

## Councillor for Pontnewydd, Cwmbran wants more Torfaen streets named after women

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MORE STREETS FOR

**SISTERS:** Councillor Jessica Powell, who wants more streets in Torfaen to be named after women. She is in Shakespeare Road, Cwmbran

WHEN it comes to having highways and byways named after them, men are streets ahead of women - but in Torfaen, at least, that may start to change, thanks to Torfaen councillor Jessica Powell.

Gender equality in street naming is now firmly on the council's agenda after members voted for Ms Powell's motion that officers draw up lists of appropriate women and men after whom future streets may be named.

The 24-year-old, elected at last May's council election to serve the Pontnewydd ward, was inspired by an Italian movement called Toponomastica Femminile (Female Toponymy) which is seeking to celebrate famous women through the naming of streets up and down the country. Toponymy is the study of place names.

"It might not be something that many people have thought about, but there are very few streets named after women in Torfaen and most other places," said Ms Powell.

"Apart from saints and monarchs, like Queen Victoria, women don't really get a look in and

these days that seems ridiculous. It's not about renaming streets but about balancing out the naming process for the future.

"I was quite shocked (the motion was passed) because I thought people might think it just a waste of time, especially with the economic outlook being so tough. But the vast majority of members voted for it.

"It's also one of those things that doesn't have a cost implication."

Ms Powell, a graduate of women's college New Hall (now called Murray Edwards) at Cambridge, would not be drawn on the names she might like to see on street signs in future.

But, a Labour Party member and councillor, she said women who have made a significant impact in Labour politics, the trades union movement and in women's rights, such as the Suffragettes, might be among those considered appropriate.

- Can you think of a female leading light in Torfaen's history who should be honoured by having a street named after her? Or is there a woman now you think fits the bill?

Tell us what you think by leaving a comment below or e-mail [letters@gwent-wales.co.uk](mailto:letters@gwent-wales.co.uk)

### **Male bias in street names confirmed**

A SWIFT look through a Gwent valleys street atlas confirms Ms Powell's view that women are under-represented.

Saints Hilda and Mary are commemorated in Griffithstown, but male saints on street names are more common.

Themed naming of streets tend to have a male bias too, an example being streets in Cwmbran named after playwrights and poets such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Milton and Keats, while numerous male politicians are so honoured There is an Elizabeth Row at The British, a Florence Place at Griffithstown and Victorias in several areas.

In Torfaen, only one other street is seemingly named after a woman - Clare Drew Way, in Croesyceiliog.

# Are our street names sexist?

By Mark Bosworth BBC World Service



A tiny proportion of streets in Rome are named after women, while nearly half are named after men - and it is a similar story in other major cities around the world. Outrageous sexism, a simple fact of history, or both?

Place your finger on a street map and it's far more likely to land on a road named after a man than one named after a woman. You may not have given it much thought, but Maria Pia Ercolini has. The geography teacher in Rome says her city's landscape is dominated by men and wants that to change.

It all began when she wrote a cultural guide to Rome, celebrating the role of women in the city's history.

"During the research I realised that you never see traces of women. History just cancelled the women - they're not here," she says.



We don't want to re-name streets - we want new streets to be named after women"

End Quote Maria Pia Ercolini

Ercolini and a team of 26 women painstakingly went through every one of Rome's 16,550 streets to determine the gender balance.

They found that 7,575 (45.7%) of the city's streets were named after men and just 580 (3.5%) were named after women.

"That's proof of the discrimination," she says.

"Men made the history - the known history. In Italy it is very strong because we have so many [male] saints and religious people like the Pope. Religion is so full of men."

Of Rome's eight main streets, two are named after men - the Via Cavour, referring to Camillo Cavour, a leader of Italy's 19th Century unification struggle, and Via Giulia, named after "Fearsome" Pope Julius II.

The other six are named after inanimate things, from the Via del Corso, which alludes to a medieval horse race, to the Via Sacra, so-called because it passes key religious sites in the ancient Roman Forum.

Local authorities, which have the final say over street names, are now being urged to redress the balance.

#### Equality street

City	All streets	Named after men	Named women	after
Rome	16,550	7,575	580	
Milan	4244	2,466	134	
Florence	2,284	1,100	72	
Catania	2,172	700	75	
Madrid	10,500	2,800	700	

Source: Toponomastica femminile

Ercolini has set up the [Toponomastica femminile Facebook group](#), as a rallying point for her campaign, and 2,600 people have signed up as members.

"We don't want to re-name streets. That would be very unpopular," she explains.

"We want new streets in Rome to be named after women. There are lots of new developments around the city."

#### An Afghan plan



*Habiba Sarabi, governor of Bamiyan province, Afghanistan, says:*

"I think there is one street named after a woman in Kabul but I have not seen any others. We do not feel good about this. We have to struggle and fight for streets and other things like parks and schools.

"In my province, Bamiyan, there are no streets named after women but there is a new town under construction and we plan to name some of the streets after women.

"I have asked the culture department to find names of popular women which we will use. Women are a big part of the community so we can't ignore that."

Ercolini and her team have studied other Italian cities, from Florence to Milan, and found a similar pattern.

Inspired by the Italian project, a group of women in Spain surveyed Madrid's streets. It fared a bit better than Rome, with nearly 7% of streets named after women, and 27% after men.

Work has begun on Paris, and while the data has not been fully analysed, Ercolini estimates that a street there is around five times more likely to be named after a man than a woman.

To the best of her knowledge no country has a gender-based street naming policy. But some regional authorities are beginning to address the issue - including Afghanistan's only province with a female governor, Bamiyan, where a whole new town is being built.

London taxi driver Tina Kiddell estimates that something like twice as many streets in London are named after men than women.

She describes herself as "a woman in a man's world" and has an in-depth knowledge of the city, after driving people around it for 24 years.

When not behind the wheel, she spends much of her spare time poring over a copy of The London Encyclopaedia, a comprehensive reference book of more than 1,000 pages.

"Every single road has got a story. For example, Gower Street was named in 1790 after a lady called Lady Gertrude Leveson-Gower, who married the fourth Duke of Bedford," she says.

**Some London streets**



- Cavendish Square (W1) - named after Henrietta Cavendish, a daughter of the Duke of Newcastle
- Charlotte Street (W1) - named after Queen Charlotte, wife of George III
- Gunnersbury Park/Lane/Avenue (W3) - named after Gunylde, a niece of King Canute
- Minories (EC3) - named after the Minoresses, the nuns of St Clare, who had an abbey here
- Savile Row (W1) - named after Dorothy Savile, the third Earl of Burlington's wife

"And you have Bedford Square at the end of Gower Street - so there's your little story about a family marrying together and having the two names in one area where they had houses and owned land."

Kiddell is proud of her city's history and the stories behind it and is not bothered by London's somewhat male-dominated street map.

"When the streets were named, women were subservient to men. Whether that was right or wrong at that time, it was the way it was," she says.

"Women have only been recognised as something worth noting in the latter years. You can't change history."

But Julia Long from the London Feminist Network says the women in Rome are absolutely right to question the status quo.

"I would love to see a similar project taken up in London. It would play a big part in ensuring that women feel recognised and valued in our city," she says.

Long is concerned about the impact this has on the self-esteem of women and girls. She also thinks it gives men an inflated sense of entitlement and self-worth.





- Via Margaret Mead - named after the American anthropologist (above)
- Via di Santa Cecilia - one of the most popular Roman saints
- Via Beatrice Cenci - Beatrice was beheaded in 1599, convicted of killing her abusive father
- Largo Gaetana Agnesi - Gaetana Agnesi was a famous 18th Century mathematician
- Via Tina Modotti - named after an Italian photographer, actress and revolutionary who emigrated to the US and died in Mexico in 1942

"Street names are a very important form of recognition. They are a way of immortalising a person, and of holding in high esteem their achievements.

"The message conveyed by the naming of such a disproportionate number of streets after men is that men are of more value and importance than women," she argues.

Ercolini's project is starting to gain political backing. The wife of the Mayor of Rome, Isabella Rauti, has said the shortage of streets named after women reflects "centuries of discrimination".

On International Women's Day last month, Toponomastica femminile launched a campaign to get three pedestrian walkways in public parks named after women.

The president of Rome's 15th district has agreed to dedicate two parks to Elena Cornaro Piscopia, the first woman to earn a doctorate, and Laura Bassi, the first woman to officially teach at a European university.

Ercolini says the president of the second district is also interested.

"It's having a big effect," she says.

"I've fought all my life to get recognition for women so this is a big symbol for us. I'm happy, it's satisfying."

*Maria Pia Ercolini spoke to [Newshour](#) on the [BBC World Service](#).*

## Thoughts on Public History

### FEMINISTS FOCUS THEIR ATTENTIONS ON STREET NAMES



*Photo Credit: [Keith Bloomfield](#) via Creative Commons*

Although International Women's Day was a while ago, it is still March (just) which is **International Womens Month**. One particular IWM-related public history article which caught my eye was "**Combating Inequality by Remembering Famous Women in Town's History**", which featured in my local town newspaper, the Bury Free Press.

The article brings attention to the recently formed Bury St Edmunds branch of the Fawcett society, an organisation that campaigns for equality between men and women. The group's current focus is an interesting one – local street names.

In the article Ms Rehahn (Founder of Bury St Edmunds Fawcett Society) says: "The perception is that if you only see men in a job, only men are capable of doing that job. So, if you only see streets named after famous men, you think only men are



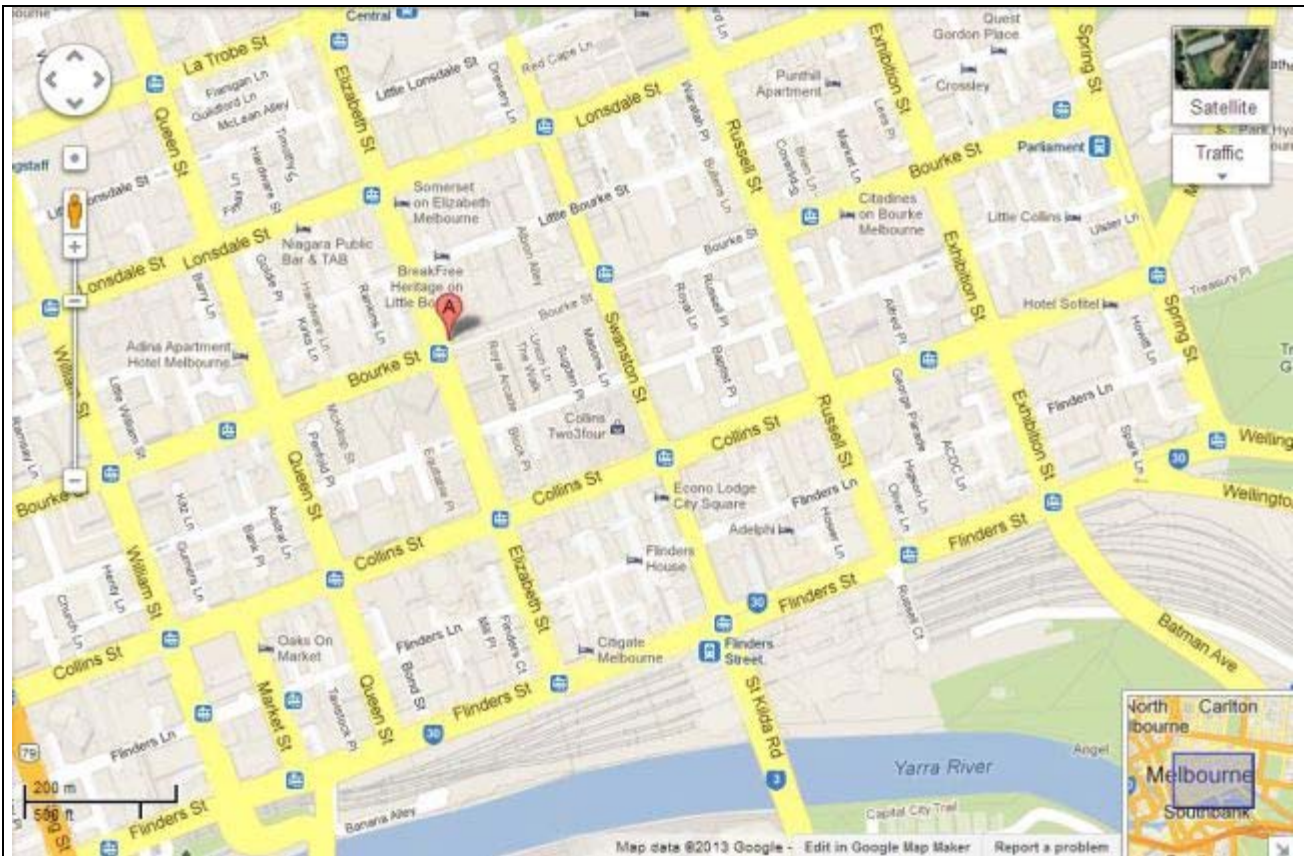
famous.” Which in my opinion, is going a step too far.

Admittedly, street names can be extremely powerful. When new regimes come to power, they often change the names of local streets and landmarks – sometimes termed as ‘toponymic cleansing.’ Examples of this would be in Baghdad during the Iraq War in 2003 where **American troops renamed Arabic street names**, Major Dean Thurmond declaring that “Unless you know what stuff corresponds to, it’s just gibberish.” Similarly, the **Shi’a community are attempting the removal of the memory** of Saddam Hussain, in a way that parallels the Roman *Damnatio Memoriae* of condemned emperors.

Geographical naming is also targeted by protesters as well as the establishers of new regimes. Basque and Irish nationalists have attacked street signs to highlight their cause – one example would be the changing of Londonderry to Derry. Other campaigns have come from Aboriginal activists in Australia for the inclusion of Indigenous place names on street signs – such as Uluru/Ayers Rock.

Street names can hold the story of a particular place and, rather surprisingly, little research has looked at commemorative naming so far, except for the odd cultural geographer. As well as being great reflections on what certain societies viewed as important, street naming can also inform us about the growth of a town or city. This is especially apparent when it comes to colonialism.

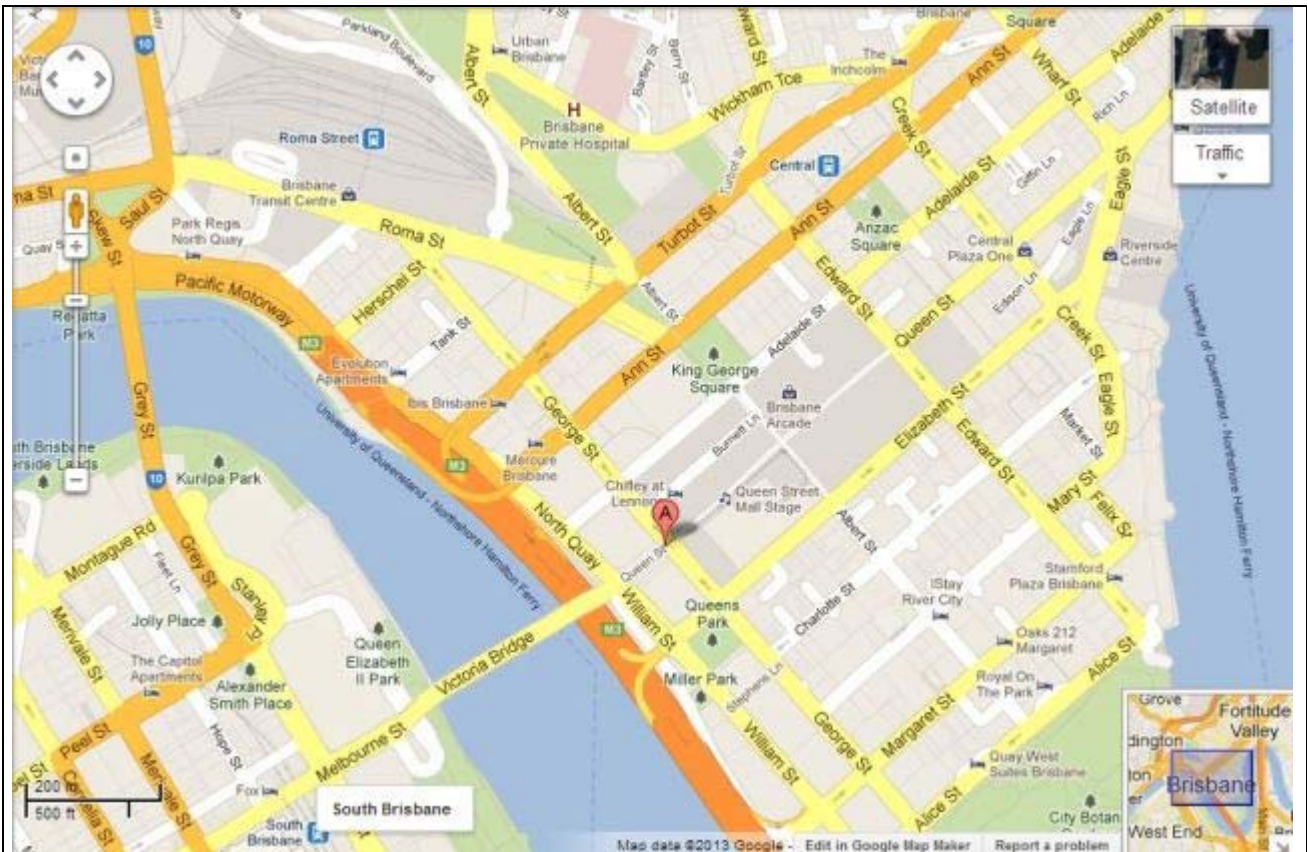
A comparison of street naming in Brisbane and Melbourne in Australia is very telling:



*Melbourne CBD*

Melbourne's street names tell the story of the city – **the main streets** are mostly named after important figures of the time (Russell Street refers to Lord John Russel, the British Prime Minister) as well as prominent participants in the construction and history of Melbourne (Hoddle Street named after the surveyor responsible for the grid of the streets and Batman Avenue, which refers to Explorer John Batman, rather than the superhero). **The smaller lanes reflect Melbourne's entrepreneurial past**, these streets are self named, often after pubs and hotels, some of which no longer exist.

But Melbourne's street names aren't static – more recent commemorative additions are ACDC Lane after the rock group as well as Dame Edna Place after the character played by Barry Humphries. In East Melbourne, Bionic Ear Lane can also be found, commemorating Professor Graeme Clark, developer of the cochlear implant. Furthermore, the city has made attempts at commemorating the Aboriginal community more recently, such as Wurundjeri Way, the Birrarung Marr park and the William Barak Bridge.



*Brisbane CBD*

Brisbane however, tells a different story and approach to city-building. Brisbane screams colonialism – **the main streets** are named after the British Royal family, female streets running one way, whilst the male streets run perpendicular. The city seems meticulously planned – unlike Melbourne, street names in Brisbane don't hold all of the little stories and also prominent individuals in the city's history don't seem to be commemorated until a little further out.





*Bury St Edmunds Town Centre*

Similarly the street names of Bury St Edmunds reflect the story of the town. We see the importance of the abbey in the emergence of a medieval town: Northgate Street, Westgate Street, Out Westgate, Southgate Street, Northgate Street, Abbeygate Street, Raingate Street and The Vineyards. We also see functional names such as Cornhill and Butter Market. In a society where most people were illiterate, streets were referred to by function, much like the importance of the pictures on pub signs.

Places get their names for a reason, and this should be fully embraced (the name of the town itself has a story to tell, with the burial of a saint.) Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu comment that “The merit of a place name as a commemorative vehicle is that it transforms an official discourse of history into a shared cultural experience that is embedded into practices of everyday life.” In other words, place names are a way to experience history on a daily basis.

Going back to the members of the Bury St Edmunds Fawcett society, they feel that the street names in their town portray a patriarchal history. As we have seen, street names tend to reflect the attitudes of their contemporary societies, but Rehahn has overstepped the mark when she says “if you only see streets named after famous

men, you think only men are famous.” People aren’t stupid and many don’t engage with place names on such a level anyway – when have you ever given thought to the names of places where you live and what it means? People know women are famous for many different reasons – from the Queen to Margaret Thatcher to Beyoncé – seeing a few street names named after men isn’t going to change that.

She complains that there is a lack of places named after women, and includes the example of Shakespeare Road, but there is no female equivalent of Shakespeare. Because of the patriarchal nature of past societies, many male greats don’t have female counterparts - this should be acknowledged rather than scorned. There are many great women in history, from Sappho to Elizabeth I to Rosa Parks, there’s just seems to be less of them. It’s not that women aren’t important, just so often their society didn’t allow them to have a voice. Throughout history many groups have been marginalised for a variety of reasons, be it gender, sexuality, race, nationality...the list is endless. We should learn from the past and move on, rather than seek to eliminate it.

The society hopes that new estates will be named after women, in particular local women to “correct the imbalance.” They have picked out a selection of candidates including Norah Lofts, Mary Beale and Rose Mead, not exactly ‘well known greats.’ And couldn’t it also be argued that by picking a selection of ‘only-just famous’ women that the society have taken a step in the opposite direction? What does it say about our society when an estate is only named after women, who someone had to go search for in the depths of the past? Surely an estate named after important women as well as men, is a more progressive step to equality than one distinctly named only after women, in some attempt to ‘correct the past’ because people don’t want to acknowledge it?

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(This post has been influenced and inspired Dr Sarah Pinto’s ‘Commemorative Naming’ lecture for HIST3614 History and Popular Culture at the University of Queensland.)

Further (Academic) Reading:

Maoz Azaryahu, 'The power of commemorative street names', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 1996.

Robin Kearns and Lawrence Berg, 'Proclaiming Place', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 2002.

Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman & Maoz Azaryahu, 'Geographies of Toponymic Inscription', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2010.

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*Do you think that street names are important? Do we need to name more streets after women?*



## **Toponomastica, poche le strade italiane intitolate a donne**

E' di gran lunga inferiore a quella maschile la presenza femminile nei nomi di strade e piazze delle città italiane: la media di luoghi urbani "in rosa" è del 6,92% sul totale delle denominazioni stradali. Lo evidenzia una ricerca pubblicata sull'ultimo numero di Anci Rivista, utilizzando anche i dati del sito [www.toponomasticafemminile.it](http://www.toponomasticafemminile.it) che ha censito un campione di 47 Capoluoghi. A Roma su 14.270 strade solo 336 sono dedicate a donne, cioè il 2,3% (si va da quasi il 14% del Municipio IV ad appena l'1,75% del XV). A Napoli 1.165 strade sono dedicate a uomini e 55 a donne, mentre a Torino su 1.241 strade 27 sono per le donne. Le città con il maggior numero di piazze e strade al femminile sono Perugia (con il 18,09%), seguita da Bolzano con il 15,96%, e appunto da Napoli con il 13,45. Anche se nel Capoluogo partenopeo su 95 strade, piazze e vichi intitolati ai santi, quelli dedicati alle sante sono soltanto 17. A Frosinone i nomi di via e di piazze in rosa sono il 13,06% del totale (femminili più maschili), mentre a Siracusa l'11,24%, a Caltanissetta l'11,20%, a Trento il 10,40%, a Messina il 9,82%, a Catania il 9,55%, a Viterbo il 9,41% e a Cosenza l'8,33%. La città meno attenta alla presenza delle donne nelle denominazioni stradali è Arezzo con il 2,30% di odonimi femminili, seguita da Pordenone 2,44%, Potenza 3,21%, Trieste 3,32%, Belluno 3,36%, Vicenza 3,60%, Gorizia 3,66%, e Padova 3,99%.

## Sign of the times as women call for street name equality; LABOUR COUNCILLOR TAKES NOTICE OF CAMPAIGN IN ITALY.

Byline: MARTIN SHIPTON Chief Reporter martin.shipton@walesonline.co.uk

WHEN it comes to roads [commemorating](#) Wales' famous sons and daughters, the use of men's names has long been streets ahead.

But a council is set to consider a pioneering move to [redress](#) a gender [imbalance](#) that has seen the John Streets of the nation flourish at the expense of their female counterparts.

Cambridge history graduate Jessica Powell, 24, was elected in May to represent her home patch of Pontnewydd as a Labour member of Torfaen council - which has 32 men and 12 women.

Inspired by an [Italian campaign](#), she intends proposing a motion that, in future, as many new streets should be named after women as after men.

The PhD student, who is also one of Wales' youngest councillors, said: "I was contacted by a local guy who told me about a campaign called 'Pink Streets' which started in Rome and has now spread to other parts of Italy.

"People thought that it was unfair that so many streets were named after men, and that more recognition should be given to women who have made a contribution to their community. "It seemed a good idea, and while there hasn't been a survey on the scale of the work done in Italy, there is no doubt in my mind that women are under-represented in street names. "In Torfaen, there are quite a few streets named after the Hanbury family, for example, who were big landowners and founded an ironworks in Pontypool.

"We also have streets named after the likes of the Wesley brothers, the Methodist preachers.

One of the few female names used in street names is Victoria, after the Queen who reigned for most of the 19th century.

"I'm not suggesting renaming any streets, and I don't have a problem with existing

names.

"But I think that in future it would be fair to have some kind of gender balance when new streets are built."

Ms Powell has already attracted the support of the majority Labour group - which is made up of 21 men and nine women.

She added: "I was a little apprehensive about raising it as an issue, because I thought some people would take the view that there were more important things to concentrate on in these tough times.

"But at the group meeting there was a lot of support, and people understood the point I was making from an equality point of view.

"I'm looking forward to proposing the motion at a full council meeting next month." If the motion gets passed, as seems almost certain, the council will ask future housing developers to come up with gender-balanced street name proposals.

Under current legislation it is local authorities that are responsible for approving the names of new streets.

In Italy, the organisation Toponomastica Femminile (TF) (toponomastica means toponymy, the study of place names) was set up in January with the aim of persuading councils to give women equal [prominence](#) to men when streets are named.

The group's volunteers have e-mailed every city council in Italy, proposing that leaders of local government commit to dedicating half of their street and place signs to notable women from Italy and around the world.

TF said earlier this year it had only been able to collaborate with 290 Italian councils, or less than 1% of the total councils in the country.

Puglia is the most collaborative region, with 125 councils having agreed to count their "pink streets".

But several regions - including Tuscany, Liguria, Trentino [Alto Adige](#) and Umbria - had not replied to the proposal.

Italy ranks average in its male-female signage among European countries, with roughly 5% of signs carrying the names of women.

TF was founded by Maria Pia Ercolini, a professor of geography at Giulio Verne College in Rome.

"During my research, I realised that women are culturally invisible," she said.

"For that reason I decided to share information about this kind of gender discrimination and put pressure on every single [township](#) in Italy, so that 50% of the

streets, squares or gardens would be named after women," she added.

CAPTION(S):

Jessica Powell in Cwmbran, Torfaen, with a sign named after one of the Wesley brothers