

1. The statistics reflect the historic systemic sexism

Thank you to the Women and Equalities Select Committee for conducting an inquiry into “A Gender Sensitive Parliament”. The fight for women’s political equality is still on. In order to attract the full range of talented people into politics Parliament needs to be a modern and inclusive workplace.

The Good Parliament Report (July 2016) made 43 recommendations that would make for a more Gender Sensitive Parliament. Some have been implemented, others happened due to the Covid crisis (such as remote working and voting) but many recommendations are still outstanding. A new audit needs to be undertaken to assess progress.

The International Parliamentary Union report “Gender Sensitive Parliaments” (2011) has a questionnaire “Is your Parliament gender sensitive?” The first question is: “How many women are there in your Parliament?”

The statistics are key, what gets measured gets managed and the number of women elected demonstrates how accessible and attractive politics is for women.

In the UK only 220 of our 650 MPs are women. Men continue to outnumber women by 2:1 in the Commons. The Lords is worse with only 231 (27%) women peers out of a membership of 829.

In the 2019 general election just 12 extra women won seats, up from 208 to 220. At this rate it will take forty years, that is until 2060, for women to have equal seats and an equal say in running the country and planning the future. Since women won the right to vote, over 100 years ago, over 5000 MPs have been elected but only 552 have been women.

This is not only a democratic deficit, it is a democratic disgrace. It is a historic and persistent problem. We need women on the front benches, back benches and on both sides of the chamber in similar numbers to men. We need to build a better democracy!

The principle of gender equality of representation transcends party politics. All political parties and Parliament need to work together to right this wrong. Some parties have had more success than others. Thirty nine countries achieve better gender balance in their parliaments than the UK. This shows that solutions can be found and that it is possible for women to participate in politics. The UK should be a world leader.

2. What is 50:50 Parliament?

50:50 Parliament is a non-partisan campaign taking action for better gender balance at Westminster. It started in 2013 as a voluntary, grassroots pressure

group, raising awareness with a petition and running events with a team of Ambassadors. The petition called upon Parliament and the parties “to collaborate and do something to make Parliament more gender balanced - like life!” Over 50,000 people signed the petition and many wrote comments. One comment on the petition sums it up: “Apart from the obvious injustice we are in no position to under-utilise so much talent” Helen, Canterbury.

Since 50:50 started in 2013 the number of women in the Commons has increased by 73, up from 147 to 220. But if women are to have equal representation within the next 10 years then an extra 105 women need to be elected to Westminster, that is around 50 at each of the next two general elections.

50:50 has now developed into a funded organisation. We aim to inspire and recruit women to stand for elected office. We have created a network of support to help them progress in politics with our [#AskHerToStand](#) and [#SignUpToStand](#) campaigns.

In the 2019 UK general election fifty of the women standing were part of 50:50 and nine went on to win seats in the Commons. In fact six of the extra twelve women who won seats were part of 50:50.

We work with all the political parties to empower women into politics. When women click [#SignUpToStand](#) we help them build their **Personal Political Profiles**, allocate “**50:50 Buddies**”, invite them to weekly party specific **50:50 BiteSize meetings**, where they gain expert advice, and offer **bespoke support** to women from minority groups. We are building a **50:50 Network** to help women get selected and elected. This is a pipeline of political talent.

3. What steps should be taken to build a gender sensitive Parliament and increase the number of women MPs in the House of Commons?

50:50 Parliament welcomed the publication of [The Good Parliament Report](#) and the setting up of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion. We continue to urge that the reports recommendations be implemented.

Below we outline some actions that could be taken by Parliament and the political parties to create a more gender sensitive Parliament and increase the number of women elected to Westminster.

3.1 Support for women in politics needs to be established at a local party association level.

On 21 November 2020 the [Prime Minister](#) and [all party leaders](#) made videos stating support for a gender balanced, 50:50 Parliament. They encouraged women to put themselves forward to stand for elected office. This had an immediate impact with hundreds of women coming to [#SignUpToStand](#) with 50:50 and the political parties

directly over the course of the next few days.

It is great that party leaders showed enthusiasm to recruit women into politics but it cannot just come from the top, it also needs to be implemented within local party associations. Established constituency party groups need to be committed to supporting women who want to be selected and elected at local and national level.

3.2 Retain existing women MPs

Given the lack of women at Westminster it is essential that steps are taken to retain current women MPs. The actions required range from ensuring that parental leave is a given, that remote working remains a possibility as well as building a more gender sensitive parliament as recommended by the Good Parliament Report.

During any boundary changes women should be given priority. Studies suggest that parties may place precedence on incumbents or senior MPs. These factors could have a deleterious effect on women's representation, particularly for new women MPs who have not yet established themselves.

3.3 Reinstatement of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion

The Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion had been taking forward some of the recommendations made by the [Improving Parliament Report July 2014](#) and the [Good Parliament Report July 2016](#). However the group has not met since Autumn 2018. The group needs to be reinstated and conduct an audit of how many recommendations have been implemented and decide upon how to action the outstanding suggestions.

3.4 More respect for women needs to be demonstrated online and offline

Women MPs and those in public life are subjected to three times more vitriol and intimidation online than men. This is a major deterrent and effectively undermines women's representation and right to free speech.

In 2016 Yvette Cooper launched the "Reclaim the Internet" campaign with Maria Miller MP and stated "We can't let public debates be dominated by those who are most aggressive." There have been many initiatives attempting to overcome abusive messages and behaviour but the problem persists.

The continuation of violence against women dominated the speeches at this year's [International Women's Debate](#) in the House of Commons. Nearly all female MPs have been threatened. Much more needs to be done to stop violence against women both online and offline. Consideration should be given to classing misogyny as a "hate crime".

More education, public awareness and tighter legislation is required to ensure that

respect for women in private and public life is recognised as a priority along with their personal safety.

3.5 Political Culture

To encourage women, and indeed anyone, to become engaged with politics, it is essential that politicians treat each other with respect, even if they have differing political opinions. This point was made as recommendation 1 to the Speaker in the Good Parliament Report. Progress has been made concerning the culture within Parliament. The changes made and their positive impact needs to be amplified.

3.6 Funding & financial support for women candidates

Women not only earn less than men but are also more likely to adopt caring roles and undertake unpaid work that makes them more financially dependent. Standing as a political candidate is costly and women have less access to funds. If Parliament wants to encourage more women to stand it should look to providing some financial assistance to meet their expenses.

Political parties should, in general, look at limiting the amount that those seeking selection as a party candidate can spend on their campaign to get selected.

3.7 Legislate for parenting leave and create a parent friendly Parliament

Making provision for parental and leave is an essential component of a modern, inclusive institution. The right to maternity leave that has been legislated for government ministers needs to be extended to all MPs to ensure that anyone who is starting a family while serving at Westminster is able to meet their parenting and family responsibilities. A system of proxy or locum cover needs to be established.

Around 80% of people become parents but the statistics indicate that Parliament is currently generally unattractive or inaccessible to parents. As [The Good Parliament Report](#) States:

“There is as previously noted a sizeable ‘motherhood gap’ in Parliament, with fewer women MPs having children relative to both male MPs, to women in comparable professions and to women more widely in society. Some 45% of women MPs do not have children compared to only 28% of male MPs.”

3.8 Continuing with technology that allows for remote speaking and voting

We are living in the digital internet era and the Covid crisis has demonstrated that more remote working in Parliament is possible. The opportunities that new technology present in allowing more remote speaking, voting and participation should be grasped.

Remote working and voting enable MPs to spend more time in their constituencies, improving local communication, enhancing democracy and enabling them to balance their family commitments more easily.

3.9 Create returner-ship programmes

Parliament and the parties should develop returner-ship programmes aimed at including women later in life when family commitments change.

Corporations have created “returner-ship” programmes to encourage women back into the paid employment. Parliament and the parties could run similar programmes. 50:50 is launching a campaign “Politics Make a Great Second Career” reaching out to older women to encourage them to consider standing.

3.9 Run another big #AskHerToStand Day to recruit women

Studies have shown that women are 50% less likely than men to consider themselves potential candidates for elected office. There are numerous reasons for this but active recruitment campaigns, such as the #AskHerToStand day that 50:50 organised in November 2018, when over 300 women visited Westminster for the day, have a real impact. Hundreds of women were inspired to #SignUpToStand, many of whom went on to be elected to their local councils.

The online #AskHerToStand day in November 2020 was another huge success. These special recruitment drives demonstrate that Westminster does welcome women.

3.10 More action within the political parties - 50:50 shortlists

The parties need to continue employing better recruitment methods reaching out beyond their normal membership. They need to bolster their training, support and mentoring programmes. Consideration should be given to extra funding and bursaries for women candidates and having 50:50 shortlists along with proven solutions such as A lists and all-women shortlists.

3.11 Bring a debate to the Commons concerning women at Westminster

As recommended by [Improving Parliament Report](#) a Parliamentary debate should be initiated to discuss the full range of solutions as to how and when Parliament might achieve a better gender balance.

4. Why it matters: Representation, Resources, Responsibility, Respect

Representation - Parliament is meant to be a representative institution and representation shapes policy. Women’s life experiences and opinions count as much as men’s. It is essential that women are able to participate in politics at the

highest level.

Resources - Parliament should draw upon the widest possible pool of talent, including the 32 million women who live and work in the UK. Women account for over 50% of the graduates and 47% of the paid workforce. They dominate some professions, such as nursing (90% women) and teaching (75% women). A large proportion of unpaid carers are women. The work that women do and the role that they play is crucial to social well being and this experience should feed into our legislative process.

Responsibility - Building the future is a joint responsibility. It is a woman's world and solving some of the major global problems going forward should be a joint endeavour. Research from the IMF shows a higher proportion of women on the boards of banks and financial supervision agencies was associated with greater stability. To quote Christine Lagard "Greater diversity always sharpens thinking, reducing the potential for groupthink," adding "This very diversity also leads to more prudence, and less of reckless decision-making that provoked the [financial] crisis."

Respect - Parliament and the political parties should be leading the way in showing respect for women. It is essential that our leaders and those people who have influence and run our political systems ensure that women are made to feel welcome, encouraged to contribute and supported in standing for elected office.

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