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# Levelling Up gender inequality in the UK

## Leadership and development

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# Levelling Up gender inequality in the UK: Leadership and development

## Key takeaways

1. The UK continues to produce ‘masculine coded’ ways of seeing and understanding development and leadership. Notions of competition, growth, ‘world-leading’ or ‘world-beating development’ and ‘strong-man leadership’ limit thinking and policy making.
2. The UK Government’s current Levelling Up agenda neglects deep-rooted gender inequality, and cannot therefore lead to rebalancing long-term geographic inequality: we need people and place-based approaches.
3. Gender is constructed differently across systems of power and geography, and policy makers, academics and practitioners need to pay attention to such inequalities, before offering solutions that often reproduce these.
4. Gender equality is not just about representation, nor should it be sidelined or reduced to ‘body count’ or ‘tick-box’ approaches, but more deeply embedded in agenda-setting and practices.
5. The role of women in development and leadership has been more significant than *historic* accounts have allowed, and this has denied the value of other forms of leadership that exist in places.

## 1. Introduction

Despite gender equality being a UN Sustainable Development Goal ([Goal 5](#)), women continue to be denied equal opportunity to shape and encounter urban and regional life, experiencing life through various barriers (physical, social, economic and symbolic) which are often invisible to many people. Just as understandings of ‘gender’ vary across times and places, so too do various gender inequalities (which are often complex and not about gender alone, but intersect with sexuality, race, ethnicity and class).

Past and present policy approaches aimed at addressing inequality within and between regions continue to be blinkered to gender inequality. ‘Development’ and place ‘leadership’ are spheres that continue to be dominated by men, as well as seen and analysed through a ‘masculine gaze’.<sup>1</sup>

We see this in notions of development being ‘won’ through selected *competitions* (where local authorities compete, for example, to renew high streets through the [Future High Streets Fund](#) or clean up chewing gum via the [Chewing Gum Task Force](#)). Development is also understood through *growth-orientated* lenses, positioned as *world-leading*, *world-beating*, delivered by *strong-man/charismatic leaders*. The current UK Government’s policy approach to ‘level up’ longstanding geographical inequality is a case in point, but as this policy briefing outlines, more meaningful people and place-based policy approaches are urgently needed.

This policy briefing sheds light on the gendered dimensions of regional development and leadership in the UK. It draws on a [recent paper](#) to suggest that the UK’s levelling up agenda needs to better understand and engage with the people nature of place-based inequality

<sup>1</sup> There is an inherent problem in the way particular qualities are socialised into gender stereotypes of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, which must be recognised at the same time as acknowledging this happens; a variety of traits and perspectives should be valued without being reduced to gender.

(the *people* as well as places ‘left behind’). Not doing so will only maintain the deeply embedded inequalities in regional development and life.

## 2. Level with us, ‘Levelling Up’ is not for everyone

The UK government’s levelling-up agenda is ‘a moral, social and economic programme for the whole government’ (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). This is underpinned by the 2022 [Levelling Up White Paper](#), which draws on accounts of historic development of cities and regions, and the drivers and geography of economic growth, in order to explain the inequality within and between places, alongside previous policy responses.

This selection and narration of development over time makes a familiar omission we see in the use of *history*: women. Often entirely absent from historic accounts of regional life, or reduced to passive bystanders, the ‘absent presence’ of invisible people (Crado Perez, 2019) shapes and limits how we see present inequalities and think about future alternatives. In its 297 pages, the Levelling Up White Paper does not mention gender inequality in the UK once. Nor does it feature explicitly in the ‘capitals’ or twelve ‘missions’, the metrics by which progress will be monitored as set out in the [technical annex](#).

The White Paper does not acknowledge the well-documented range of gendered inequalities such as ongoing gender pay gaps, more precarious forms of employment ([Women’s Budget Group, 2023](#)), and unequal amounts of unpaid domestic and care-based labour, many of which were exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead, it focuses on selected ideas of development *growth* and *competition*. Furthermore, the White Paper calls for ‘*strong*’ and ‘*ambitious*’

place leadership, through devolution, to deliver levelling-up:

*‘The UK Government will proactively identify and engage with 20 places in England that demonstrate **strong local leadership and ambition.**’* (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022, p.208).

Firstly, such calls for ‘strength’ and ‘ambition’ are masculine-coded. They seek to target very particular ways of leading which embody traits such as overconfidence, competitiveness, aggression, risk-taking and charisma, which have come to dominate an increasingly narrow view of place leaders and authoritative power. Secondly, this call does not recognise the current inequality in place leadership: only one of England’s ten Metro Mayors is a woman, and according to a report by [IPPR](#) in 2017 just 15% of local authority leaders in England were women.

There are now a series of emerging policies and programmes aligned to this agenda (as well as the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill currently going through parliament), which appear to bolster the dominant ‘masculine-coded’ grip on understandings of development and leadership. For example, the Levelling Up Fund is a competitive funding scheme which has been described in a recent [Institute for Government report](#) (2023) as ineffective; ‘neither large enough nor targeted enough to make a dent in regional inequalities’, not to mention underlying peopled inequalities. Research by the [Guardian](#) suggests that this fund has been unequally allocated, with Tory seats being awarded significantly more money per person than other equivalently deprived areas, amounting to ‘pre-election bribes’ from central government (Goodier et al, 2023).

Devolution is positioning leaders and decision makers as conduits for economic

growth in limited ways. We further see this in a [consultation](#) to revise the National Planning Policy Framework to ensure that policies ‘empower local leaders across the country to attract investment, drive economic growth and grow the private sector’. At one point the consultation sets out a desire to ‘understand if national planning policy should do more to enable local authorities to consider the safety of women and girls, or other vulnerable groups, when setting policies or making decisions’. The answer is of course yes, but safety and vulnerability are symptoms of deep rooted inequalities, which are not being addressed.

This male dominated and narrow understanding of sub-national development leadership matters; it impacts policy making and implementation. A lack of diversity in positions of power will mean we continue to overlook a range of inequalities. This is particularly difficult to uproot when women - especially women of colour - are excluded from positions of power across politics, business and public life through structural barriers, discrimination and harassment ([Fawcett Society, 2020](#)).

Whilst more diverse representation is an important step in place leadership, that alone will not necessarily lead to more equality. It is also a matter of changes in wider cultures and practices. For example, a report on [Women in Planning](#) by the Royal Town Planning Institute (2020) saw an overwhelming majority of respondents report that workplaces are still dominated by masculine culture and norms, leaving women planners feeling excluded and finding it necessary to adopt particular ‘masculine’ traits.

The stream of corporate ‘self-help’ literature that encourages women to ‘lean in’ to particular gendered ways of working and leading (how to dress, speak, behave) is very much part of this problem

(Mahdawi, 2021). But learning might be taken from a small critical body of work which calls this masculinist and racialised grip on leadership out, and challenges current ways of working and enactments of power. For example, Helena Liu (2021: 9) seeks to disrupt the ‘business’ of leadership and its “beautiful illusion created by theorists and practitioners to capture our desires and sell development programmes”.

### 3. Representation and Beyond

Shifting cultures, practices and representation is not a quick fix. It will take time and will face resistance, particularly since so much inequality continues to be unseen or denied. Attempts at developing policies through a gender equality perspective in ‘gender mainstreaming’ (an EU policy objective since 1997) in the UK have been hindered by systematic inadequacies ([RTPI, 2021](#)). We also know that policymakers can suffer from ‘gender-fatigue’ (Perrons, 2011), considering gender peripherally, and retrospectively, not as a fundamental part of a range of interlocking inequalities in society. It is not easy to see and counter the structures of power that have shaped how we think, and in turn shape policy. But we need to find new ways of identifying this inequality and thinking about various solutions.

Gender is constructed differently across systems of power and geography and we need to pay close attention to the representation of place leaders and policy makers, but also the social-relations and power involved in decision-making. This must move us past ‘body count’ or ‘tick box’ approaches, which see gender sidelined to tokenistic forms of inclusion, which do not necessarily offer the range of perspectives and knowledge required to meaningfully share decision making, responsibility and power.

Having women involved in policy and decision making, and having focus on

evidence makes a difference when tackling inequality. A 2019 report by Policy@Manchester, [‘On Gender’](#), sets out that female police and crime commissioners are twice as likely to make violence against women a priority, but where evidence on gender inequalities and women’s experience of crime is available (and equality duties are taken seriously), *all* commissioners are more likely to prioritise violence against women. A further 2020 Policy@Manchester report [‘Mind the Gap’](#) strives to put current gender inequalities in Greater Manchester at the centre of the devolution agenda.

These reports have led Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) to establish a [Women and Girl’s Equity Panel](#), to ensure gender equality is considered across policymaking and decisions. This comes as GMCA agreed a [‘Trailblazer’ deeper devolution deal](#) with central government in March 2023, offering increased powers in policy areas and control over a single funding settlement; a potential solution to piecemeal pots of competitive centrally-held funding. Whilst the deal continues to be mired in hubristic language of ‘world-leading businesses’, ‘trailblazing’, ‘growth-driven’, ‘strong local leadership’, developing robust and inclusive evidence, and listening to a range of voices will be key to GMCA’s success, remembering that its leadership is already unequal (eight out of ten of the local authority leaders in Greater Manchester are currently men, led by Mayor Andy Burnham).

It will require a combined effort from policy makers, practitioners and academics to pay closer attention to the inequalities underpinning development and leadership and reject gender stereotypes and bias in how we ‘value’ certain leadership styles, even under the promise of decentralised power.

This could mean looking at (and valuing) alternative forms of leadership, including

informal leadership that is already shaping places to push us beyond current understandings of the need for ‘strong-man’ and ‘saviour’ style leadership. A broader set of leadership qualities might include seeing ‘strength’ as being risk-averse, careful, and reflective (without falling into the trap of gender stereotypes).

The role of women in development and leadership has been more significant than historic accounts have allowed (Ormerod, 2023), and this continues to deny the value of leadership qualities in networks of care, reciprocity, mutuality and cooperation. The levelling-up agenda reproduces this selection and narration of a particular past which excludes certain people, offering ‘masculine-coded’ solutions which limit the way we can begin to imagine alternative futures.

#### 4. Conclusions

The ‘masculine-coded’ visions and calls for leadership and development in the levelling-up agenda - whilst pitched to be a devolution of power - will not lead to equality if they continue to maintain systems of white patriarchal organisation. This needs challenging by a range of people.

We cannot continue to rely on narrowly selected and biased accounts of *history* that categorise and exclude people when thinking about present geographical inequalities and future solutions; we need peopled and place-based approaches which are better attuned to inequalities. As part of this, it is imperative to recognise that formal place leadership opportunities continue to exclude women. This exclusion is impacting the agenda-setting policy-making of places.

Whilst increased devolution powers offer an opportunity for localities and regions to address deep rooted inequalities, this will not happen if: a) focus is entirely on narrow, GDP-led understandings of

growth and development, propped up with insufficient funding fought for through competitions; b) there is a continued oversight of inequalities, such as gender, with lacking representation, inclusion and evidence; and c) we continue this 'romance' with leadership and masculinity (Liu, 2021) as a solution. To level-up meaningfully might need devolved places to re-establish their own development 'missions', monitoring metrics (including health, wellbeing, care and quality of life) and scrutiny. It may also involve re-thinking current models of sub-national leadership and boards, which do not currently offer diversity of voices or equal access. Resisting this requires a language and imagination beyond current neoliberal modes of governing regional development.

Ignoring a range of inequalities will prevent meaningful change, and will continue to be an injustice for everyone. This is a challenge for academics as much as policy makers - what is researched and taught can uphold practices in how we train future planners, architects, development consultants, economists and leaders. It is time to challenge these specific and selected visions of place leadership and development which are mired in hubris and sensational language, and have a current grip on our economic, political and social organisation.

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