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Political parties

What's the point of a Women's Equality Party?

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This article is useful for students of A2 Ideologies, but it can also be linked to AS questions on the role of political parties and exploring the differences between a political party and pressure groups.

Who are the Women's Equality Party?

The Women's Equality Party (WEP) was formed after a public meeting at the Royal Festival Hall in March 2015. It was established by the journalist Catherine Mayer and the comedian, broadcaster and television personality Sandi Toksvig. The leader is another journalist, Sophie Walker. It claims to now have around 45,000 members and over 65 branches.

What does the party stand for?

According to the founder members, the party was set up because of the failure of any established political party to treat the equality issue seriously. In October 2015 the party issued its key pledges:

1. Equal representation in politics and business

This would involve quotas and all-women shortlists in politics. The WEP points out that there have only been 450 women MPs since 1918. This pledge also aims to increase the number of women in the boardroom and to tackle the 'glass ceiling'.

2. Equal pay

At present women earn 81p for every £1 earned by a man. Another way of looking at this is to say that women effectively worked for free from 9 November 2015 until the end of the year. The party also aims to give both women and men more rights to flexible working patterns.

3. Equal parenting and care giving

This would allow both men and women to share parenting or caring without being penalised at work.

4. Equal treatment

This pledge aims to change media representations of gender and body image, allowing girls and boys to grow up 'comfortable in themselves'. It also includes better sex education and gender-free careers advice in schools.

5. An end to violence against women

This pledge focuses on making the UK a safer place for all women by reducing all kinds of violence both in the public and private realms.

The WEP argues that equality isn't just a women's issue. Economic, social and political equality will benefit everyone, and our future economic success depends on it.

Is it actually a political party?

The party is crowdfunding to raise money to pay for candidates' deposits and will be announcing who these candidates are in January 2016. They aim to stand in both local and national elections. However, unlike the other UK parties, the Women's Equality Party does not aim to develop policy in any other area and can be seen as a single-issue party in that respect. They also argue that once other parties adopt their agenda and take action they will happily disband. This suggests that they are a kind of hybrid of a party and a pressure group (and they will therefore be a useful example to cite in an AS politics exam).

Are feminists supportive of this party?

The WEP can easily be labelled as an example of liberal feminism. They focus on public sphere issues such as employment and politics — issues that are not generally controversial. Radical feminists have already taken issue with the WEP, criticising their middle class, white, London-based founders. Radical feminists examine the issue of 'intersectionality' — how various forms of oppression overlap and interlink — and they argue that this party has, so far, failed to address how gender discrimination can be linked with race, disability and class-based oppression. Perhaps the WEP is taking a simplistic approach to equality, presuming that women are all oppressed in the same way? The focus on the rights of fathers and mothers as carers can be used to suggest an expectation that the nuclear family is 'normal', for example.

Other feminists have asked what the party actually means by the term 'woman' and whether this will include the topical and difficult debate over the identity and rights of trans-women. Another difficult topic for the party will be their attitudes to sex work and sex workers.

A right-wing feminist perspective would criticise the mention of quotas and positive discrimination. Kate Molloy in the *Telegraph* argues: 'My feminist is directly tied to a commitment to meritocracy and individual flourishing', and criticises the party's attacks on austerity.

What are their chances of success?

There are and have been various parties exclusively for women around the world. Predictably, there are several in Northern Europe, such as the Women's List in Iceland and the Feminist Initiative in Sweden and Norway. There are also several women's parties in India, another representing orthodox Jewish women in Israel, and the fascinating Gabriela Women's Party in the Philippines. Some parties have won seats, but none has become a serious electoral contender.

Some people criticise the idea of separate representation for women as a tactic likely to fail. Gaby Hinsliff, writing in the *Observer*, argues that although she wants to like the Women's Equality Party, she believes that women seeking change should join existing parties and 'shake things up' from within. There are already active feminists inside the established parties, such as Jess Phillips (Labour). Hinsliff worries that the WEP will take votes from Labour and the Liberal Democrats, ultimately benefiting the Conservatives, who are responsible for the very austerity they criticise.

Could the WEP lead to a ghettoisation of women's equality as an issue? Or will they push women's issues up the political agenda?

Find out more

www.womensequality.org.uk/policy_launch_announcement

www.gq-magazine.co.uk/comment/articles/2015-08/19/womens-equality-party-alienating-men-sandy-toksvig

www.democraticaudit.com/?p=17347

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