

## A Feminist Perspective on... openDemocracy

### OPEN DOOR OR CLOSED SHOP?

**Open Democracy's stated mission is to ensure that marginalised views and voices are heard but when Patricia Daniel carried out a gender audit of the website, she came to a different conclusion**

Women make up 51% of the population, so in a just and equitable world we should find women involved at all levels in democratic processes at that rate. However, since ongoing barriers to women's participation are widely recognised, many countries and organisations have set a more pragmatic target of 30% of women, either as a formal quota or at least as an aspiration.

There are a very small number of countries who have exceeded this target at central government level - including Rwanda and Sweden (45%) and Cuba (36%). (UNDP Gender Empowerment Measure, 2005) The Wales Assembly is the first legislature in the world to have an equal number of men and women (2004 elections). But the majority, including the UK parliament, have a long way to go.

A decade after the UN Conference of Women for Peace, Equality and Development, **gender auditing** has become a popular exercise for international and national entities. The process aims to assess the extent to which gender equality has actually been mainstreamed within the organisation and its operations - as well as the wider impact, within its sphere of influence, on the promotion of women's empowerment.

In fact, the conclusions of all these studies sadly coincide: despite policies, strategic plans and programmes, nothing much has changed in the past ten years. ([www.siyanda.org](http://www.siyanda.org)) The main problem lies in the fact that new gender norms have to 'fight their way into institutional thinking' as Sylvia Walby puts it, in competition with traditional norms - because established goals may compete with the prioritisation of gender equality even if this goal is not directly opposed.

Since Open Democracy's mission states that the website is 'free to read, free to participate, free to the world' and that it aims to 'ensure that marginalized views and voices are heard', it seems to be reasonable to expect that the website will overtly promote gender equality and women's perspectives.

Of course, 'freedom' like 'democracy' means different things to different people. So in order to test out the initial hypothesis, I took the lower target of 30% participation as the benchmark for a quick gender audit.

### **Staff Composition: 50%**

Open Democracy scores highly on this aspect. Equal numbers of men and women are found at all levels of the organisation, in editorial, technical and administrative positions as well as non-executive directors. This is why an investigation of other aspects is both surprising and disappointing.

## **Contributors: 10-20%**

A quick glance at the home page on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> October highlights the fact that the vast majority of contributors of articles are male. One out of twelve new articles and two out of 21 recent articles were by women. (10%)

In the new list of regular columnists (accessed via the left side-bar) Becky Hogge and Maryam Maruf, who are members of the permanent staff team, are the only women named (10/%) although past articles by both Caroline Moorehead and Wendell Steavenson are archived (40%).

Delving back at random into some of the themes and debates shows that the rate of 10-20% is common. This applies, for example, to contributions on **HIV/AIDS**, which is widely recognised as a gender issue, and **Peer power**: reinventing accountability in technology and communication. Again in this latter theme, two of the women contributors are members of the staff team, which does indicate that OD is making a conscious effort to promote the contribution of its female staff.

The obvious exception to the 10-20% rule is the debate on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (which promotes greater participation of women in peace processes). Here, all the articles are by women and so are all the entries in the blog - which was an original and effective mechanism for encouraging contributions from women. (100%)

Other former contributors include Wangari Maathi and Mary Robinson. But there is a whole range of other high profile women who could be contributing to Open Democracy. Why aren't they doing so?

## **Content: 10%**

What do contributors actually write about?

To a very large extent, OD writers comment on, and analyse, the male world, not only from a male perspective but also, it seems, from an acceptance of the male status quo - those male-dominated structures that perpetuate inequality, poverty and war. Male leaders, summit meetings, international decision-making processes – all are argued against on their own terms, rather than being deconstructed as, well, boys' games.

Again, the obvious exception is Resolution 1325. However, one could argue that, by the very fact of highlighting this as a separate debate for women, the topic itself has been marginalised, along with its female contributors

One would perhaps expect that the issues of women's participation in peace and democratic processes should by now have been mainstreamed into other debates and themes by other writers – but they haven't been. The vast majority of articles make no reference to women whatsoever.

So, has Resolution 1325 really made a difference to OD? Apparently not.

Of course, those male themes dominate the world, but what's new? Very often the perfectly justified, well-written and intelligent criticism is not balanced by the proposal of any kind of alternative solution. As I've argued elsewhere on OD, men just tend to come up with more of the same. It's women who are better able to provide creative answers to problems we are all fully aware of.

### **Commissioning: 10%**

The above analysis of both contributors and content indicates very strongly that there are problems within the commissioning process, which also (I am sure not consciously) buys into the male-dominated paradigm: high profile male writers or academics and a male approach to the exploration of political ideas - rather than how the ideas of powerful men actually play out in the lives of real people (including women).

This suggests there is the need for an explicit policy to

- 1) seek out and encourage female experts to write for openDemocracy
- 2) commission more articles about that still invisible 51% of the population

and

- 3) make space to print deconstructions of what continues to be a man's world.

### **Comments: 10-20%**

How many women readers comment on the debates?

As regards the Security Council Resolution 1325, 100% of the comments are from women. This debate, through its blog, has provided a unique channel for women to exchange experiences - an invaluable process for self-recognition, mutual support and collective confidence building. OD could well consider extending this mechanism to other debates.

However, in order to promote and influence the general debate on gender equality more widely, what is needed are female readers' comments on what men write - and vice versa. The new 'direct comments' function may help to develop this kind of dialogue (especially if there are more contributions by women writers).

I certainly appreciated the email feedback from (quite high profile) male readers to my published essays. It would have been constructive to have those comments more publicly available.

Up until now, in other debates, the vast majority of online commentators are male. I don't have the space to properly deconstruct this, except to point out that many

women are less comfortable with the use of technology, as well as less confident in writing, than men.

### **Case Study**

An interesting example of the issues under consideration is the article this week by David Shariatmadari about the use of the veil by Muslim women in UK society. My intention is not to criticise this piece, which I found insightful. It stimulated an interesting discussion between several readers. Yet here we have (mainly) men commenting on a male writer's analysis of what another man (Jack Straw) has said. None of this was balanced by the views of the minority in question: Muslim women. I'm not hearing their marginalized voices on OD.

By the way, I have it on good authority that many professional women in the Arab world 'choose' to wear the burkha because this is the only way they can actually go out to work as doctors, lawyers and teachers. But they subvert this instrument of male oppression by working and walking naked under the burkha.

### **Conclusion**

From this rapid (but easily verifiable) analysis of the website, it seems that, as in so many liberal democracies, while there are no constitutional restrictions in OD which prohibit women's involvement, there are still fundamental cultural factors which inhibit them.

'The door is open, why don't more women come forward?' is a question I am often asked by men who, I believe, would genuinely welcome greater participation by women.

But when a woman walks down the road and sees an open door (or surfs the internet and sees a portal) she doesn't barge in, she doesn't normally enter unless she has an invitation. Even when invited, she may not wish to cross the threshold and join the party - if she sees that it's actually a men's club, an old (or ageing) boys' network and that other women who are there have not been able to change that ethos.

In summary, it's not likely that OD is going to have much influence on gender equality and therefore to succeed in its mission to help fix the world, if it doesn't put its own house in order.

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