

Written evidence by Centenary Action Group to the Women and Equalities Select Committee
inquiry into Gender Sensitive Parliament

Introduction

1. [Centenary Action Group \(CAG\)](#) is a cross-party coalition of organisations, activists and politicians campaigning for an equal and representative democracy where women are directly involved in the decisions that affect their lives without discrimination or fear of violence and harassment. Member's include Jo Cox Foundation, Electoral Reform Society, Glitch, Pregnant Then Screwed, Muslim Women's Network, Labour Women's Network and Conservative Women's Organisation.
2. The British Parliament is not representative of the communities it serves. Women make up 51% of the UK population, 14% identify as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic and 16% of the adult population identify as having a disability. Yet, there are 220 women MPs and only five of the 23 cabinet members are women - making up just 21.7%. 10% of MPs are Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic and fewer than 1% of MPs are disabled.
3. As well as the barriers that women face in entering politics, including online abuse and financial costs; parliamentary practices, such as unpredictable hours and a lack of parental leave, disproportionately impact women's political participation.
4. To be truly diverse, elected representatives must reflect the full spectrum of diversity in society. Diversity drives more effective and inclusive policymaking, allowing governments to better represent the populations they serve¹. Research indicates that parliaments are more likely to substantively tackle key issues such as childcare, violence against women and maternal mortality, when an increased number of female legislators are elected². As the impacts of COVID-19 continue, diverse representation is even more important in ensuring that existing inequalities are not further compounded by gaps in representation at a local and national level.

Recommendations

5. Implement the 21 evidence-based recommendations for a more representative Parliament outlined by Dr Jess. C. Smith and Sarah Childs³. Recommendations include:
 - The Leader of the House should move a Motion giving effect to any recommendation of the Procedure or Liaison Committees on hybridity, giving the House time for debate and allowing for a free vote.
 - The House should establish a new Reference Group to lead on the Diversity Sensitive Parliaments agenda.
 - During R&R, the House should provide remote voting for all Members and centre hybrid and remote participation in all planning for a restored House of Commons.

¹ Centenary Action Group (2020). "Data Drives Diversity: A Simple Step to More Transparent Politics", Centenary Action Group https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f6c6785a30f513e35cda046/t/5f71fcc6f2eb6a05700e4e01/1601305800688/data_drives_diversity_A4_report_OCTOBER_PAGES.pdf

² Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2020) "Women Political Leaders Key to More Equal and Caring Societies" <https://www.wfd.org/2020/07/29/women-political-leaders-key-to-more-equal-and-caring-societies-new-report-shows/>

³ Smith, J.C., (2021) "Remotely Representative Parliament: Lesson Learning from the Hybrid Parliament". Available at: <https://www.centenaryaction.org.uk/publications/remotely-representative-parliament>

- The House establish a formal Parliamentary Women's Caucus to lead on the gender sensitive House of Commons agenda and support a new Reference Group and the diversity sensitive parliaments agenda.
6. Enact Section 106 of the Equality Act, which would require political parties to publish candidate diversity data.
 7. The House Authorities must recognise online abuse against women MP's and their staff as a workplace harassment hazard and provide digital resilience training to women MPs and their staff.
 8. Include measures to tackle online abuse against women, including intersectional abuse, in the upcoming Online Harms Bill. Furthermore, 10% of the Digital Services Tax should be ringfenced for enforcement, education and empowerment.
 9. Continue to review and make public recommendations to the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme.
 10. Parties should revise and make public their own internal sexual harassment and complaint policies to ensure that they are transparent, quick, victim-focused and independent, and cover volunteers, employees and elected and appointed representatives so that sexual harassment is prevented.
 11. ILO Convention 190 on Ending Violence and Harassment in the World of Work to be ratified.
 12. Access to Elected Office Fund for disabled candidates to be reinstated and reformed.
 13. Accessibility should be a key consideration during restoration and renewal.
 14. IPSA should provide automatic and uniform funding for MPs who take parental leave.
 15. Reforms to the baby leave service requirement for MPs staff should be implemented.

Political participation and procedure

Virtual measures

16. The Hybrid Parliament allowed MPs who couldn't be physically present as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic to carry on representing their constituents from home in many Parliamentary activities. For many, including disabled people and those with caring responsibilities, being able to join meetings virtually has made politics more accessible.
17. During the first wave of the pandemic, the House of Commons Library found that female MPs were more likely than male MPs to use virtual participation during 'hybrid proceedings'. In addition, more than half of women MPs took advantage of proxy-voting, due to Covid-19 medical reasons and caring responsibilities, which we know are overwhelmingly gendered⁴. Retaining elements of Hybrid Parliament long-term for those who need it would help increase the gender sensitivity of Parliament.

⁴ House of Commons Library (2020) "Coronavirus: What does data show about men and women MPs in the hybrid Commons?". Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/men-and-women-mps-in-the-hybrid-commons/>

18. Century Action Group's new report 'Remotely Representative Parliament: Lesson Learning from the Hybrid Parliament'⁵, written by Dr Jess C Smith and Professor Sarah Childs, sets out 21 recommendations for a 21st century Parliament which is inclusive and responsive. Building on the style of The Good Parliament Report⁶ each recommendation is made the responsibility of particular individuals or groups within the House, detailing the necessary steps to be taken. These recommendations would see an effective virtual Commons that compliments rather than detracts from the physical one. Where there is no meaningful detriment to the overall effectiveness of the House of Commons, Members should be free and entitled to decide how they participate.
19. The Remotely Representative House recognises the many virtues of physical parliaments but argues that hybridity has significant benefits. These benefits relate to the core work of parliaments – representation, scrutiny, and accountability – and in respect of realizing a Parliament properly representative of those it represents. Implementing these recommendations would establish a more inclusive and effective House of Commons than its predecessors. One that looks like those it represents, is hospitable to all, and is responsive to the needs and interests of the British public. It is on these grounds that the House of Commons should continue on a hybrid basis, post-pandemic; this should be the norm for a 21st Century Parliament.

Improving diversity of candidates through Section 106 of the Equality Act

20. While reforming policies and practises within Parliament is important, steps must be taken to address barriers to becoming an MP. A simple first step for the PM to achieve 50:50 Parliament would be to enact section 106 of the Equality Act which would require political parties to publish diversity data.
21. The case for the publication of data to drive change and best practice is not new. The introduction of mandatory annual reporting on the gender pay gap from 2017 was steered by the same logic: that collecting information promotes transparency which in turn drives change. Such public information can illuminate particular areas of weakness to organisations, thereby incentivising remedial action.
22. The Women and Equalities Committee has also previously called for the Government to bring into force Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, stating that “publication of this information is vital for public and parliamentary scrutiny of the record of political parties in selecting a diverse slate of parliamentary candidates. We also recommend that the Government bring forward legislative proposals to empower the Electoral Commission to collect and host this data, to ensure consistency and transparency from political parties.”⁷
23. CAG's report 'Data Drives Diversity', sets out why Section 106 must be enacted and how this would work in practice⁸.

⁵ Smith, J.C., (2021) "Remotely Representative Parliament: Lesson Learning from the Hybrid Parliament". Available at: <https://www.centenaryaction.org.uk/publications/remotely-representative-parliament>

⁶ Childs, S. (2016) "The Good Parliament Report"

⁷ Women and Equalities Committee (2017) "Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 election"

⁸ Centenary Action Group (2020). "Data Drives Diversity: A Simple Step to More Transparent Politics", Centenary Action Group https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f6c6785a30f513e35cda046/t/5f71fcc6f2eb6a05700e4e01/1601305800688/data_drives_diversity_A4_report_OCTOBER_PAGES.pdf

Violence against women in politics

Online abuse

24. We don't just need to get women into Parliament, they need to be able to do their job and to stay. Abuse and intimidation are commonly experienced by women politicians and electoral candidates. In 2016, a study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 82% of the women politicians surveyed had experienced some form of psychological violence; 44% had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction; and 65% had been subjected to sexist remarks. Women politicians of colour are 34% more likely to be targets of online harassment than their white counterparts⁹. At the 2019 General Election, several women MPs stood down, citing the continued abuse they received online as a key reason. The House Authorities must recognise online abuse against women MP's and their staff as a workplace harassment hazard and provide more support, including digital resilience training.
25. The use of digital spaces has increased significantly in light of COVID-19, and with it has come reports of an increase in abuse and harassment online¹⁰. The Online Harms Bill is an opportunity to tackle this but there is concern amongst civil society organisations that the white paper falls short when addressing the disproportionate levels of online harms faced by women and those with multiple protected characteristics¹¹. Recent revelations from Facebook that targeting politicians and candidates for political office with death threats and threats of violence highlights the importance of engaging with social media platforms at a legislative level to work to prevent this abuse.
26. The government can also move towards ending online abuse and harassment against women in politics and public life through committing 10% of the digital services tax to the following three areas: enforcing existing legislation on online abuse and increasing police resources; educating the public on the importance of good online citizenship; empowering individuals and organisations working to end online abuse. Wider gendered abuse online reverberates into the political sphere, where women in politics face a disproportionate level of abuse.

Sexual harassment and assault

27. In UK politics, bullying and harassment is an issue which occurs on all sides of the political spectrum and particularly affects young women. In 2018, a House of Commons report revealed that 19% of Westminster staff had experienced sexual harassment in a single year. 39% of staff, MPs and peers had experienced bullying or harassment of some sort in Parliament¹².
28. Legislative changes and action by all political parties is urgently needed to make Parliament a safe workplace for women, free from the threat of gender-based violence and harassment.
29. In 2018, Parliament introduced the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS)¹³ to address bullying and harassment of Parliamentary staff. Following our campaign, we were pleased that in June 2020 MPs voted in favour of the creation of an independent expert

⁹ Amnesty International (2017) "The Alarming Impact of Online Abuse Against Women" <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/>

¹⁰ Glitch & End The Violence Coalition (2020) "The Ripple Effect: Covid-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse". Available at: <https://fixtheglitch.org/covid19/>

¹¹ <https://fixtheglitch.org/2020/12/17/uk-civil-society-organisations-respond-to-governments-online-harms-white-paper/>

¹² The Working Group on an Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy (2018) "ICGP Working Group Report".

¹³ Kelly, R. (2020) "Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme". Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8369/>

panel which will have the ability to investigate independently and impose sanctions including the suspension and exclusion of MPs in the most serious cases.

30. However, a recent 18-month review of the ICGS found “Its operation and processes have become over complex and there is a perception amongst the Parliamentary community that it is a stressful, isolated and lengthy process”¹⁴. Moreover, reports in 2020 found that nearly a quarter of MPs had not completed the Valuing Everyone training, which was introduced in May 2019 and is now mandatory for all MPs and Peers¹⁵.
31. Recent allegations, including the arrest of a Conservative MP on charges of rape that were later dropped, reveal that Parliament is still not a safe place for women to work. It was deeply concerning that both the Conservative Party and Labour Party allowed MPs faces charges of sexual harassment and/or rape to continue working as MPs without having the whip suspended while investigations were ongoing. In any other profession, anyone accused of serious sexual offences would face immediate suspension followed by an investigation.
32. Political parties must revise their own internal sexual harassment and complaint policies to ensure that they are transparent, quick, victim-focused and independent, and cover volunteers, employees and elected and appointed representatives so that sexual harassment is prevented. The parties’ own systems for dealing with complaints should be made publicly available and include specific protocols and training for the Whips or Chief Whip on how to respond to disclosures appropriately.
33. The government must also ratify the ILO Convention 190 on Ending Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, which would reinstate third-party harassment laws and introduce a legal duty on employers, including MPs, to prevent harassment of their employees.

Barriers for Disabled women and men

34. On average, it costs a candidate £11,118¹⁶ to contest an election and research shows that it takes women, on average, three times as long to be elected as their male counterparts. For disabled women and men, this cost is even higher. Scope’s 2019 report found that disabled people face additional costs of £583 a month when compared to able-bodied and neurotypical people across the UK. When standing for election, the costs of various necessary aides can be extortionate – one deaf candidate who stood in 2019 reported that the cost of an interpreter for the campaign was quoted as £20,000¹⁷.
35. Previously, the Government’s Access to Elected Office Fund, then EnAble Fund, provided funding to disabled candidates to cover the additional costs, but this has been scrapped. The removal of this funding effectively shuts many disabled people out of politics. This is additionally gendered, as ONS statistics show that women are more likely to be disabled than men, at 21.1% and 16.6%, respectively¹⁸. Government must reinstate funding for disabled candidates, as well as improve and promote the application process to make it more accessible.

¹⁴ Stanley, A. (2021) “The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme: Independent Eighteen Month Review”. Available at: https://www.parliament.uk/contentassets/e3ed0297d92a400bb249c887a30aa59b/icgs-18-month-review_final.pdf

¹⁵ <https://news.sky.com/story/boris-johnson-takes-part-in-most-informative-sexual-harassment-training-session-for-mps-12060511>

¹⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/parliament-candidate-ordinary-average-person-people-cost-a8519456.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/deaf-election-candidate-plans-legal-action-over-governments-access-costs-refusal/>

¹⁸ Office for National Statistics (2018) “Disability pay gaps in the UK”. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/disabilitypaygapsintheuk/2018#:~:text=4.,%25%20and%2016.6%25%2C%20respectively.>

Making Parliament more family friendly

36. Parliamentary practices like unpredictable hours and lack of maternity leave have resulted in a 'motherhood gap' in Westminster. In 2016, 45% of women MPs did not have children compared to only 28% of male Members.¹⁹ This changed slightly following the 2017 general election - 39% of female MPs having no children in comparison to 30% of male MPs.²⁰ Moreover, the available data also suggests women are more likely to enter politics once their children are significantly older. The average age of the MP's eldest child when they first entered Parliament was 15 years old for women and 11 years old for men.²¹
37. The House of Commons provisions for new mother and father MPs via baby leave proxy voting has increased the gender sensitivity of Parliament. As has the introduction of Maternity leave for cabinet ministers.
38. However, the lack of paid and staffed baby leave available to MPs poses a significant barrier to the gender sensitivity of Parliament. To tackle this, IPSA should standardise, and make automatic, cover for MPs on baby leave. CAG has outlined how this could best be implemented in response to the IPSA consultation on funding for MP parental leave cover²². Another issue that should be considered is the matter of parental leave for MPs staff – currently, if a staff member moves offices to work for another MP the service ceiling they have to meet to be eligible for leave resets, which may disadvantage mobility among women staffers in Westminster. Everyone working in politics must have the same access to parental leave.
39. A lack of advance knowledge and predictability in Parliament's sitting has previously been cited as a barrier to gender sensitivity, particularly for those with caring responsibilities²³. Call lists have been particularly helpful in tackling this and should continue post-lockdown.
40. For many women, being a local councillor is a pipeline to becoming an elected member of parliament²⁴. As set out in LGA's Twenty First Century Councils Toolkit²⁵, local councils should adopt more family friendly ways of working, including by introducing and formalising adoption and parental leave, childcare, and dependent care policies, as well as having a clear policy and culture encouraging councillors to ask for flexibility and to claim childcare costs and adult dependent care costs.

Conclusion

41. In the post Covid era, as we start to Build Back Better and level up society, there is no better place to start than in Parliament. Given the Prime Ministers recent pledge to work towards a

¹⁹ Childs, S., (2016) "The Good Parliament" Available at:

<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/medialibrary/sites/news/2016/july/20%20Jul%20Prof%20Sarah%20Childs%20The%20Good%20Parliament%20report.pdf>
²⁰ Results of the 2017 parenthood survey carried out Campbell and Childs with the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, see: Campbell, R. & Childs, S., (2018). "Where's Mum? She's in the House – Parents in Parliament". PSA Women and Politics Specialist Group. Available at: <https://psawomenpolitics.com/2018/10/01/wheres-mum-shes-in-the-house-parents-in-parliament/>

²¹ Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs (2019) Where's Mum? She's in The House – Parents in Parliament

²² Centenary Action Group (2021) "Consultation: Funding for MP parental leave cover and staff reservists leave". Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f6c6785a30f513e35cda046/t/6033acfee647656718516dad/1613999358778/Funding+for+MP+parental+leave+cover+CAG+response+Feb21.pdf>

²³ Inter-parliamentary Union (2018) "UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018". Available at: https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/lords-information-office/uk-parliament_gender-sensitive-parliament-audit_report_digital.pdf

²⁴ Fawcett Society (2018) "Strategies for success: Women's experiences of selection and election in UK Parliament". Available at: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/strategies-for-success>

²⁵ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-launches-twenty-first-century-toolkit-support-women-parents-and-carers>

representative 50:50 Parliament, it is time for the House to take steps to implement to policy changes that are necessary to make such a goal achievable.

42. The pandemic has proved that equality and diversity is not simply 'a nice to have' - it's far more. In Parliamentary terms, it is a way of securing the health and welfare of those most at risk. The House has a responsibility to help secure that equality, by ensuring Parliament is a place where women in all our diversity are considered, included and valued.

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