



Gillian Norton: Through the Glass Ceiling

In an exclusive interview with Unison, retiring Chief Executive Officer of LBRuT Gillian Norton reflects on how she made it to the top

‘Local government remains a male-dominated world, with men making up a majority of both total and senior roles. If we are to achieve an equal balance, local government needs to make jobs and elected roles in the sector easier to access for those with other commitments, and stop pigeonholing women, says Laura Wilkes of the LGIU* in the latest post of our Gender and Democracy series’

Gillian Norton reports that things have improved for women since she first became CEO of Wokingham Council in 1994, when there were only 6 women CEOs in the country.

We have to wait for the results to be published from an ongoing study by the Fawcett society in partnership with the LGIU, to see if progress in gender equality in Local Government is still improving.

As she approaches retirement, I asked Gillian if she regrets that her swansong will be handing over the reins of Richmond Council to the SSA with Wandsworth, a much more male dominated organisation, with Paul Martin at the helm.

‘Not at all. This is a historic moment in Richmond and Wandsworth Council’s history. And part of me is a little sad that I won’t get to see it being implemented. Wandsworth has been a more male dominated organisation. However, a number of senior women in Richmond are going to play a key part in the future of this new organisation.’

‘In 2013 only 22.9% of CEOs in Local Government were women.’ LGIU

Gillian allowed me to delve into the circumstances of her background; her family, education and the trajectory of her career, with a view to inspiring other women to break through the glass ceiling and by example, show them how it can be done.

Gillian hails from the North East, her mother was a housewife and her father had a good job as an advertising executive. Family life was somewhat blighted by her father’s heart problems, but in addition to a strong Christian faith, her parents imparted to their three children the values of hard work and achieving success.

After attending the local primary school, Gillian went on to the Grammar School where she worked hard and took her O Levels, A Levels and then her place at Hull University to read History, each a year early.

I took the opportunity to ask if she was in favour of bringing back Grammar schools,

‘I think if you’ve got good Comprehensives, you don’t need them. When I was young, where I lived the Secondary Moderns were dreadful. They did not see any investment. My Grammar School was not an elitist school. It was just a school of bright kids. We lived in the middle of a coal mining community. My brother, who was 8 years younger, went to the local Secondary which had become a Comprehensive. In Richmond, we are lucky that we have some excellent secondary schools and others that are well on the way to improving.’

Gillian did very well at University, achieving a prize for top marks in History in her year. I asked her what her

*Local Government Information Unit

ambitions were, if she had wanted to dedicate her life to public service,

‘I had an ambition to get out of the North East, to go down to the big smoke of London I wanted to do something useful, not ‘selling soap powder’ as we used to say in those days. I was interested in research and writing as a result of my degree; I was interested in public policy.’

So in the late 1970s, Gillian headed south to join a graduate programme at the GLC*

‘I chose the GLC because it paid a few pounds more than the Civil Service. The money was a big thing for me. I had no parental help as by that time my dad had to give up work. In terms of Local Government, the GLC was the crème de la crème. They had a big graduate training programme, 40,000 staff and a massive budget. I learned a lot and I am now pleased that Richmond Council run a small graduate programme. Despite all the cuts, we have managed to keep it going and that is a great credit to our elected Members.’

It is well documented that women are pigeonholed into ‘softer’ areas of Local Government, HR or social care for example and that if they went for the ‘harder’ options such as finance and economic development then they stand a better chance of climbing the promotional ladder and achieving more powerful positions. I asked Gillian if she thought there was an element of truth in this...



‘I do think it’s true that if you are an able woman in those harder subjects then you probably can get to the top more easily. It does go back

to choices girls make at school really. So many girls don’t choose the hard subjects like Science and Maths. I would have loved my younger daughter to go into accountancy; she has a natural aptitude for figures and is a logical thinker. But she just wasn’t interested. I worked on several projects at the GLC, in finance, in HR and in Director Generals. That cemented my view that I wanted to work in the Corporate Centre and that is what I did in the GLC. I worked with the Director General for a long time, working on central policy and with Members, I worked on the abolition of the GLC. This did prepare me for the role of CEO.’

*Greater London Council

The Role of CEO

• **Leadership:** working with elected members to ensure strong and visible leadership and direction, encouraging and enabling managers to motivate and inspire their teams.

• **Strategic direction:** ensuring all staff understand and adhere to the strategic aims of the organisation and follow the direction set by the elected members.

• **Policy advice:** acting as the principal policy adviser to the elected members of the Council to lead the development of workable strategies which will deliver the political objectives set by elected members.

• **Partnerships:** leading and developing strong partnerships across the local community to achieve improved outcomes and better public services for local people.

• **Operational management:** overseeing financial and performance management, risk management, people management and change management within the council.

Just before the GLC was abolished in 1986, Gillian ‘jumped ship’ and secured a job at Woking Council ‘to set up a policy, planning and communications function’, and then in 1994 became CEO at Wokingham.

‘You do get some lucky breaks. I think my first CEO job was a lucky break really. They wanted something different and all the other candidates were middle aged men. I was 37 and a woman. At the particular moment, being a woman was an advantage.’

More than 4 decades after the Equal Pay Act, it was reported just last week by the IFC* that women earn 18% less than men on average,

‘..The gap between the hourly pay of higher educated men and women has not closed at all in the last 20 years....the widening of the hourly wage gap after childbirth is associated with working fewer hours. However women do not see an immediate cut in hourly pay when they reduce their hours. Rather, women who work 20 hours or less per week lose out on subsequent pay rises, meaning that the hourly wages of colleagues in full time work pull further and further ahead.’

Part time workers also find their pensions affected and their chances of promotion.

Margaret Thatcher famously said that if women wanted to continue working full time after having children, they should find a ‘treasure’ to take care of the children and the housework. I asked Gillian how she had managed work and family life..

*Institute of Fiscal Studies



More than 4 decades after the Equal Pay Act, women still earn 18% less than men

'I had my children when I was quite established in my career. I was already a CO in Woking when I had my first maternity leave, so I was earning what many people would consider a good salary. When Lucy was 1, I applied for my first CEO job and got it and then life was better as I was earning more money. I didn't go part time after the children. I love my children dearly but I didn't really enjoy the small baby bit. I was lucky that I could afford a full time nanny and a lot of help. To have a career and children is hard. Lucy my youngest didn't sleep through the night until she was quite old; I'm talking 7 or 8. It was completely wearing. You need to be completely determined and to have a good support mechanism around you.'

Would you say you didn't face any barriers to progressing your career?

'I didn't really, no. I mean the GLC was a place that was really committed to equal opportunities. However, you do need a 'kit bag' as I call it. There is no point in applying for a job you haven't got the skills for.'

So women have to work harder than men?

'At the end of the day I need to sit in an interview and know that if they ask can you do x then I need to know that I can do x because I have done something that demanded the same skills.'

Are you a feminist?

'Ah yes, in the technical definition, I believe that women are equal to men, different but equal. I don't like some of the overtones of those women today who are anti-men ; sometimes they get a bit extreme.'

What have you done to help women achieve more seniority in LG other than act as a role model?

'Well yes I've tried to act as a role model to convey a sense of possibility. I think so many women limit themselves. When in a meeting and it's clear that someone needs to pick up their children from childcare, I would say go, go now. It's good for the woman concerned and it's quite powerful for others to recognise that that's accepted. Our councillors are very good about that. Our Leader in particular will

always say, 'family comes first'. I've just tried to make my own value set very clear, been very supportive and brought women on in the organisation. We have quite a lot of senior women in this organisation; our stats are quite good on that.'

Better than national statistics?

'I'd have said so, yes'

(I have requested copies of our stats, but as yet, they have not materialised. MF)

What are you most proud of achieving in your time as CEO?

'Well, I am proud of the kind of organisation we have become. It is a very open, high achieving place. It gives opportunities to staff and staff have responded very well. When you walk

around, people are friendly and open, they give their best and they're committed to doing a good job. That's what my job is about really, building a strong organisation.'

Any regrets? Perhaps the SSA?

'Oh no, not at all. We have to save £10 million pounds. If we didn't create the SSA we'd have been doing something much worse. So no regrets about the SSA at all, on the contrary, I think it has been a real achievement the way we've knitted the two organisations together; it is a first anywhere in the country. I've always been a glass half full person and I've got a naturally sunny nature.'

And finally, what advice would you give to any young ambitious women out there who want to build a career in local government?

'I hesitated to recommend Local Government to my girls. Having said that, my younger daughter has just joined the civil service fast stream. Public service must be in the blood. My older daughter works in the voluntary sector. The key is get a good manager, that always helps. If there's an extra job to be done, do it because it will add to your CV. See things as opportunities. That is what I've done. I've never had a plan about climbing the 'greasy pole', I've just seen an opportunity and seized it. But I would say to young women who want to rise to the top in LG, there's nothing to stop you other than yourself.'



Any plans for your retirement, any consultancy work?

'No. I've a few non-consultancy things I'm doing and some voluntary work. My husband and I want to go travelling. I've spent 41 years working hard and it's time to hang up my hat. I will miss the people of course. But, there are a lot of things I won't miss; Council meetings that's for sure. I'll miss the place too, it's a fantastic place.'

I was very pleased that Gillian gave me an hour of her time to share her experiences. She was relaxed, open and honest; I mean how many women admit to not enjoying their babies! We may have felt it, but never admitted it; that was brave!

She was certainly fortunate in having a firm foundation to her career at the GLC at a time of such great opportunities. Graduate programmes are still around but in far fewer numbers. Today, internships are flourishing as a way into the professions. They do rely on parental financial support however, as unlike graduates on training programmes, interns are not paid.

We have to admire Gillian's determination to succeed in a profession so male dominated at the top. She is outspoken and direct and as she says of herself, **'quite uncompromising'**. She is certainly **'no poodle, I won't do as I am told if it is wrong'**. I hesitate to add ruthless, but it is something of a ruthless irony that Gillian worked on the abolition of the GLC, the organisation that offered her so many opportunities. But as Gillian herself says in her advice to other ambitious women, **'seize opportunities, and that's what I've done, I've just seen an opportunity and seized it.'**

Gillian certainly benefited from the high expectations of those around her; from being an eldest child who was given responsibilities in the home, to the traditional local primary school which sent a third of their pupils to the Grammar, to the Grammar School that encouraged her to sit her O and A Levels early. Gillian exceeded their expectations by choosing to go to university a year early rather than take a year out, an equivalent Gap year that we are more familiar with today. Gillian opted for a head start among her peers. Her parents gave her confidence in her ability to succeed. Their guiding principle was that the reward of hard work is success.

So sisters, here follows 9 steps to climbing the promotional ladder, smashing through the glass ceiling and achieving those top jobs.

- 1. Seize every opportunity you can to advance in the organisation.**
- 2. Confidence and assertiveness are essential skills.**
- 3. Have a kit-bag containing evidence that you can demonstrate all essential knowledge and skills at interview.**
- 4. Get yourself a good manager.**
- 5. If your area is finance or economic development, your journey to success is easier, but you will have to work harder than the men that outnumber you.**
 - 6a. Delay having children until you are well on your way to success.**
 - 6b. Work full time after maternity leave for better salary, pension and promotion.**
 - 6c. If you do not have parents willing to devote their retirement to looking after their grandchildren, be prepared to be well off but hard up as your money will pour into childcare.**
- 7. Develop leadership skills and apply them.**
- 8. Never forget you have organisational skills in abundance if you are juggling children and f/t work**
- 9. Do not limit yourselves!**

As Gillian said it is hard, but it can be done.

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