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Written by Maureen Younger

VOICES

## Stand Up for 50:50 Parliament

The UK lies in a poxy 70th place when it comes to the percentage of women in national parliaments. *Maureen Younger* chatted to Stand Up For Women director Dr Sasha Rakoff about how comedy might help address the imbalance.

Posted on 15/04/2015



Parliament: home to too many knobs. Photo by Life Thru A Lens.

In 1918 the first woman in the UK was elected to parliament. The woman in question was Countess Constance de Markievicz who – besides taking part in the bloody Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 – stood for election while a guest of His Majesty in Holloway Prison. Unsurprisingly, as a member of Sinn Fein, de Markievicz refused to take her seat.

Yet almost 100 years on from this rather interesting start we're still far from achieving equal representation in parliament in this country. In fact, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, when it comes to the percentage of women in national parliaments the UK is rather low down on the table, currently lying in approximately 70th place, behind such models of democracy and bastions of women's rights as Sudan, Afghanistan and Zimbabwe.

"I don't think anyone should have to justify having equal representation of women in parliament. The current status quo is totally unacceptable. Full stop." – Sasha Rakoff

Though women make up 51 per cent of the UK's population, a mere 23 per cent of our MPs are women – a figure that's barely changed since 1997. The politically neutral organisation [50:50 Parliament](#) is currently petitioning party leaders to debate and take action to make our parliament more gender balanced.

In the run up to this year's general election, umbrella organisation [Stand Up For Women](#) is organising a comedy night to support the work of 50:50 Parliament, featuring award-winning and BBC-writing political comedians [Grainne Maguire](#), [Joe Wells](#), [Kate Smurthwaite](#) and [Chris Coltrane](#). I'm emceeing the night, and caught up with Stand Up For Women's director, Dr Sasha Rakoff, to get the lowdown on the show.

"I've worked in the women's voluntary sector for more than a decade now, starting off by setting up the pressure group, OBJECT," says Rakoff. "The purpose of OBJECT was to challenge the 'porn as the norm' culture we were living under. Lads' mags had become 'bottom shelf' porn, lap-dancing clubs were licensed like cafes, and *Playboy* was selling 'back to school' stationery to primary school children.

"Within a few years, OBJECT was turning back the tide, changing the law to get strip joints licensed as sex establishments and getting the Home Office to set new codes on the sale and display of material like *Nuts*, *Zoo* and *The Sport*," she continues. "Perhaps even more importantly it got the sexualisation of women and girls into discussion at a time pre-social media and when women's rights simply weren't being talked about by the traditional press."



Dr Sasha Rakoff of Stand Up For Women.

OBJECT continues to go from strength to strength, but Rakoff left a couple of years back to set up Stand Up For Women. "Stand Up For Women is all about comedy for equality, using humour – from comedy shows, to videos to games – to raise awareness of women's rights," she explains. "The ultimate dream is to become a 'Comic Relief for Women', raising millions for women's charities and raising awareness to millions of the much-needed work these charities are doing.

"In the UK alone, 10 million women experience violence in their lifetime, and even more will experience discrimination and harassment – and there's an appalling lack of funding for women's groups," she says. "Raising awareness through humour in a positive, inclusive and non-judgemental way has to be one of the very best possible ways to reach people. Although it shouldn't be, our dream is probably in the distant future, so in the meantime we are busy helping organising fun protests with women's groups, putting on comedy shows and lobbying and campaigning about women's rights."

"The ultimate dream is to become a 'Comic Relief for Women', raising millions for women's charities and raising awareness to millions of the much-needed work these charities are doing." – Sasha Rakoff

Working with 50:50 Parliament was a no-brainer for Rakoff who feels there is a "particular type of male" who dominates this country's decision-making process: "I don't think anyone should have to justify having equal representation of women in parliament. The current status quo is totally unacceptable. Full stop. The added bonus is, if we finally get proper representation of the majority of this country's population it will be better for everybody – for *all* people who are currently under-represented – because it will mean the mechanism and culture is in place for us to finally see a real people's parliament with people from *all* backgrounds and walks of life finally making the decisions that affect us all."

As part of the ongoing quest for equality in parliament, Stand Up For Women has also released an online game: [Dame! Those MPs](#) encourages you to make the most of your sartorial flair to dress up Clegg, Farage, Cameron and Miliband in wigs and tiaras, then download your pic and Tweet, Facebook or Instagram to your heart's desire.

"It's something fun, but with a serious message," says Rakoff. "Every picture downloaded links you straight back to the [50:50 Parliament petition](#). Comedy and campaigning – what's not to love?"

*The pre-election comedy show, which supports Stand Up For Women and 50:50 Parliament's campaign, is at the Old Queen's Head, London, on Monday 20 April. For tickets, [click here](#).*

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Dr Rakoff speaking as the founder of OBJECT.

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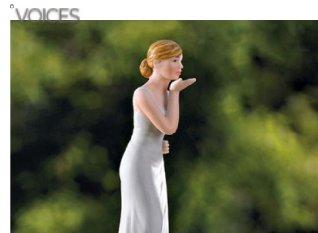
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