Lewis, Erica ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0574-598X (2024) Sisters in suits: where is the women's policy machinery in devolution? In: 22nd International Studying Leadership Conference, 8-10 December 2024, University of Birmingham, UK. (Unpublished)

75 - Sisters in Suits – Where is the women's policy machinery in devolution?

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This paper will present early work from the 'Sisters in Suits' project.

This project explores the role and need for 'women's policy machinery' in devolution and devolved authorities. It will document what women's policy machinery has emerged in those already established devolved authorities and coalesce conversations with those in and around local government who might be interested in seeing a more explicit feminist policy analysis develop. It will draw on good practices identified internationally for local, regional and national governments in leadership/representation, policy-making and policy delivery.

According to the Women's Budget Group, women make up 75% of local government and school workers, and Disabled and Minoritised women have been hardest hit by spending and service cuts, both as workers and as service users.

"Sisters in Suits" refers to a classic feminist text written by Professor Marion Sawer (1990) documenting the path Australian feminists took into government bureaucracy to develop a unique model of women's policy machinery. Although this starts as a discussion about 'women's policy machinery' 35 years ago, feminism today is intersectional and sustainable. The phrase 'social sustainability' is used by folk working within the Sustainable Development Goals framework to highlight the goals around people, equality, rights and justice.

This research comes from a rolling conversation with councilors and other local government actors about the capacity of local government to generate policy, specifically to generate policy with a gender analysis. This project is an opportunity to surface what is happening in the sector with women's policy and women's policy machinery and to identify good practice that could be part of devolution campaigns and/or local government reorganisation.

There is a lively field of local government and regional studies research both domestically and internationally, but certainly, in the UK, gender is rarely on the agenda. Women council leaders were rarer than women MPs even before the 2024 election. Overwhelmingly, political decisions that affect women workers and service users are made by older white men. Feminist scholars have worked hard over the last five decades or so to build a deep gender analysis of leadership/representation, policy-making and policy delivery in national governments. This work is overdue in local government, especially if we are to give that tier of government significant additional responsibilities and resources.