

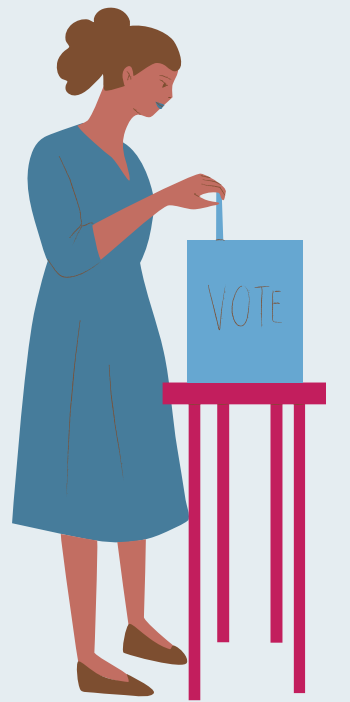
# WHY ARE THERE SO FEW WOMEN AS METRO MAYORS?

## EXPLORING THE GENDER DISPARITY IN LOCAL AND DEVOLVED POLITICS IN ENGLAND

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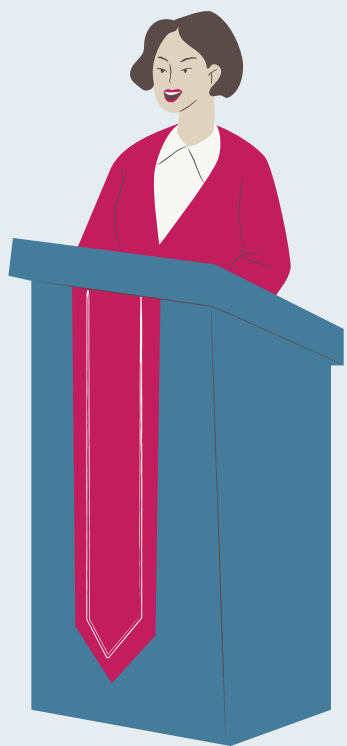
### INTRODUCTION

This research explores why despite English devolutions emergence at a time of pushes for women in politics, with the first elections for non-London Metro Mayors occurring in 2017, no woman was elected metro mayor in the first four years of these roles' existence. Furthermore, out of the 106 years collectively served by metro mayors, only 11 have been served by women, demonstrating that the development of English devolution has been damaging to female representation within politics. It was not until Tracy Brabin's 2021 assumption to the role of Metro Mayor of West Yorkshire that a woman held one of the new mayoral roles; as of the 2025 round of local elections, five of the fourteen Metro Mayors are women. There's very little mainstream analysis and discussion on this issue, it is vitally important area to explore as the metro mayor role grows in prominence and reach with the target of 85% of the population to live under devolution in the coming years. I aim to show how institutions and political parties can better support women overcome the structural and cultural barriers preventing women from being elected to these positions.



### METHODOLOGY

An absence of mainstream research meant I collected a lot of quantitative research myself on pathways into local politics and metro mayor positions whilst supplementing this with articles, reports and conducting interviews with councillors.



### CURRENT SITUATION

Since Livingstone's first election to mayor of the Greater London Authority in 2000, followed by the inauguration of metro mayors in other parts of England in 2017, there have been 23 metro mayors. 5 of these have been women and all of them are currently serving. Tracy Brabin was elected in 2021; it then took 3 years for another woman to be elected demonstrating the lack of urgency parties have shown in addressing.

### ISSUES AT A COUNCIL LEVEL

#### Structural Issues

- Only 48% of councils have parental policies (this was just 4% in 2017) which leaves families unsupported
- Incumbency rate is 80% for councillors meaning councils are dominated by the status quo - women are also more likely to serve 1 term.

#### Cultural Issues

- 40% of female councillors had faced sexist remarks from other councillors
- Women are much less likely to be council leaders - in 2022, only 17% of local authority leaders were women - with many pigeonholed into deputy or social care cabinet roles.

#### Systemic Issues

- Women are simultaneously less likely to have the financial resources or the flexibility in caring roles that allow them to run for a council role.

### WOMENS DIFFERENT LEADERSHIP ROLES

Women are far more likely to be appointed to leadership positions related to childcare, social care or education. In interviews, councillors said that this was both down to women's employment and personal experience as well as stereotyping.

This experience has been less drawn upon in the Northern Powerhouse and later metro mayorships due to them having a more economic rather than social care focus. This was a factor in men's domination within the Northern Powerhouse and the initial lack of women as metro mayors.

### METRO MAYOR POSTS CREATED BY MEN, FOR MEN

The Northern Powerhouse was in many ways the political precursor to the roll out of Metro Mayors. The agreement was signed exclusively by men and 72% of leadership roles within the project went to men.

This intensified when Metro Mayor posts were initially set up with an all male mayoral line-up joined by their teams that were 94% male.

Women were not sought or invited in during the setting up of English devolution. This has had a generative impact demonstrated by none of the inaugural metro mayorships being women and progress being so slow on the issue.

### EMERGING TRENDS ON PRIOR EXPERIENCE

Since 2022, 8 new metro mayors have been elected, split evenly between men and women. None of the men have any previous political experience whereas all of the women have either served as a councillor or MP with two serving as both.

This does follow global trends of women requiring higher qualifications to both seek support to run for office and have the confidence to do so.

Women disproportionality rely on experience within political institutions that they are underrepresented within.

### SOLUTIONS

There are initial structural changes that are needed at all levels of government to make political posts more accessible to women.

- Crèches, accommodating hours and remote voting
- Exploration of mayoral job shares

But the disenfranchisement and difficulty faced by women, in a system made by and for men, requires actions to actively encourage women into these roles.

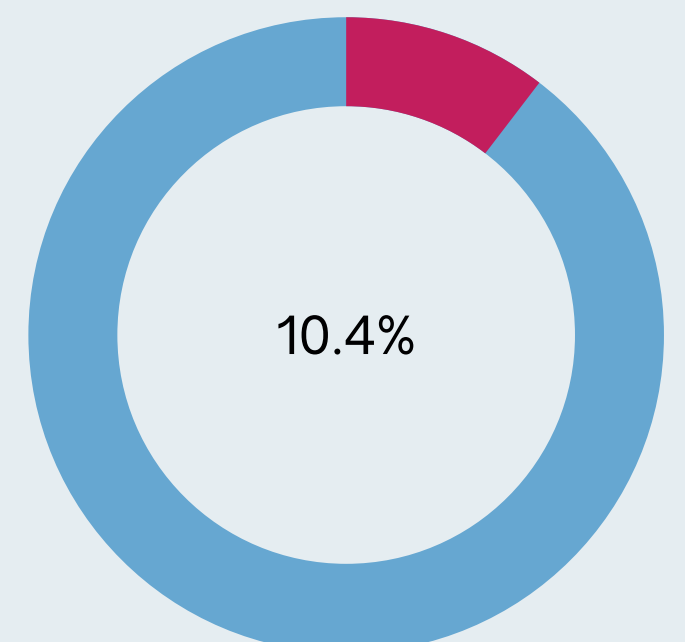
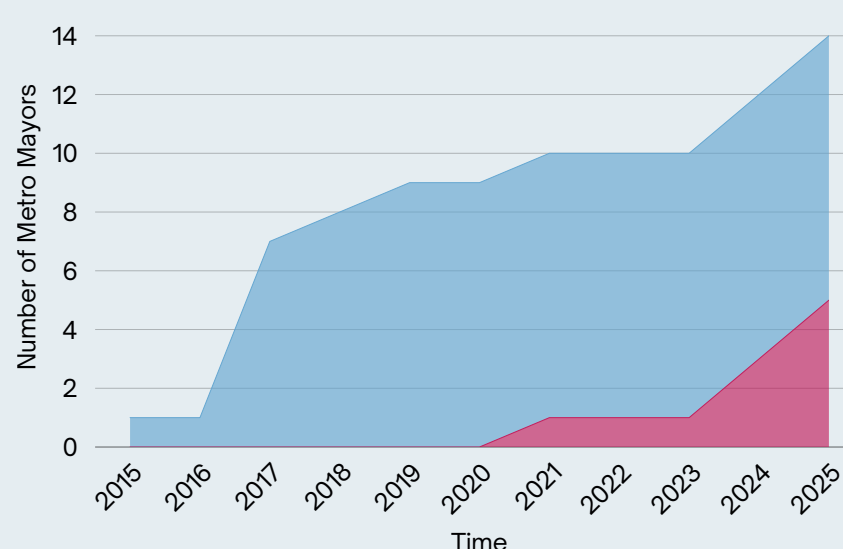
Devolved constitutions should set minimum representation levels and allow more portfolio-holder roles that can let women sit on combined authority boards.

Combined Authorities themselves need to serve the whole population; the Northern Powerhouse's STEM and physical infrastructure focus led to male focus on the Metro Mayors agenda, according to The Fawcett Society. As devolution expands, promoting areas such as social care and education may allow for more women to take up leadership positions.

### CONCLUSION

Instead of offering a 'new politics', English devolution reflected and reinforced historic structural and cultural barriers that have limited women's participation in local politics. Combined authority constitutions and council networks have perpetuated male dominance by privileging prior political experience, informal male-led networks, and roles traditionally held by men. As a result, women have been systematically underrepresented in leadership positions, pigeonholed into social and care portfolios, and excluded from the economic and infrastructure roles that shape regional policy. Even as female representation has begun to increase, women continue to face higher experience expectations and limited access to leadership pathways, creating persistent inequalities in both opportunity and political influence. Addressing these disparities requires both the acknowledgment of the systemic barriers embedded in institutions but also proactive structural and cultural reforms. Only through such reforms can devolution fulfil its promise of fair, representative, and inclusive governance, ensuring that women have both the opportunity and the support to participate fully in regional leadership.

Number of Metro Mayors in the last decade  
Women are in pink



Out of the 106 years served by Metro Mayors, only 11 have been served by women. This is equivalent to 10.4% of time served.