two most prolific female questioners (Jackie Baillie MSP and Monica Lennon MSP) are omitted, the contributions of female members to written questions is equal to 26.7% of the total. This finding strongly supports the notion that ‘critical actors’ – that is, “those who act individually or collectively to bring about women-friendly policy change” (Childs & Krook, 2009: 127) – significantly impact the substantive representation of a particular group (Chaney, 2011).

2. Questions.

Due to the lack of data pertaining specifically to men’s issue, the following section explores how women- and gender-related questions were framed by questioners.

2.1. ‘Women’.

A total of eight themes in relation to women’s issues were raised by questioners. The most common were women’s health and public safety, which accounted for 87.1% of the total. A mutual focus on women’s health suggests a shared understanding between male and female members of the “medical concerns specific to women” (Schreiber, 2008: 96-116). Questioners made privileges to pregnancy-related concerns, but both male and female members referenced a range of sub-issues from COVID-related complications to post-miscarriage care.

This was not consistent across all themes. 88.9% of questions regarding women’s public safety were asked by male MSPs, and presented women as most in need of protection. Female MSPs, on the other hand, were more likely to address policy areas that are not conventionally ‘feminine’; notably, all questions regarding ‘women in sport’ and ‘women in agriculture’ were lodged by women. In a similar vein, Jackie Baillie MSP, addressed both “barriers that women experience working in financial services...” and “...the under-capitalisation of women-owned businesses” (*The Scottish Parliament*, 24 February 2022: S6W-06798). As such, female MSPs were found to be more likely to move outside of a framework of stereotypically female-related issues. This supports findings in Bird’s paper, and wider

notions that “female MPs [or MSPs] speak about feminist issues more frequently, whereas men represent more neutral, women-specific topics instead” (Hohmann, 2020: 46).

Table 6: Written question relating to ‘women’ organised by theme.

Theme	No. of questions.
Domestic violence	2
Employment	4
Health:	86 (total)
⇒ Pregnancy	28
⇒ Breast cancer	19
⇒ Cervical cancer	8
⇒ Other	24
Income inequality	3
Prison service	2
Sport	1
Public safety	9
Women in agriculture	2

2.2. ‘Gender’.

The prevalence of gender-related questions supports existing evidence of a shift in political language, from notions of distinct and separate sexual differences to one that incorporates an understanding of men and women as ‘interconnected’ (Lovenduski, 1998). Whilst some referred more simply to ‘tackling gender inequalities’, a number of MSPs presented questions that furthered more substantive, and broader issues regarding the interdependencies of men and women. Jamie Greene MSP, for example, asked the Government if it would “consider introducing legislation in the current parliamentary session that aims to deter men who pay women for sex” (*The Scottish Parliament*, 9 November 2021: S6W-04156).

However, such an approach may be problematic. In the context of this research, a comparison of *Tables 6 and 8* shows that issues of ‘domestic violence’ were most commonly framed either as an equal risk to both men and women, or more generally to “people”. Richard Leonard MSP, for example, differentiated between “domestic abuse by (a) men against women and (b) women against men” (*Scottish Parliament*, 06 January 2022, S6W-05491). This is despite that, in Scotland, women are around four times more likely than men to be victims of domestic abuse (The Scottish Government, 2022). In this way, parliamentarians may inadvertently ignore how particular issues affect women differently in certain cases (Bird, 2005: 366).

Such concerns may be unfounded as wider parliamentary and governmental activities do suggest a focus on the specific needs of women in this context. For example, the Government’s ‘Equally Safe Strategy’ aims to “address the full spectrum of violence and abuse against women and girls” (The Scottish Government, 2018: 48). Additionally, the Women, Families and Justice (WFJ) cross-party group highlights a further willingness to incorporate the specific needs of women into parliamentary considerations.

Table 8: Written question relating to ‘gender’ organised by theme.

Theme	No. of questions.
Domestic violence	8
Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill	9
Gender equality strategies	13
Health	15
Law and order	1
Prison service	2
Public safety	6
Transgender rights	2

Conclusions.

This research, like Bird’s, lends some support to theories underlying advocations for the increased parliamentary representation of women. Female members continue to be more willing to raise both women- and gender-related concerns than men. Whilst a positive relationship was identified between male MSP’s willingness to address women’s concerns and the increased representation of women, male members remained less willing to move outside of a framework of stereotypically feminine issues. As noted, the findings in this paper remain provisional and require further substantiation. However, they provide a hopeful account for the gradual establishment of a ‘new Scottish politics’ for women, in which they are not only present, but their concerns and perspectives built into the parliamentary agenda.

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