

Joint Submission to the Modernisation Committee from Centenary Action and Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London

Founded in 2018 by [Professor Helen Pankhurst CBE](#) to build on the legacy of the suffrage movement, [Centenary Action](#) is dedicated to achieving a gender-equal Parliament by 2028 – the centenary of equal franchise. We campaign for laws and policies to remove the barriers to women's political participation. As a leading voice for women's political representation, we unite over 100 activists, politicians, and academics in a cross-party coalition, driving change through collaboration and advocacy.

The [Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London](#) is chaired by [Julia Gillard](#), the only woman to have served as Prime Minister of Australia. The institute brings together rigorous research, practice and advocacy to break down the barriers to women becoming leaders, while challenging ideas of what leadership looks like. The institute works towards a world in which women of all backgrounds have fair and equal access to leadership.

1. 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?

The Modernisation Committee has stated it wants to improve the culture and working practices of Parliament including '*creating a more 'gender-sensitive Parliament'*'. We share the view that doing this will lead to a more accessible and inclusive place of work and we have set out how this could be achieved.

While the last election marked a milestone, with women making up 40% of MPs, at 51% of the population, women remain underrepresented. One significant barrier to increasing women's representation is the culture and practices within politics that not only deter women from entering the field but also contribute to their decision to leave. The House of Commons continues to reflect '*the traditions and preferences of Members who have historically populated it*', perpetuating a culture that often excludes women. A recent [report](#) from The Fawcett Society found that '*only 37% of women MPs agreed that 'the culture in Parliament is inclusive for people like me', compared to a majority of men (55%)*'.

Addressing cultural and structural issues is essential, not just for gender equity, but for strengthening our democratic system overall. [Research](#) shows that balanced representation enhances debate, brings forward issues affecting a broader range of constituents, and fosters public trust in government institutions, thus enhancing democracy. The upcoming centenary of equal franchise in 2028 should serve as a strong impetus for action – if not now, when?

Since 2014 there have been multiple reports and recommendations for parliamentary reform aiming to create a more gender-sensitive Parliament. However, the recent [Open House](#) report from the Women in Parliament APPG found that of the '92 recommendations, spanning 36 different themes... only a handful have actually been adopted.' The report identified that 'in order for Parliament to tackle the multitude of reviews and reforms that are required, it needs a guiding body which can keep up the momentum for reform, monitor changes and celebrate progress.' We believe the Modernisation Committee can fulfil this role.

We recommend applying a '[gender and diversity-sensitive test](#)' to all proposals for reform ensuring they:

- directly improve outcomes for women;
- are assessed for differential impacts on women and other underrepresented groups;
- avoid unintended consequences detrimental to MPs or staff.

By embedding gender and diversity sensitivity, the Committee can help transform the House of Commons into a [role-model institution](#) that embodies equality and fairness in both practice and culture.

[Centenary Action](#) and [Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London](#) (GIWL) are delighted to make this submission with the collaboration of the following; [Dr Minna Cowper-Coles](#), Amy Hewson-Smith, Devangi Roy Dinesh and Elona Gashi, GIWL ; [Professor Sarah Childs](#), Edinburgh University; [Professor Hilde Coffé](#) and [Dr. Kaitlin Senk](#), University of Bath; [Dr Jessica C. Smith](#), University of Southampton; [Professor Maria Sobolewska](#), University of Manchester; [Dr Sofia Collignon](#), Queen Mary University of London; [Dr Stefanie Reher](#), University of Strathclyde

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

1. Representation, data and monitoring

1.1 Gender-sensitive parliamentary audits

The concept of 'gender-sensitive parliaments,' developed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), envisions institutions structured to meet the needs of both women and men. The Modernisation Committee should sponsor a second [IPU Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit](#) by 2028, building on the [2018 Audit](#) and fulfilling the [2022 Kigali Declaration's](#) call for two audits within ten years—a commitment Parliament has already endorsed. To prepare for the 2028 Audit, the Committee should:

- lead efforts to collect comprehensive gender/sex and other disaggregated data, ensuring auditors have the necessary information;
- ensure the audit is bi-cameral;
- conduct the delayed third [Parents in Parliament](#) survey.

✓ Additionally, the Committee should recommend:

- the House of Commons maintains an institutional focus on gender and diversity sensitivity;
- a process is established for undertaking regular intersectional gender sensitivity audits;
- results are published with actionable progress plans.

1.2 Women's representation

The increase in female representation has been seen to have an [impact on the environment in Parliament](#), but even when women are numerically similarly represented, women still face systemic barriers in [contributing equally to parliamentary debates](#). Lower participation by women, impacts [decision-making and public trust](#). Women tend to participate more in debates on traditionally 'feminine' policy areas such as healthcare and education, perpetuating an uneven distribution of influence. However, some changes can support women's participation, for example [Research](#) shows female ministers increase female MPs' participation in debates by 20%, creating a 'role model' effect that challenges male-dominated norms.

✓ The Committee should recommend:

- enacting Section 106 of the Equality Act to require parties to publish candidate diversity data;
- [equal representation](#) of women in committee chairs and leadership roles;
- [gender equality](#) in select committee membership and witnesses;
- [gender sensitivity training](#) for MPs and staff to mitigate biases and promote equitable participation;
- [improved communication](#) of female MPs' successes and leadership to the public through media and other means.

2. Culture

2.1 Abuse harassment and intimidation

The Modernisation Committee should focus on the issue of abuse, harassment and intimidation. [Research](#) has shown this is a pervasive issue in UK politics with important [consequences for the working of MPs](#) and the wellbeing of their staff, with women MPs disproportionately affected and [BAME MPs experiencing approximately half of abusive tweets](#).

✓ The Committee should recommend:

- training and [support](#) for MPs to learn strategies for dealing with abuse and harassment;
- periodic reviews into abuse, harassment and intimidation experienced by MPs and evaluations on the instruments implemented to prevent and deal with it;
- [monitoring](#) the effectiveness of the [Online Safety Bill and Elections Act in 2023](#) in preventing online abuse of MPs;
- implementation of the [Jo Cox Civility Commission](#) recommendations.

2.2 Parliamentary culture

A survey from the *Reset: A Blueprint for a 21st Century Parliament* report found that many MPs' mental health had been negatively impacted by their role. Gender exacerbates these impacts, as 83% of the women surveyed reported that *'their gender had influenced their experience of being an MP'*. The survey also found that *'36% said effective mechanisms are not in place in Parliament to tackle inappropriate behaviour.'* The Modernisation Committee should look to address issues in parliamentary culture including unparliamentary behaviour and sexist working culture.

✓ The Committee should recommend:

- establishing a modern **independent HR function**;
- strengthening the MPs' Code of Conduct;
- **stricter sanctions** for sexism, sexual harassment, gendered bullying, and violence against women in politics;
- monitoring the Independent Complaints and Grievances Scheme (ICGS) and evaluating its effectiveness in addressing bullying, sexual harassment, and abuse;
- introducing **mandatory training** on bullying, harassment, and civility in politics for all MPs;
- ensuring **professional conduct** and respect is embedded in workplace culture;
- prioritising infrastructure and policy changes that promote gender equity and address workplace challenges unique to women MPs;
- trialing alternative formats for **Prime Minister's Questions** to encourage professionalism and reduce the masculinised, adversarial culture.

2.3 Customs and practices

The *Good Parliament* report highlights how certain parliamentary customs and practices can appear opaque, creating barriers and alienating some Members.

✓ The Committee should recommend:

- a review into customs and practices looking at standing orders, dress code and language and making recommendations to improve transparency and inclusivity.

3. Working practices

3.1 Gathering MPs experiences

A comprehensive **survey of MPs** would provide critical feedback on their experiences with existing working practices, facilities, and provisions and help to develop evidence-based reforms.

✓ The Committee should recommend:

- conducting a detailed survey of MPs to gather feedback on:
 - childcare services and support;
 - adequacy of facilities;
 - accessibility for individuals with disabilities or long-term health conditions;
 - effectiveness of working practices in promoting gender and diversity sensitivity;

- voting processes
- hybrid and remote working provisions;
- flexible working;
- parental leave arrangements;
- views on MP job-sharing.

3.2 Family friendly facilities and provisions

The [Open House](#) report stresses the importance of enhanced facilities, such as breastfeeding support, accessible parking and expanding childcare and parental leave provisions. [Evidence](#) shows that the public do not punish MPs for taking parental leave.

✓ The Committee should recommend:

- a [review for the provision of a crèche facility](#) on the Parliamentary Estate;
- regular audits to assess the adequacy of [child-friendly provisions](#);
- a review of parental leave provisions for MPs leading to a formalised system of leave.

3.3 Flexible working

The House of Commons is not keeping up with [workplace norms](#) of greater flexibility which would increase accessibility for those with caring responsibilities or disabilities.

✓ The Committee should recommend:

- a review around the possibilities of MPs [job sharing](#);
- expanding proxy voting policies to better support MPs with caring responsibilities, long-term health conditions or illnesses.

3.4 Hybrid and remote working

[Reintroducing remote working and hybrid measures](#), as successfully implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, could enhance inclusivity in parliamentary work. Virtual options, such as video calls, online ballots, remote and proxy voting, proved beneficial for MPs, particularly those balancing parliamentary duties with childcare responsibilities during the pandemic. [The Equality in the Heart of Democracy](#) report found that over half of female MPs utilised proxy voting during this period for COVID-related reasons or caregiving responsibilities. Making these practices permanent would better accommodate individuals with caring responsibilities or disabilities and make better use of MPs' time.

✓ The Committee should recommend:

- a [review of hybrid and remote working measures](#) introduced during the pandemic for their impact on diversity. Reintroducing those which improve predictability and flexibility;
- trialing options for [remote voting](#) on the Parliamentary Estate, including voting stations in key locations or desk-based voting within the Chamber, similar to practices in other legislatures;
- considering the introduction of a [hybridity principle](#) allowing MPs to choose whether to participate in parliamentary activities in person or remotely, provided there is no detriment to the overall effectiveness of the House of Commons.

3.5 Sitting hours

The *Open House* report highlights that late and unpredictable sitting hours, often extending past 10pm on Mondays, disproportionately impact MPs with caregiving responsibilities and undermine their work-life balance.

✓ The Committee should **recommend**:

- a review of sitting hours and trialling sittings of the House based around 'normal business hours'. This would aid work/life balance, support the mental and physical health of MPs, improve debate quality by reducing exhaustion and symbolically signal inclusivity;
- setting the recess dates for each parliamentary session at least one session in advance;
- introducing greater predictability in the scheduling of House Business to provide MPs with earlier notice of whipping requirements and the House's timetable to help them plan their time more effectively for both parliamentary and constituency duties;
- publishing call-lists in advance;
- reviewing the establishment of a 'Division Time', whereby multiple votes could be taken together at a designated daily time to streamline processes, save time and improve MP's ability to manage their responsibilities.

3.6 Job related costs and transparency

MPs with disabilities or dependents, especially those far from London, may face higher costs, risking stigma for being **more expensive**. MPs also need clear information about work related costs to aid decision making.

✓ The Committee should recommend:

- provision of transparent information on reimbursable job-related costs, explicitly including disability-related expenses, childcare, and caring responsibilities;
- using gender-inclusive terms like 'business costs' instead of 'expenses' to emphasise professionalism, reduce stigma, and improve public and media perceptions;
- **recording business costs** associated with having dependents at the aggregate level;
- assessing the need for greater support for **MPs' childcare costs**.

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

Australian Parliament

Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces (2021) identifies key drivers of bullying, harassment, and discrimination in Parliament, including power imbalances, gender inequality, and weak accountability. Recommendations from the report's *Framework for Action* include:

- foster a culture of inclusion and diversity through strong institutional leadership;
- revise policies and practices to eliminate discriminatory behaviour and language;
- implement a Code of Conduct to prohibit harassment and ensure accountability, prioritising the well-being and safety of all Members and staff.

Canadian Parliament

The 2023/24 annual report of the *'Members of the House of Commons Workplace Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy'*, outlines practical steps:

- include harassment prevention and promoting respect as part of onboarding training for MPs and staff;
- provide confidential support services for those affected by workplace harassment or violence.

The Parliament has also introduced [diversity and inclusion](#) initiatives aimed at ensuring the House is a *'workplace that is safe, inclusive and free of all forms of racism and discrimination.'*

European Parliament

Recent updates to its [anti-harassment policy](#) include:

- establish a mediation service to resolve workplace conflicts and promote a positive culture;
- review the Advisory Committee, aiming to *'shorten procedures, further options to protect complaints and further support the complainant'*;
- provide mandatory training on harassment prevention, conflict resolution, and team collaboration.

Scottish Parliament

The Scottish Parliament carried out an audit looking at barriers to equal representation and participation at Holyrood. The recommendations from the report *A Parliament for all* include:

- rule changes to ensure gender balance on key bodies and groups, and prohibit single-sex parliamentary committees;
- establishment of a forum for women MSPs to discuss issues of mutual interest;
- a review of the Parliament's sitting time data to determine what changes need to be made to limit unpredictability of sitting times and maximise inclusion and wellbeing;
- a proxy voting scheme covering parental leave, illness and caring/bereavement leave;
- establishing an Advisory Group to oversee the implementation of the recommendations.

Irish Parliament

The Irish Parliament established a [Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life](#). The Task Force's recommendations for the Houses of the Oireachtas included:

- a collective commitment to civil and respectful discourse in political debate;
- a comprehensive social media support service for Members;
- information sessions for Members and their staff on workplace security measures;
- reviewing and updating codes of conduct on appropriate behaviour for Members and setting out clear sanctions for breaches of these codes;
- undertaking a gender sensitive audit of parliament.

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

The recommendations in Professor Sarah Childs' [The Good Parliament](#) report provide a blueprint for a more representative and inclusive House of Commons.

Centenary Action's [Remotely Representative House](#) report examines how reforms introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic could be adapted to foster a more diversity-sensitive Parliament.

The Women and Equalities Select Committee report [Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive house of commons](#) makes recommendations based on their inquiry into gender sensitivity in the House of Commons.

The Fawcett Society's report [A House for Everyone: A Case for Modernising Parliament](#) looks at the experiences of women MPs and makes recommendations for culture change.

The APPG Women in Parliament report [Open House: Where next for gender equality in parliament](#) reviews recommendations made to date and highlights where action is still needed.

50:50 Parliament and Compassion in Politics report [Blueprint for a 21st century parliament](#) provides a starting point for modernising the UK Parliament.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's [Gender sensitising parliaments guidelines: standards and a checklist for parliamentary change](#) outlines gender-sensitivity standards.