MMP and women’s political representation in New Zealand

A report prepared for Women for MMP
by Ana Gilling and Sandra Grey
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Suffrage Day 2010
A woman's opinions are useless to her, she may suffer unjustly, she may be wronged, but she has no power to weightily petition against man's laws, no representatives to urge her views, her only method to produce release, redress, or change, is to ceaselessly agitate.

Louisa Lawson, speech to the inaugural meeting of the Dawn Club.
Published in Dawn, July 1889.
Representing Women

This report examines how the vision of the early suffragists for equality of political representation has been enhanced by the introduction of the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system in New Zealand.\textsuperscript{2} This review is timely. In the lead up to the 2011 electoral system referendum, all who are committed to equality of political representation need to understand and celebrate the key gains for women made under MMP.

Political Rights for Women

New Zealanders are proud of their history as the first nation in the world where women won the vote. In September 1894, The Press carried a report of the first anniversary of suffrage which was celebrated by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union:

\textit{Mrs J. Smalley . . . concluded by congratulating her own sex on their efforts to make this colony an example to the rest of the world, and a land in which women should enjoy full privileges.}

Since 1893 the achievement of the suffragists has become part of our national identity and is often presented as a demonstration of our commitment to equality and fairness.

Women, such as Kate Sheppard, fought for the vote because they believed women had a right to political equality. But added to this was a belief that women would bring a unique perspective to elections. Members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union sought the vote as part of their campaign to limit the devastating impact of alcohol on the lives of women and children.\textsuperscript{3}

So how has their vision of political equality and representation of “women’s views” shaped up?

The suffragists’ vision echoed around the world and resonates today. The Beijing Platform for Action states “women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be
seen as a necessary condition for women’s interests to be taken into account.”

This is an acknowledgement that women’s inclusion in political decision-making enables both descriptive and substantive representation.5

Descriptive representation is based on the belief that parliament should, to some extent, mirror the population from which it is drawn.6 Political science literature questions whether this improved descriptive representation is then followed by improved substantive representation. That is, once elected to parliament do women meet the expectation that they will “act for” women, bringing women-friendly legislation and ways of being into the political arena.

This report provides evidence that MMP has improved the descriptive representation of women by directly increasing the number of women MPs in the House. It then moves on to discuss whether the rise in numbers of women due to MMP and women’s presence in parliament has resulted in women MPs meeting the expectation that they will “act for” and “in the interests of” women.

**From Votes to Standing as Representatives**

While women gained the right to vote in New Zealand in 1893, it was not until 1919 that women won the right to stand for parliament. From that time, until the late 20th century, progress was relatively slow, with the numbers of women in parliament remaining in single digit figures for most of the century.

**Table 1: New Zealand Women’s Political Rights and Representation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1893 Votes for all women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919 Women’s right to stand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933 First woman elected to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947 First woman in Cabinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993 First woman party leader</td>
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<td>1997 First woman Prime Minsiter</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Lobbying and action by women both inside and outside mainstream political institutions impacted the number of women in the House from the late 1970s. Numbers rose from just under 9% in 1981 to just over 21% in 1993.
The importance of women’s election to parliament was noted by politicians in the 1980s:

*Sonja Davies (Pencarrow)* I am proud to be part of a Government whose commitment to women is proved at each election as more of us enter the house.7

*Ruth Richardson (Selwyn)* The National Party will bring able women to the House who will join forces with my colleagues the member for Waipa and the member for Ashburton in ensuring that a National Government continues to be an effective champion for women.8

The next major shift in respect of women’s representation came as the result of a mechanical change to the electoral system.

**MMP Means More Women**

100 years after suffragists won the right to vote, New Zealanders voted to change their first-past-the-post electoral system to MMP. The 1986 Royal Commission on the Electoral System had urged New Zealanders to look at adopting MMP to improve diversity within the House of Representatives.9 The change to MMP brought more than an improvement in the access of a range of political parties to parliament; it also improved the representation of groups who were highly under-represented in institutional politics.

One of the most visible changes following the introduction of MMP was the increase in numbers of women in parliament. In the final first-past-the-post election, 21% of parliamentary seats were won by women. In 1996 under MMP, women held 29% of the seats in parliament.
There has also been improved representation for Maori, Pacific Island people, and other under represented group. The number of Maori in Parliament has grown considerably, from six in 1993 to 16 in 1996 and 1999, and to 19 in 2008. There were no Pacific Island MPs in 1990. The 2008 election saw five Pacific Island MPs elected to parliament. And through Party lists there has been the election of Asian MPs – Pansy Wong, Ashraf Choudhary, Kanwaljit Singh Bakshi and Raymond Huo.

The changes in the New Zealand arena reflect global trends. International research shows that the type of electoral system used will impact upon levels of “minority” representation in parliament. In particular it is acknowledged that proportional representation (PR) facilitates the entry of women in parliaments in established democracies. For example, Darcy, Welch and Clark conclude that, “on average twice a proportion of women (20.2%) are currently elected to list PR systems as compared to single-member district systems, like first-past-the-post (10.2%).” A study of 23 democracies demonstrated that the most
important predictor of women’s levels of political representation is whether elections are run using PR or a single-member district system.¹²

The importance of the electoral system was not lost on women’s organisations. Women mounted campaigns for PR in a number of democracies, including New Zealand. Some of these campaigns began just a few years after universal suffrage was first granted.

The arguments for PR were not just about getting more women in parliament, though this was seen as crucial, but also about ensuring a new style of parliament was created. In 1898 Catherine Helen Spence campaigned for PR and appealed to “the new voters – the women of South Australia and of New Zealand, to change neck-and-neck competition for all or nothing, into peaceful co-operation.”¹³ These views about the importance of co-operation in parliament can still be found in attitudes of women today. The New Zealand Election Study results from 2005 show that when asked “which type of government do you prefer”, well over 50% of women surveyed said “coalition government” (a feature of MMP), while around 45% of men supported this type of government.¹⁴

The reason proportional representation leads to increased numbers of women MPs is due to at least two factors. First, there is an incentive for political parties to present a balanced list for an election.¹⁵ Second, minor parties are more likely to win places in parliament in proportional representation systems. This has benefits for the representation of women due to three factors:

- there are generally more women candidates in smaller parties;
- women are more likely to hold high level positions within such parties; and,
- larger parties see smaller parties putting forward women and attracting votes as a result, and they follow suit.¹⁶

While a shift to MMP increased the number of female politicians in the New Zealand Parliament, as is the case for all older democracies, political parties are still the main barrier to women’s political representation.¹⁷ It is political parties that are responsible for what has been termed the “gender gerrymander,” the
The fact that women are far less likely than men to be pre-selected for the safe seats controlled by such parties.18

The control by political parties over who gets into parliament can be seen by looking at whether women are given safe constituency seats and in their placement on party lists. For example, in 1999 the Labour Party constitution was changed to include a principle of gender balance for all selection procedures, including the party list, while the Green Party’s alternation of men and women candidates in their party list ensured a high number of women candidates for the 1999 general election. While the other major political parties did not have specific mechanisms for selecting a certain number of women candidates, in practice it may well be that they followed similar, informal methods for ensuring the representativeness of their party lists.19 The results of such actions are then visible in the gender balance within party lists. After the 1999 election, about a third of Labour MPs and less than a quarter of National’s MPs were women. On the party lists women were allocated 40% of the top 20 Labour positions and 30% of the top 20 National positions were women.

Table 2: New Zealand House of Representatives 1972 – 1999
Party Affiliations of Candidates and MPs (Selected Parties)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>Labour Number of Women Candidates</th>
<th>Labour Women MPs (% of Labour's Parliamentary Caucus)</th>
<th>National Number of Women Candidates</th>
<th>National Women MPs (% of National's Parliamentary Caucus)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4 (7.3)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 (6.2)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 (3.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3 (7.5)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6 (14)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10 (17.9)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2 (5.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11 (19.3)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3 (7.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8 (27.6)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14 (31.1)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13 (35.1)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>17 (34.0)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9 (23.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: McLeay (1993), Catt (1997), and New Zealand Electoral Commission
Consider the placement of women in the top ten of selected political party lists for the 2005 and 2008 elections.

Table 3: The Number of Women in the Top Ten Positions on New Zealand Political Party Lists in 2005 and 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maori Party</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand First</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressives</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Future</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A spin-off from the increased numbers of women in parliament has been the rise in the number of women in Cabinet and leadership roles in New Zealand. The ability of women to make a difference in parliaments is not merely a question of numbers but also of power and of what leadership positions women hold. While the rise in women in Cabinet did not occur at the first MMP election in 1996, since 1999 women have secured at least six of the seats in the political executive. However, 11 years later, this number hasn't increased – only 6 of the 20 strong Cabinet in 2010 are women.
**Figure 2: Women in the New Zealand Cabinet 1972 to 2008**

**MMP Means Making a Difference**

*Women can only have an influence when they have the numbers. When you have the influence is when you have the votes.* Dianne Yates, MP, 1999.  

With MMP New Zealand has taken another step towards political equality for women, but these gains then raise the question of whether the election of women will “make a difference” in the outcomes of political debate. A belief that women will make a difference once in parliament is based on the idea that the messenger as well as the message is important in political spaces. As was noted earlier, women politicians are seen to not only be “standing as” women but also “acting for” or “in the interests of” women once elected. It is argued that this will result in policy and legislative outcomes of benefit to their constituency – women.

The assertion that women politicians will “act for” women as a group once elected is not based on assertions of an essential link between sex and representation. It is about the way women experience the world and how this
affects their actions if they are elected as MPs. As Melissa Williams puts it: “The representative who is capable of acting as an advocate for women’s interest must have some understanding of the ways in which the lives of her constituents are shaped by the privilege of men, and the most effective starting-point for that knowledge is the fact of her own experience of exclusion and subordination.” Numerous studies internationally have provided evidence that on issues particularly close to women (such as abortion, childcare, and equality debates), female MPs will hold substantially different views than their male colleagues.

Why might women’s views be better considered in MMP parliaments and coalition governments, than when New Zealand had first-past-the-post and majority governments? First, under MMP there will be more women in parliament, government, and Cabinet, advancing the possibility that women’s voices will be heard in institutional political spaces. Secondly, MMP means voters have both constituent MPs to represent them in terms of geographical location and list MPs who are able to move beyond geographic identity. UK academic Thomas Lundberg states that under MMP list MPs can choose to represent “communities of interest”.

In New Zealand, Green party list MP Rod Donald focuses not only upon geographical areas (allocated by the party), but also upon what he calls ‘constituencies of interest’, which include employment, training, trade, tourism and constitutional reform. Therefore, while parties may assign geographical constituencies held by constituency representatives from other parties to their list representatives, it appears that interest groups, which represent the constituencies of interest that Donald refers to, might be easier for list representatives to deal with.

While it is possible to argue having women in parliament leads to policies and laws that are better for women, it is much more difficult to show conclusive evidence of this process in action. Many things contribute to political decisions – political parties, interest groups, the public sector, international conventions, political institutions, and much more – so isolating out the role of female MPs is difficult. As the relationship is complex results will be “probabilistic”.

11
Women MPs Representing Women’s Interests in New Zealand

In this paper we examine the impact of women in parliament using three sets of data:

- how female MPs talk about MMP and the representation of women;
- the introduction of women-friendly legislation to the House of Representatives; and,
- levels of spending on special women’s health programmes.

These forms of data are used internationally. Scholars assess the substantive representation of women by looking at the introduction of bills or interpellations on selected issues such as violence against women, child care, pay equity, parental leave, or equality laws; issues framing over time; contacts with women’s organisations, legislative success, and so on.29

We cannot say conclusively that changes witnessed in politics in New Zealand would not have ever happened without the rise in the number of women MPs, but added together the evidence might give us some indication if the theory that female MPs “act for” and “in the interests of” women once in parliament holds.

The first evidence supporting the assertion that female MPs will act in the interests of women comes from the statements of politicians themselves. An examination of New Zealand parliamentary debates shows that female politicians consider MMP important in providing better representation for women.30 For example, in debates on parental tax credits National MP Christine Fletcher noted:

*I think the fact that we are debating this is a measure of the success of MMP. A lot of people would criticise it, but there is a greater number of women in Parliament, and that allows us—as we approach the new millennium—to finally begin to debate some of the issues, which I see as the hard issues.*31
And in the 2001 Paid Parental Leave Act debates Alliance MP Liz Gordon stated:

*I was going to start by celebrating MMP and saying how great it was that MMP had brought more women into the House, and that in particular in this instance it has brought in the Hon. Laila Harre, who is herself the mother of young children.*

Both Fletcher and Gordon are asserting that female politicians are acting in the interests of women. An examination of parliamentary debates from 1989 to 2002 inclusive shows that women were more likely than men to mention their gender when debating in parliament. In 114 speeches made by women politicians on the topics of employment equity and state support for new parents, female MPs overtly spoke of their own gender in 35 of those speeches. Only four of the 91 speeches made by male MPs contained claims that they were “representing men” or “speaking as a man”. For example in 2001 Anne Tolley (National) said:

*I have to say that, as a woman and a mother, I was delighted and grateful to see that recognition so widely spread amongst a wide range of the community.*

The importance of gender is noted by former New Zealand First MP Deborah Morris in a 1999 interview:

*I have witnessed some very good, strong advocacy coming from some women in the New Zealand parliament . . . because they are women they are able to do much more justice to some of these issues.*

Not only do women MPs discuss their own gender more than their male colleagues, they are also more likely to speak on issues of concern to women. An earlier study by Grey showed that women MPs from both National and Labour were equally likely to talk about “women’s issues” – childcare and parental leave – during parliamentary debates between 1984 and 1999, and that women MPs were more likely than their male colleagues to debate these issues. Similarly, international studies show that many, although not all, women parliamentarians do express the view that they have a special role to
play in safeguarding the interests of women, a view not necessarily shared by their male colleagues.  

There may well be problems if women politicians are seen to represent only “women’s interests” or Maori politicians are seen to represent only “Maori interests”. While politicians may see themselves as representing a particular sector of society, they must also take into account the views and evidence presented by other representatives and other sectors of society.

Again the move to MMP and the subsequent increase in the number of women in parliament helps to partially address any essentialism in claims-making, as there are more women in the House making it possible for more diverse groups of women to be represented. For example, National MP Pansy Wong is best known for her advocacy on behalf of Asian minorities. Labour MP Winnie Laban (New Zealand’s first Pacific Island woman in parliament) has been seen as a strong advocate for Pacific Island communities and Pacific women. The increased diversity due to rising numbers of female MPs means the women in the House can utilise hyphenated categories (such as working-parents, Maori-women) when calling for the state to recognise the rights of groups in society.

**Jenny Shipley** (National) - It is excluding a whole group of people, many of whom are women who deserve to be heard in this Chamber. Many of the women who are self-employed today are not rich, middle-class women. Many of them are Maori women. When I was Minister of Women’s Affairs in the early 1990s, we set up a number of programmes that were able to promote Maori women into business.

**Marie Hasler** (National) - We are concerned that the bill does not apply to self-employed women, women who work part time, and women who may change their jobs more frequently than is provided for in the bill.

Women politicians may see themselves as acting in the interests of women in the New Zealand parliament, but does this translate into women-friendly decision-making and policy outcomes? As noted earlier, international studies evaluate the influence of women by looking at “women-friendly” legislation passed by governments.
Women-friendly Legislation and MMP in New Zealand

A number of recent “women-friendly” pieces of legislation are attributable to MMP coalition governments. It was a Labour-Alliance coalition that put in place paid parental leave in 2002, extended the provision of childcare funding to parents in the labour force and those who stay-at-home. It is unlikely that the paid parental leave legislation would have made it onto the books as quickly as it did, if it had not been for the Alliance and Green parties’ support of the Labour party.

Another major commitment – the establishment of the position of an Equal Employment Commissioner – was put through during the Labour-Alliance coalition days. In 2005 the Green’s Sue Kedgley brought into the House flexible working hours legislation, another measure aimed at helping women balance work and family commitments.

There has also been a range of Bills around the well-being of children. Since MMP was introduced there has been an Alliance sponsored bill on the establishment of the Office of Commissioner for Children and Green MP Sue Bradford successfully moved to Repeal Section 59 of the Crimes Act which allowed parents to use the excuse of justifiable force if they beat their children. While media representations presented this as a deeply unpopular Bill, many women’s organisations and children-centred NGOs were committed to Sue Bradford’s Bill.41

The early campaigners for women’s votes would be proud to see several women continuing the fight over alcohol, albeit to do with moderating or modifying drinking habits rather than outlawing alcohol. Labour List MP Diane Yates introduced the Sale of Liquor Health Warning amendment bill in 2000; and in 2006 Green MP Metiria Turei was responsible for the Liquor Advertising (Television and Radio) Bill coming into parliament.

A review of bills indicates that New Zealand women politicians have been responsible for introducing into parliament women-friendly legislation. It is only under MMP that many of these women secured the seats in the House of Representatives that allowed them to perform this role. This fits with international studies which show that in all corners of the world female
politicians, sometimes together with male colleagues, have made a difference on women’s issues.42

**Increased Spending on Women-related Programmes**

As was noted earlier, another international measure of the influence of female politicians is to examine levels of spending on “women’s health” and other women related programmes. In New Zealand this is very difficult to assess as the figures for funding of health care are not gender disaggregated. As a proxy for this, we have looked at special programmes or “women’s health” initiatives to get an indication of whether spending has changed as the number of women in Parliament and government has increased.

In the last six years of the first-past-the-post electoral system (1990 to 1995), when representation of women was 16% and 21% respectively, there were two major spending programmes in women’s health totaling $36.4 million. The funds went to a cervical cancer programme and a programme aimed at improving the overall health status of women.

In the next six year period, 1996 to 2001, women’s parliamentary presence was around 30% thanks to MMP. At this time the government committed $53.9 million to four special women’s health programmes. The commitments started with National’s Jenny Shipley announcing a “Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy”, a $6.3 million package. There was also “Breastscreen Aotearoa” which began in 1998; and additional funding for maternity services and the cervical cancer programme.

While there is less funding on additional women’s health programmes in the next period, 2002 to 2007, the number of special programmes increased to five. The programmes on which the government spent $21.8 million included: the second In Vitro Fertilisation cycle; further funding for embryo screening in the IVF process; and funding for a cervical cancer awareness campaign.

The last three years on which we have focused, 2008 to 2010, have seen the largest ever commitment to special women’s health programmes with $194.5 million committed to four programmes. The largest component of this was
$164.2 million over five years for a human papilloma virus immunisation programme (to immunise against cervical cancer). There was also Herceptin funding fought for by the “Herceptin Heroines”; the establishment of a Maternal Fetal Medicine Network; and finally an extra $8 million over four years for additional breast reconstruction surgery. During this time frame women’s political presence in parliament was just over 30%.

New Zealand health spending does, in part, fit predicted expectations that higher numbers of women in the House will result in the commitment of state funding to women’s programmes, though the relationship is not a simple causal one. As noted earlier it is a probabilistic relationship. However, when added to the other data – women MPs claiming to speak and act for women; and the changes in legislation that have been due to members bills introduced by women brought into parliament on party lists – we can detect a trend in women’s issues receiving parliamentary attention at a time when MMP has led to more women in the House and a more consensus style of government.

**Conclusion**

This summary of a more extensive research project illustrates the positive impact of MMP on women’s representation in terms of increasing the number of women in parliament (and as a result, in government and Cabinet). It also points to a range of ways in which it is likely increased numbers of female MPs brought in because of MMP has led to politicians acting “in the interests of women”.

The electoral referendum in 2011 gambles with the gains we have made in women’s political representation. If New Zealand moves back to first-past-the-post or to another majority-plurality system, like supplementary member, we will almost certainly see a drop in the number of women in parliament. We would be moving away from the vision of Kate Sheppard and those women who fought convention and braved criticism to advance the position of women in the 19th century.
We must continue the fight for women’s political equality begun over a century ago and ask New Zealanders to ensure they retain an electoral system that ensures democracy for women.

Endnotes

1 Ana Gilling is a PhD candidate at Queens University, Belfast researching New Zealand women in politics and concepts of political power. Dr Sandra Grey works at Victoria University of Wellington, has a PhD in Political Science from the Australian National University and is the Spokesperson for the Campaign for MMP.

2 This report is part of ongoing research project by Ana Gilling and Sandra Grey.


23 Helena Catt (2003) “How can women MPs make a difference? Reconsidering group representation and the responsible party model” Occasional Paper No. 6, Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics, Queen’s University Belfast.


40 Information is drawn from Parliamentary Bulletins, accessed 20 August 2010.

41 Those who supported the Repeal of Section 59 included Plunket, Barnardos, Save the Children, Unicef, Women’s Refuge. For more see http://yesvote.org.nz/.