

September 2023

**APPG ON WOMEN
IN PARLIAMENT**



Open House:

Where next for

gender equality

in Parliament?

Executive summary

This Report was researched by Dr Minna Cowper-Coles, of the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London, and Alex Shepherd and Zainab Asunramu of the Fawcett Society, and was written on a pro bono basis.

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group.

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Read the full report at:

fawcettsociety.org.uk/appg-on-women-in-parliament

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Foreword

In a world where democracy is under threat, we must redouble our efforts to strengthen democratic institutions at home, and one crucial element to any strong democracy is ensuring they are places where the full diversity of the UK population can be represented. The largest under-represented group in Parliament is women. Since women were first allowed to vote in national elections just over a century ago, we have made only slow inroads into the most important part of our democratic system, the House of Commons. Individual women have overcome substantial barriers of sexism and bias to have their voices heard but it remains the case that in the UK Parliament two men are elected for every one female MP. An assessment of the House of Lords is not part of this report but arguments in support of improved diversity in our scrutinising chamber are just as valid.

In the past 10 years, a series of reports and audits have changed the focus of the debate on female representation in Parliament from individual women, to consider the systemic institutional and organisational change needed to ensure more equal representation. Much focus has rightly been on the role of political parties, and now all of the main parties have put in place an extensive programme to help play their part in addressing this imbalance. But changing the people who are elected is only one part of the solution. Report after report has set out that only by reforming our democratic institutions themselves will we get lasting change.

Since the first such report was published eight years ago in 2014 the proportion of women MPs has increased by just 12

percentage points. Within the committees, governance structures and leadership of Parliament, there are women in many of the most senior positions. Perhaps most importantly, the Women and Equalities Committee has been established on a permanent basis to scrutinise the government from the perspective of gender and equality. But for many women on the outside looking in, the House of Commons remains a place that seems out of step and not somewhere they would necessarily thrive and succeed. For those women who have been elected, their tenure is often shorter than their male counterparts, driven by a system that struggles to accommodate them.

This Open House report shows the extent of the task ahead. 93 recommendations to over 26 different bodies and institutions are still outstanding from previous reports. So many of the important changes that have been identified are not happening quickly enough, running the risk that others outside of Parliament may seek to take on the responsibility of securing the change that is so clearly needed.

Parliamentarians have the opportunity to shape the future of this institution – an opportunity we must not squander – and this report lays out the areas we must consider. It is up to members and others who work in key roles in Parliament to assess what this report lays out and implement the best solutions we can devise.

To date, reforms have been piecemeal. That has to change, with an agreed plan to modernise the House of Commons as a workplace that attracts and retains the full diversity of the UK population. The key recommendation from this report is the creation of a new advisory body to the Speaker to carry out this role. With a single body to drive change, together with momentum from members and staff alike, there is hope that the House of Commons can become a truly representative part of our legislature where all MPs and staff can thrive in time for the centenary of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act.

Rt Hon Dame Maria Miller

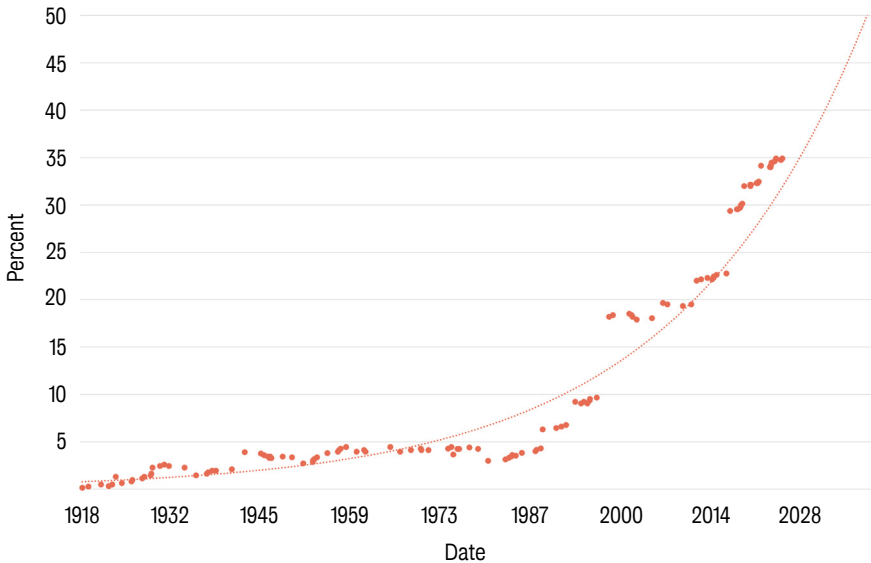
MP for Basingstoke, Chair of the Women in Parliament

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Introduction

In 2028 it will be 100 years since the Equal Franchise Act gave equal voting rights to women and men. In that time, the UK has had three women prime ministers, yet women are still profoundly underrepresented in the House of Commons, presently constituting 34 per cent of members (see Figure 1). The proportion of women in Parliament matters for reasons of political equality and for the quality of decisions the institution makes. Figure 1 shows how the percentage of women parliamentarians has increased since 1918, with step changes in the late 1990s and mid-2010s. However, it also points to the fact that even with continued exponential growth it will be hard to reach a point where women make up 50 per cent of MPs by 2028.

Figure 1: The percentage of women MPs in the UK parliament, 1918 to 2023, with an exponential trendline extended to 50 per cent



Research shows that in systems where men are overrepresented, legislative outputs are significantly different from those where there is greater gender equality.¹ Studies across a range of countries have shown that increased representation of women is correlated with lower mortality rates, better-quality sanitation provision, higher levels of female education and reduced levels of infant and child deaths.² In the UK, research has found that women MPs are more likely than men to speak about their constituents in the House of Commons, implying a closer relationship with those who elected them.³ Without equal representation, women's views and priorities are not adequately considered during the legislative process, undermining our democracy. Importantly, it is not just women who are underrepresented in Parliament. People with disabilities, belonging to an ethnic minority and those educated in the state system are underrepresented in relation to the UK population, and action should be taken to address this.

The importance of women's equal political representation has been understood for a long time by both scholars and politicians. There is no one simple fix that can remedy the underrepresentation of women. There are numerous contributing factors, from the role played by political parties to the wider socio-economic and cultural barriers that

women face.⁴ But it is crucial that the UK Parliament itself addresses any barriers which might be stopping women from all backgrounds from full participation in our elected chamber.

About the report

Open House is an audit of the UK House of Commons in relation to the recommendations made in 11 reports, dating from 2014 to the present, which aim to improve gender diversity in the House and Parliament, support women MPs, and highlight international best practice.⁵ The report, and this executive summary, outline where action has been taken and points to where more work needs to be done. It is the first time an audit of the previous audits has been conducted, and it represents a starting point for a longer-term review system that ensures momentum to implement these and future recommendations continues.

The recommendations from each of these reports are grouped into four themes, to address issues relating to equality of participation, infrastructure, culture and women's substantive representation. Recommendations range from measures to increase the diversity of members, through to provisions for work-life balance, addressing harassment and bullying, and ensuring that data on diversity is being collected and published. The recommendations encompass measures to help people with caring responsibilities and disabilities, and to ensure an intersectional approach is taken when addressing women's underrepresentation.

The scope of this report is limited to the House of Commons and the wider parliamentary context, reflecting the focus of

past reports on the elected chamber of Parliament. It does not cover the House of Lords, political parties or other key agents, though they are clearly also worthy of attention.

The reports that inform this analysis

Improving Parliament (2014)

The Good Parliament (2016)

UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit (2018)

Equality in the heart of democracy (2022)

The Remotely Representative House (2021)

A House for Everyone (2023)

Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians (2016)

Plan of action (2017)

Gender Sensitising Parliaments Guidelines (2020)

Realizing Gender Equality in Parliament (2021)

Effective and Inclusive Parliaments (2022)

Read the full report here

fawcettsociety.org.uk/appg-on-women-in-parliament

Overview of findings

Table 1: The extent to which recommendations made in previous reports have been met

CATEGORY	PROPOSED ACTION AREAS	RECOMMENDATIONS:			TOTAL
		NOT MET	PARTIALLY MET	LARGELY MET	
Equality of participation	Increasing diversity of members	3	4	0	7
	Women in committees and leadership positions	0	2	0	2
Infrastructure	Infrastructure for gender-sensitive parliament	2	2	0	4
	Predictability, flexibility, time and work	3	2	0	5
	Parents and carers in parliament	1	3	0	4
Culture	Abuse, harassment and bullying, within parliament	1	2	1	4
	Protections from external abuse	0	1	1	2
	Inclusive facilities, culture and practices	1	2	1	4
Women's substantive representation	Gender-sensitive and intersectional policymaking	1	2	1	4
TOTAL		12	20	4	36

1. Equality of participation

The most fundamental aspect of gender equality in the House of Commons is ensuring that women are able to enter the House as members and participate fully once elected. There is important work being done by the parliamentary Education and Engagement Team, but some concrete actions are required which will help attract a greater diversity of MPs and level the playing field for potential candidates, particularly those with disabilities. There has been significant progress over the last 10 years in the proportion of women within select committees and in leadership positions, but there should be safeguards in place to ensure a degree of balance into the future. The key outstanding recommendations within this category that have not been implemented include:

- Enact Section 106 of the Equality Act, which requires political parties to report the diversity of their candidates.
- Reintroduce financial support for disabled candidates to remedy the closing of the Access to Elected Office Fund.
- Take steps to improve media coverage of Parliament, through ensuring there is greater gender balance in the members of the press given access to Parliament, and through a review of sexism in the UK media.
- Formalise rules to ensure gender equality in parliamentary leadership positions.
- Formalise rules to ensure gender equality in select committee membership and witnesses.

2. Infrastructure

It is crucial that those who have been elected to the House of Commons are supported to participate fully with infrastructure that accommodates their needs and responsibilities. The House has been slow to adapt to such needs, but it can and does change when there is leadership and inter-party agreement over reforms. For example, proxy voting and additional funds to cover constituency work have recently been granted to new parents. Enabling and supporting MPs who are mothers is important: historically the “mother of parliaments” has largely been absent of mothers,⁶ and there is still a long way to go. Parliamentary workloads and schedules make the life of an MP difficult to balance with other care responsibilities. Numerous potential solutions have been recommended in the key reports which form the basis of this audit. These range from greater predictability to the introduction of remote working and voting measures and grouped voting times. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic provided the House of Commons with the impetus to trial many of the strategies suggested, however all measures brought in during the pandemic have been rolled back without review. There is therefore a need to:

- Create a new advisory body to push forward the gender-sensitive Parliament agenda.
- Undertake a published review of Covid-19 measures for their impact on diversity and reintroduce measures which improve predictability and flexibility.

- Conduct regular audits of the gender-sensitivity of Parliament to assess the adequacy of child-friendly provisions.
- Review sitting days and hours.
- Review voting practices.

3. Culture

It is important to ensure that in Parliament, as in any other workplace, those working there can do so without fear for their safety, free from abuse and harassment, and that the overall culture is welcoming of those from diverse backgrounds and with diverse needs. For MPs, the question of safety and security extends beyond Parliament into their constituency offices. The murders of Jo Cox and Sir David Amess show that security threats to MPs are real and must be taken seriously. The security provided by Parliament must extend as far as possible to cover MPs in all their roles as well as their staff. Safety and security are highly gendered, with women often suffering greater online abuse, and facing threats of a more sexualised nature. Women from ethnic minorities tend to suffer an even greater degree of abuse online of both a sexist and a racist nature. There are deep-seated issues within Parliament regarding bullying, harassment and sexual abuse which must be addressed.

There have been important developments within Parliament which aim to make it a safer, more welcoming and supportive environment. Most prominent is the creation of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS)

for addressing complaints of bullying, sexual harassment and abuse. The creation of this body marks significant progress. However, ongoing allegations of harassment and abuse attest to the fact that the underlying cultural change has not yet taken place. Elsewhere in Parliament, small but important steps have been made over the last decade in diversifying the art collection and redesigning the identity cards, which help create a more inclusive environment.

These are the key outstanding recommendations in this area:

- Continue to review the effectiveness of the ICGS and take action to address areas where it is not working.
- Require members to make a commitment to uphold the MPs' Code of Conduct and promote an inclusive workplace culture.
- Require training on the Code of Conduct to be mandatory for all passholders.
- Monitor the effectiveness of the Online Safety Bill and Elections Act.
- Consider alternative formats for prime minister's questions where professional behaviour is encouraged.
- Conduct an inquiry into the gender sensitivity of parliamentary rituals, practices, ceremonies and language to improve transparency, with recommendations on where changes need to be made to make Parliament more inclusive.

4. Women's substantive representation

When there are more women in the House of Commons, women's views should be better represented in the legislative process. Studies show that numbers are important, but not always sufficient, for seeing an increase in gender responsiveness in the legislation.⁷ Within the context of Parliament, the provision of information and institutions can support and amplify the ability of parliamentarians to ensure legislation is sensitive to gender differences, and to create policies which represent the needs of women.

There has been one major point of progress in the last 10 years, and that is the establishment of the Women and Equalities Committee on a permanent basis in 2017. This fulfils recommendations from previous reports. The areas which still need work are around providing the expertise to MPs and their staff so they are better able to draft, scrutinise and amend legislation from a gender perspective. Recommendations include:

- Introducing – and potentially making mandatory – training in gender analysis, gender budgeting and mainstreaming, gender impact assessments, gender-sensitive public consultations, unconscious bias and equality legislation for all members and staff.
- Ensuring there is well signposted information and expertise on gender equality available to members and their staff, through technical research units, expertise within the House of Commons

Library, research staff in Parliament, or through formalised relationships with external gender experts.

- ♦ Requiring legislation to be informed by equality impact assessments, gender-sensitive budgeting and targeted public consultations.
- ♦ Creating a women's caucus to better promote the women's agenda.

Conclusion

The task ahead is daunting. Our full report finds that, of **the 36 specific groups of recommendations, only four have been fully addressed**. The report therefore calls upon 26 different bodies to take 93 actions – many of which are substantive recommendations, such as inquiries, reviews and legislative changes. With such a mountain of work ahead it is important to remember how much has been achieved in the relatively short period of the last 10 years.

Since the *Improving Parliament* report was published in 2014, the proportion of women MPs has increased by over 10 per cent, and the UK has had two more women prime ministers. The diversity of Parliament has also increased, with only 27 minority ethnic members being elected in 2010, compared to 66 in 2019. Within the committees and leadership of Parliament, other major changes can be seen. There is currently a woman leader of the House of Commons, and women chair the Foreign Affairs and Treasury Select Committees as well as the Procedure Committee. These are key roles, and ones that have been predominantly held by men. Perhaps most importantly, a permanent select committee – the Women and Equalities Committee – has been set up to scrutinise the government from the perspective of gender and equality.

Parliament has also taken a serious look at itself as an institution, thanks to all the reports included here, as

well as countless others, and major reforms have taken place to try to make it a better place to work for women. Most prominent is the introduction of the ICGS and the accompanying behaviour code and training, while Parliament has for the first time tried to institutionalise some measures to allow new parents to care for their children in the first months after birth, through proxy voting and the provision of funds to cover additional constituency staff. These changes have come about incrementally and have provoked much greater openness about abuses of power and predatory behaviour within the institution. These are important steps, but much more needs to be done to create a truly inclusive culture.

The UK Parliament is a venerable institution, but it needs to reform if it is to uphold the democratic values that it symbolises. With momentum for change growing in the Senedd and Scottish Parliament, the House of Commons risks falling behind the other national parliaments.⁸ What is now required is commitment and accountability to see through vital changes.

In order for Parliament to tackle the multitude of reviews and reforms that are required, it needs a guiding body which can help accelerate the pace of reform, monitor changes and celebrate progress. The recommendations included here from past reports are a good place to start, rather than an

end point. We know, for example, that the introduction of the ICGS has not solved Parliament's problems with sexism and harassment, and there are gaping holes in the provisions for parents of young children in the House of Commons, with their parliamentary work not covered by current schemes.

This report aims to draw a line in the sand and prompt discussion about why these previous recommendations have not been met, as a minimum requirement. We need to lay the foundation for more ambitious reforms in the future if we are to see a more diverse House of Commons – which is why the first key recommendation from this report is to set up a new advisory body which can drive real change.

There is significant cross-party support among women members for many of the actions recommended here, but there also needs to be support from those higher up. That is why the second key recommendation is for the leaders of the political parties to commit to a gender-equal House of Commons by 2028.

Finally, very little work has been done to address the difficulties of balancing parliamentary work with care responsibilities. This has been found to be the major barrier to women's participation in politics.⁹ This is all the more shocking in the aftermath of a pandemic which forced a

successful trial of several measures for hybrid participation, yet, for the most part, were then abruptly ended. As such, the final key recommendation is to instigate a review of the Covid-19 measures and retain those which improved predictability and flexibility.

Major progress since 2014

1. The establishment, on a permanent basis, of the Women and Equalities Committee.
2. The setting up of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme for reporting and holding perpetrators accountable for abuse, harassment and bullying.
3. The introduction and expansion of the proxy voting scheme for MPs on baby leave, and additional Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority funding for staff to cover MPs constituency work while caring for a newborn.

Key recommendations

1. Establish a body, namely a Speakers Advisory Committee, with the necessary legitimacy, authority and resources to lead and push forward the gender-sensitive Parliament agenda and oversee regular future audits.
2. Secure a formal pledge from party leaders and the government to bring about a gender-equal House of Commons by 2028, identifying the specific measures each party will adopt to achieve this.
3. Undertake a published review of measures brought in during the pandemic for their impact on diversity and reintroduce those measures which improve predictability and flexibility.

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 - Childs, S. (2016) *The Good Parliament*. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/news/2016/july/20%20Jul%20Prof%20Sarah%20Childs%20The%20Good%20Parliament%20report.pdf>
- Gender-sensitive Parliament audit panel to the House of Commons

Commission and the House of Lords Commission & IPU (2018) *UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018*. https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/lords-information-office/uk-parliament_-gender-sensitive-parliament-audit_report_digital.pdf

Women and Equalities Committee (2022) *Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons*. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/9008/documents/159011/default/>

These are supplemented by seven further reports, two of which are directed at the UK Parliament:

Smith, J. and Childs, S. (2021) *The Remotely Representative House: Lesson Learning from the Hybrid Parliament*. <https://centenaryaction.org.uk/publications/remotely-representative-parliament-lesson-learning-from-the-hybrid-parliament/>

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The remaining five take a more international perspective:

Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*. <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>

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APPG on Women in Parliament

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Women in Parliament brings together MPs and peers to discuss and campaign for increasing the number of women in Parliament in all parties and, and to support women in Parliament and those standing for public office. The Fawcett Society runs the APPG on behalf of the officers and members.

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