





NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Gender and Politics Research as a Tool for Societal Change: Lessons from the United Kingdom

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(Received 07 June 2024; accepted 10 June 2024)

How can gender research be used as a tool to advance gender equality? In recent decades, gender and politics scholarship has uncovered how women’s perspectives and voices are marginalized and developed policy recommendations to overcome persistent gender inequalities. However, gender and politics scholars often pay less attention to whether and how their research can be used effectively as a tool for societal change. Most social science research offers an opportunity to inform policymakers. What perhaps sets gender research apart is that scholars can partner with strong advocacy groups with resources, such as experience, connections, and know-how to foster change.

Gender attitudes are so firmly entrenched in all of us that the bar for change is frequently too high to be brought about by researchers alone. Policy reforms often require convincing men-dominated legislatures, governments, and public bodies that underrepresent women’s perspectives and experiences. Too often, policymakers see the gender agenda as “utopian,” requiring reforms of entire societies, economies, or political systems. Women’s advocacy groups are well-positioned to persuade policymakers to center women’s perspectives and experiences, but they need robust research to support their demands. While advocates often conduct research “in-house,” they are often portrayed and perceived as by-definition biased. Scholars’ research can thus provide credible and independent factual grounds for advocates’ demands.

Despite the large benefits of scholarly research for advocates, bridging the gap between academic research and advocacy is marked with challenges. Unless scholars are aware of these issues and attempt to overcome them, the potential for advancing women’s rights and gender equality with gender research may be severely limited. In this essay, we bring together academics and practitioners in the UK to raise scholars’ awareness of the challenges and benefits of bridging the research-advocacy gap.

Drawing on our own experiences as scholars, researchers, and advocates, we outline key challenges and map pathways to overcome them. In our view, academic research is too often limited in scope, highly impenetrable to the public, and rarely prioritizes impact. We see partnerships or consultations with advocates as being at the heart of any fruitful impact strategy to master such challenges and reap the benefits of research for advancing gender equality. While we acknowledge that not all gender research can or should be of use to practitioners, we assert that gender scholars must be aware of the advantages of bridging the research-advocacy gap. We believe that engaging with advocates can best ensure that the potential of gender and politics scholarship as a tool for societal change is not lost.

Mapping Challenges: The Gap between Academic Research and Advocacy

Our experiences have revealed three key characteristics of academic research that pose challenges to bridging the research-advocacy gap: limited scope, high impenetrability, and low prioritization. Research on gender and politics is no exception.

Limited Scope

Academic research often seeks to discover novel theoretical explanations and favors internally valid research designs. In doing so, its contributions are often too narrow in scope to inform practice. If women's advocacy groups are to lobby policymakers successfully, they need research to "back up" their proposals. Changing the status quo is often faced with substantial opposition, not the least because interventions may be costly to implement. Without evidence, demands for reforms are easy to dismiss.

However, much empirical academic research may not be easily used by advocates to justify costly interventions. Indeed, critics often dismiss research that uses historical data or focuses on very specific cases as irrelevant to domestic policy interventions. One such example is research on electoral systems. While gender and politics research, including our own, demonstrates that proportional electoral systems facilitate the inclusion of women as candidates and voters, most of this is from contexts that look considerably different from today's UK. If women's advocacy groups are to endorse an electoral reform, it is less than straightforward to rely on research that primarily identifies the effects of historical reforms in other countries, or that involves electoral formulas not currently considered in the British context.

High Impenetrability

Academic research in the social sciences typically uses unnecessarily inaccessible language and terminology. Most research is, therefore, virtually impenetrable for anyone outside academia, including practitioners. While advocates possess deep knowledge of gender relations, they have limited time and

resources to understand unwieldy research articles or even navigate entire scholarly debates.

One such example is research on women politicians' electability and effects on policy. With over 500 relevant papers published on the topic, using a variety of different methodologies, it can be quite time-consuming to easily identify the key message, let alone adjudicate between contradicting findings. Research is unlikely to inform practice unless its implications are clearly summarized and communicated to practitioners in plain language. It must be digested into a few clear and quickly accessible points of scholarly consensus.

Low Prioritization

Academic research typically prioritizes publication in prestigious peer-reviewed journals over relevance to practitioners and its potential to implement a real-world change. While promotion criteria at many universities consider the broader impact of scholarly work, demonstrable impact is rarely binding for career progression. This oversight is particularly striking in the British context, where there are incentives for universities to submit strong impact case studies in the Research Excellence Framework evaluations of university departments. Obviously, this flexibility is needed to incentivize valuable research that is, for example, purely theoretical. It can, nevertheless, disincentivize scholars from forming impact strategies even when there is a substantial potential for impact. With lesser incentives comes lesser experience and even lesser "know-how" of pathways to impact.

As a consequence, scholars are often unwilling to prioritize time and financial resources to impact activities. Publishing research articles is required for career advancement; publishing summaries and reports that digest this research for policymakers and the public is not. The distance between researchers and policymakers is so wide that a "third party" may be required to bridge it. One such example is the Global Institute for Women's Leadership (GIWL) at King's College London, which houses impressive experience, know-how, and connections to facilitate scholarly impact. The impressive body of GIWL shows that it takes so much more than publishing for research to inform practice.

Overcoming Challenges: Successful Pathways to Impact

Many scholars communicate their research findings to the public. Dissemination platforms—such as the Monkey Cage (now Good Authority), The Conversation, and LSE blogs—are easy to access and typically require only a small fraction of scholars' time. However, they often give the impression that impact work can be quick and easy and can be done ex-post at the end of the research process. In our experience, ex-post dissemination does not necessarily bridge the research-advocacy gap.

Whilst there is certainly space for scholars to increase the visibility of research in the public domain, such approaches can miss the full impact potential. Ex-post dissemination may provide an accessible summary of research

findings. Still, for policymakers, the scope of the research may be too limited, clear recommendations may be missing or framed poorly, or the ideological position of proposals may be unclear. Importantly, despite being in the public domain, neither policymakers nor advocates may be aware of it.

In our view, bridging the advocacy-research gap requires that advocates are included in the research process from the get-go. In the UK, such partnerships are incentivized by the structure of research funding. A key public funding body, the UK Research and Innovation, as well as the research assessment of universities, the Research Excellence Framework, use impact as one of its assessment criteria. There is a strong consensus that whenever tax-payers' money is used to fund research, this research must be useful to stakeholders, generating further societal gains.

Activists and practitioners can influence the scope and focus of research, facilitating its usability. They can also help determine how the research is communicated to policymakers to maximize the chances of a correct reception. Crucially, they can provide connections to policymakers, while their reputation can signal to policymakers what is an important agenda and even who is going to "like it."

Collaboration with Advocates

Drawing on our own experiences, we identify a few ways collaboration and ad-hoc consultations with advocates can facilitate scholarly impact. The most straightforward pathway to impact is for scholars to develop research projects in joint partnerships with advocates. These partnerships can ensure that research is in line with the needs of activists and practitioners, opening pathways to policy change. Scholars can collaborate with advocates to develop entire research agendas and determine what and how will be communicated to whom.

One such example is our joint work as scholars at the GIWL at King's College London with advocates from the Fawcett Society, a leading membership charity campaigning for women's rights and gender equality. Working on a co-authored report, *Open House: Where Next for Gender Equality in Parliament*, our collaboration shows that the UK still fails to act on gender equality in parliament. The report calls for three key reforms, including the establishment of a committee with the necessary legitimacy and resources to push forward a gender-sensitive parliament agenda. As a convener of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women in Parliament, colleagues at the Fawcett Society were crucial in facilitating interviews with several departments and representatives, as well as in co-hosting a dissemination event attended by prominent members of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

Collaborations with practitioners can also be indirect. Practitioners can help to determine the scope of the research or provide funding to ensure that the research fills the most acute needs of advocates. For instance, the impact of the report, *Women Political Leaders: the Impact of Gender on Democracy*, compiled by Minna Cowper-Coles of GIWL, was facilitated through consultations with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), a non-departmental public body dedicated to strengthening democracy around the world. WFD not only

shaped the scope of the report but also provided funds to compile it, as well as useful connections necessary to conduct the research. The report reviews over 500 research papers on the impact of women politicians on policies and democracy, digesting lengthy academic debates into accessible summaries that can be easily used by policymakers. The report influenced UK policies, being cited several times in the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, outlining how the government will integrate a gender perspective into building security and stability overseas.

While partnerships can ensure the relevance of research for advocates, not all research agendas are of immediate interest to practitioners. For example, the appetite for gender quotas—the single most relevant electoral reform for women of recent decades—continues to be low in the UK. Even though women's advocacy groups endorse the idea, active campaigning is not the most productive use of their time and funds. Scholars studying gender quotas may, therefore, find it difficult to form active partnerships with advocates.

Engaging Advocates at Any Point in the Research Process

At the same time, while full partnerships are useful, they are not always necessary. Our own experiences indicate that ad hoc consultations with advocates throughout the research process can also facilitate a pathway to impact. Consulting with advocates about the research question, empirical evidence, and dissemination provides an opportunity to enhance potential impact without tailoring an entire research agenda to the immediate needs of advocates. This requires that scholars continue asking whether aspects of their research could be relevant for activists and practitioners and, if so, how this relevance could be enhanced at the beginning, during, and end of the research process. For instance, scholars may ask: How can our research question be extended or framed to strengthen relevance for practitioners? Can part of our research be of significance to practitioners, such as a particular finding or a literature review? Can advocates help dissemination of our findings? Answering such questions, however, is harder to do without interactions with advocates at any point in the research process.

One such example is the work by the GIWL on a report entitled *Bridging the Gap: An Analysis of Gender Pay Gap Reporting in Six Countries*. Interviewing 86 stakeholders in six countries, including the Fawcett Society, this research provides a blueprint for what is important for gender pay gap reporting to be effective. These best practice recommendations for gender pay gap reporting have been used to propose changes in at least four countries and have changed the law in one. In Australia, company-level gender pay gaps are now made transparent, and companies are required to include action plans for reducing their gender pay gaps. Apart from an effective communication of recommendations supported by academic studies, the key to the report's success was consultations with advocates throughout the research process. The stakeholder interviews fed directly into the research and opened pathways to effective dissemination to policymakers.

Consultations with advocates can also spur follow-up research projects tailored to maximize impact. For instance, our research on proportional

representation electoral systems and women's political participation has informed academic debates. Yet it has also fallen short in influencing electoral reform in the UK. If women's advocacy groups are to endorse an electoral reform, they need not only a comprehensive summary of extant research but also clear evidence of its need in the current political context of the country. Initial consultations with advocates were crucial in informing our follow-up work to maximize the impact potential of our published research. This includes current joint work on a GIWL report that summarizes existing research with a clear set of policy recommendations, as well as conducting follow-up research that applies our findings to the British context.

Final Words

Gender and politics research can shape the world we live in. However, doing so requires scholars to devote additional time to impact activities. This includes digesting findings into an accessible set of recommendations and engaging with advocates throughout the entire research process. Our combined experiences as researchers and advocates show that gender research can persuade policy-makers to bring about meaningful, even if incremental, improvements. Gender equality worldwide is possible. However, scholars and advocates must come together to effectively communicate their demands to policymakers. Advocates have the connections, know-how, and reputation. Scholars have the credibility of unbiased research findings. Only when both strengths are combined can policy-makers really start to listen.

Acknowledgements. This essay is co-authored by five leading practitioners and scholars in the UK. It draws on insights generated during an online impact event hosted by King's College London and Oslo New University College on November 8, 2023. Norwegian Research Council grant 316340.

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Cite this article: Campbell, Rosie, Minna Cowper-Coles, Alesha De-Freitas, Mona Morgan-Collins, and Øyvind Skorge. 2024. "Gender and Politics Research as a Tool for Societal Change: Lessons from the United Kingdom." *Politics & Gender* 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X24000266>