

Written evidence submitted by the Fawcett Society

Summary

Drawing on our recent reports 'A House for Everyone: The Case for Modernising Parliament' and 'Open House: where next for gender equality in Parliament?' The Fawcett Society submission focuses on the need for the Modernisation Committee to prioritise gender equality in their work this Parliament. Through polling MPs and convening experts, we conclude that though gender equality in Parliament is improving, the culture and experiences of women especially ethnic minority and disabled women, are damaging the reputation of Parliament and need urgent attention. Outdated working practices, high frequency of sexual harassment and bullying, lack of representation in senior roles including on Select Committees and limitations of the physical environment mean Parliament remains a man's world.

Overall, we recommend the Committee take heed of this analysis and prioritise work on improving gender equality and reducing sexual harassment in Parliament. The Committee could also play a major role in establishing an independent accountability mechanism to track gender equality in Parliament as part of supporting the Fawcett Society's drive to establish a Women's Caucus in the House of Commons following our sisters in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For more information about this or our submission please contact publicaffairs@fawcettsociety.org.uk.

Summary of recommendations

In prioritising the need for a more gender equal Parliament, the Modernisation Committee should consider the following key recommendations:

- 1) Establish an independent accountability body/mechanism to monitor and report on progress toward a more inclusive parliament
- 2) Increase women's representation, focusing on ethnic minority and disabled women, using leadership quotas and targeted support.
- 3) Promote family-friendly working practices, including enhanced parental leave, flexible hours, and remote participation options
- 4) Ensure parliamentary spaces are inclusive, improving accessibility for women and disabled MPs through better seating, toilets, and childcare facilities.
- 5) Incorporate gender-responsive practices into parliamentary processes.
- 6) Strengthen the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) for greater transparency, independence, and victim protection.
- 7) Investigate changes to sitting hours, online and proxy voting options

What topic(s) do you think the Modernisation Committee should prioritise and how do they link to one or more of the strategic aims set out in the Leader's memorandum?

- 1) **Topic 1: Establishing a Women's Caucus in the UK Parliament**

- There are now more women MPs than ever before in the House of Commons which a major cause for celebration. However, there's further to go to make sure Parliament is a safe and supportive place for women.
- Around the world, Women's Caucuses provide space for women to network, support each other and use their voices for the things that matter to women parliamentarians and women across the country. It is high time the British Parliament followed sisters around the world with a Women's Caucus.
- The Fawcett Society is calling on the Modernisation Committee to support our call for the establishment of a Women's Caucus in the UK Parliament. The 2022 Kigali Declaration for Gender Equality and Gender Sensitive Parliament included an agreement that signatories would establish Women's Caucuses. The House of Commons, through its membership of the Inter Parliamentary Union, committed to the Kigali Declaration.
- A Women's Caucus is the Women Members of Parliament working together to advancing issues that affect women inside and outside of the Parliament.
- The issues to be addressed in the Caucus will be decided upon by women MPs and can include issues that affect women in the country and within Parliament. The Women's Caucus should have:
 - A permanence and status in House of Commons
 - Resourcing and servicing directly by the House of Commons

2) Topic 2: Creating a Gender-Sensitive Parliament

- a. One of the key strategic aims set out in the Leader's memorandum is to create a more inclusive and representative Parliament. This includes promoting diversity and ensuring that Parliament is an environment where all MPs and staff, regardless of gender, can thrive. There is some way to go to achieve this goal.
- b. In 2023, the Fawcett Society produced 'A House for Everyone: The Case for Modernising Parliament'¹ which sets out the systemic barriers women face in Parliament, such as discriminatory working conditions, family-unfriendly hours, and a lack of gender-sensitive policies.
- c. The APPG for Women and Parliament has also commissioned and published research in this area. Most recently, 'Open House: where next for gender equality in Parliament?'² summarises key challenges and ways forward.
- d. Prioritising gender equality in Parliament would directly support the strategic goal of making Parliament a modern, equitable workplace that reflects the diversity of society. Ensuring that Parliament's processes, culture, and physical environment are designed with gender in mind would be a crucial step toward inclusivity.

3) Topic 3: Addressing Sexual Harassment and Bullying in Parliament

¹ The Fawcett Society (2024) A House for Everyone <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/a-house-for-everyone>

² Women in Parliament APPG (2023) Open House <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/gjwl/assets/open-house-where-next-for-gender-equality-in-parliament-full-report.pdf>

- a. **Link to Strategic Aims:** Another strategic aim is the creation of a Parliament that operates with the highest standards of integrity, transparency, and professionalism. The current prevalence of sexual harassment and bullying in Parliament severely undermines these values.
- b. Reports of a toxic working culture, where abuse and harassment are often left unchallenged, not only affect individual wellbeing but also erode public trust in Parliament as an institution.
- c. Addressing this issue aligns with the Leader's commitment to improving Parliament's workplace culture by making it safe and respectful for everyone, thereby enhancing both its credibility and functionality.

Why would the topic(s) benefit from the attention of the Modernisation Committee?

4) Creating a Gender-Sensitive Parliament

- a. The Fawcett Society has identified several challenges that prevent Parliament from being fully inclusive for women. These include:
 - i. **Outdated working practices:** Parliamentary working hours are often incompatible with family life, and the lack of remote participation options exacerbates this, particularly for MPs who are mothers or carers.
 - ii. **Physical environment:** Parliament's buildings were designed for men, from seating arrangements to toilet facilities, reinforcing a sense that women do not belong in the space. Fawcett recommends changes such as better parental leave policies, flexible working, and making Parliament more accessible for disabled MPs, all of which would benefit from the Modernisation Committee's attention.
 - iii. **Representation:** While women's representation has improved, women, especially ethnic minority and disabled women, remain underrepresented in senior positions and key decision-making roles. Prioritising gender-sensitive reforms would help close this gap, ensure that parliamentary processes are fair and supportive, and increase women's participation in shaping national policy.
- b. Modernising Parliament to meet the needs of women and other underrepresented groups will result in better legislation, as decision-makers will better reflect the population they serve. It also sets a positive precedent for other sectors and workplaces in the UK.

5) Addressing Sexual Harassment and Bullying

- a. According to Fawcett's findings, Parliament's culture is rife with sexual harassment and bullying. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) has been a step forward, but more needs to be done.
- b. The current complaints system is perceived as insufficient, and there is a lack of confidence in its ability to deliver justice, particularly for junior staff and women who face harassment from those in positions of power.

- c. By prioritising this issue, the Modernisation Committee can address critical gaps in the ICGS, such as ensuring independence in the investigative process and providing better support for victims. Reforms in this area would not only improve the working environment but also help rebuild public trust in Parliament as a model of fairness and integrity.

Are you aware of examples from other Parliaments relevant to the topic(s) which may be interesting for the Modernisation Committee to consider?

6) Gender-Sensitive Parliaments:

- a. The **Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)** has developed a detailed framework on creating gender-sensitive parliaments, which includes recommendations such as setting gender quotas for committee memberships, providing childcare facilities on-site, and introducing gender-responsive budgeting to ensure that all policies and resources are evaluated for their impact on men and women.
- b. The **Rwandan Parliament** is a leading example of gender parity, where over 60% of its MPs are women. This was achieved through institutional reforms, including gender quotas and political education programs aimed at increasing women's political participation. The **Finnish Parliament** also offers a model of inclusive working practices, with gender equality policies integrated into every aspect of parliamentary life, including specific policies to support women MPs who are balancing work and family life.

7) Addressing Sexual Harassment and Bullying:

- a. The **Scottish Parliament** has developed a robust system for addressing sexual harassment and bullying, including an independent complaints process. Their model has been praised for being transparent and for providing clear pathways for complaints to be made and resolved.
- b. In **Canada**, Parliament introduced a comprehensive code of conduct for addressing sexual harassment in 2014, which applies to MPs, staff, and other parliamentary personnel. This code ensures that complaints are handled by an independent body, and there are mandatory training programs for MPs and staff to prevent harassment. The Modernisation Committee could consider these examples as they reflect proactive approaches to creating safer work environments in legislative bodies.

Is there any existing work relevant to the topic(s) which you think the Modernisation Committee can build on?

8) Gender-Sensitive Parliament:

- a. The Fawcett Society's **A House for Everyone** report offers a comprehensive set of recommendations for creating a more gender-sensitive Parliament. These include improving the accessibility of Parliament's facilities for women and disabled members, reforming parliamentary scheduling to be more family-

friendly, and ensuring more women are appointed to leadership positions. Key findings include:

- i. Only 37% of women MPs agreed that 'the culture in Parliament is inclusive for people like me', compared to a majority of men (55%)
 - ii. 69% of women MPs and 49% of all MPs have witnessed sexist behaviour in Parliament in the last five years
 - iii. 93% of women MPs said that online abuse or harassment has a negative impact on how they feel about being an MP
 - iv. 73% of women MPs said they 'do not use social media to speak on certain issues because of the abusive environment online', compared to 51% of men
- b. The report makes the following key recommendations:
- i. Parliament to establish an accountability mechanism that oversees and reports publicly on progress against recommendations made to date to create a more inclusive parliament
 - ii. Parliament to investigate changes to sitting hours, online and proxy voting options with IPSA to look at increased budget allocations for MPs' staffing, office running costs and childcare needs, so that MPs can fulfil the increasing demands of the role both in Westminster and their constituencies
 - iii. Government to ensure the Electoral Commission and local police are sufficiently resourced and equipped to enforce legal sanctions for intimidating candidates, campaigners, and representatives during election periods
 - iv. Government to amend the Online Safety Bill to better address the disproportionate levels of online abuse experienced by women, especially those from Black and minoritised backgrounds, and increase the accountability of tech companies
 - v. Political parties to introduce quotas to increase women's representation and ensure women, especially disabled women and women from Black and minoritised backgrounds, are being selected in winnable seats
- c. The APPG on Women in Parliament's report 'Open House: where next for gender equality in Parliament?' also sets out the progress made towards modernising Parliament to prioritise gender equality. Key recommendations include:
- i. Parliament to establish an accountability mechanism and independent body that oversees and reports publicly on progress against recommendations made to date to create a more inclusive parliament
 - ii. Parliament to investigate changes to sitting hours, online and proxy voting options with IPSA to look at increased budget allocations for MPs' staffing, office running costs and childcare needs, so that MPs can fulfil the increasing demands of the role both in Westminster and their constituencies

- iii. Reforming The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) making the process more transparent, increasing protections for victims, and ensuring better follow-up on complaints.
- iv. Pushing for the committee to conduct regular surveys on MPs experiences and views of childcare, facilities, access and work practices.
- v. Advocating for the committee to oversee the collection and publishing on diversity data on committee memberships (including witnesses, special advisors etc). The data collected must also include intersectional data on disability, ethnicity, and other protected characteristics.
- d. The **Good Parliament Report** (2016), authored by Professor Sarah Childs, also provides detailed recommendations that Parliament can build on. These include the need for gender audits of all parliamentary procedures and policies to ensure they are fair and inclusive, as well as establishing a gender-sensitive audit committee to oversee reforms.
- e. The **Women and Equalities Committee** has also produced several reports on issues related to gender equality, including in politics and Parliament. They should be involved in the Modernisation Committee's inquiry.

9) Addressing Sexual Harassment and Bullying:

- a. The **Cox Report** (2018) provides a detailed examination of bullying and harassment within Parliament and outlines key reforms needed to address these issues, including a more independent complaints process and greater accountability for senior MPs and staff who perpetrate harassment.
- b. The **Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS)**, while a starting point, needs to be strengthened. The Modernisation Committee can build on this by making the process more transparent, increasing protections for victims, and ensuring better follow-up on complaints. The ICGS's current limitations, make it essential that further reforms are introduced to ensure Parliament becomes a safe working environment for all.

10) Establishing a Leadership Structure for a Women's Caucus

- a. In **Wales** the Caucus is made up of all women in the Senedd, chaired by Joyce Watson MS and a Steering Group of representatives from each party.
- b. The **Scottish** Women's Caucus sits under the auspices of the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP.
- c. In **Northern Ireland** the Cross-Party Steering Group overseeing the Caucus' strategic direction meets bi-monthly.
- d. In the Oireachtas (the **Irish** Parliament), the Women's Parliamentary Caucus has elections of a Chair and Vice-Chair from across the cross-party membership. The Chair and Vice-Chair are rotated intermittently.
- e. **Fawcett recommends** each party elect or nominate a member of a Women's Caucus Steering Committee. Political parties may wish to have deputies or spokespeople additionally, that will be within their remit. The Steering

Committee will drive the work of the Caucus, organise meetings and work to get formal recognition from the Speaker's Office.

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