



## DEBATE PACK

Number CDP-2017-0160 , 12 September 2017

# Barriers for women in standing for Parliament

Debate initiated by Mims Davies MP on the motion "That this House has considered barriers for women in standing for Parliament."

The debate will take place in Westminster Hall on Wednesday 13 September 2017 at 2.30pm.

It is now nearly one hundred years since women could be elected to sit in the House of Commons. In that time a total of 489 women have elected to the House. In January 2017 the Women and Equalities published a report on representation of women in the House and noted that:

If the Commons is serious about being truly representative of the people it seeks to represent, it must rise to the challenge of being a world leader on women's parliamentary representation.

In recent years several reports have examined issues relating to increasing the number of women in Parliament. This debate pack briefly highlights those recent reports and some of the themes that have been raised.

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

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## Contents

<b>1. Barriers for women in standing for Parliament</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Recent reports</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3. Press Articles</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4. Parliamentary material</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>5. Further reading</b>	<b>13</b>
5.1 Commons Library briefings	13
5.2 Comparative study	13

# 1. Barriers for women in standing for Parliament

Since 1918, 489 women have been elected as Members of the House of Commons . Three of them were elected as Sinn Féin MPs and did not take their seats, Countess Constance Markievicz (1918), Michelle Gildernew (2001) and Elisha McCallion (2017).

Of the 489 women, 283 (58%) were first elected as Labour MPs and 140 (29%) as Conservative.

2018 will see the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Representation of the People Act 1918*, giving the Parliamentary vote to some women and all men, and the *Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918*, which women over 21 the right to stand for election as an MP. Parliament will be marking those anniversaries with its [Vote 100](#) events.

As those anniversaries approach, the total number of women ever elected to the House of Commons in those 100 years is 47 more than the number of men elected to the House in one day in June 2017.

In January 2017 the Women and Equalities Committee published its report on *Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 election* (HC 630 2016-17). It wrote:

The UK ranks only 48th globally for representation of women in the lower or single legislative chamber, having fallen from 25th place in 1999. If the Commons is serious about being truly representative of the people that it seeks to represent, it must rise to the challenge of being a world leader on women's parliamentary representation.

## Current number of women MPs

At the 2017 General Election 208 women MPs were elected to sit in the House of Commons. This compares to 442 men. Women MPs now represent 32% of all MPs, a record high.

Women MPs elected in 2017 included 119 Labour MPs, 67 Conservative and 12 SNP. 45% of Labour MPs are women, compared with 21% of Conservative MPs and 34% of SNP MPs.

The table below, taken from the Library briefing *Women in Parliament and Government*, shows how this compares with other elected bodies.

**Women in Parliament and other elected bodies, as of 10 July 2017**

	Con	Lab	LD	SNP	Other	Total
<b>Male</b>						
House of Commons	250	143	8	23	18	442
House of Lords	191	138	67	-	198	594
National Assembly for Wales	8	14	-	-	13	35
Scottish Parliament	25	13	5	36	5	84
Northern Ireland Assembly				-	63	78
London Assembly	7	6	0	-	2	15
European Parliament (UK Members)	14	9	0	2	19	44
<b>Female</b>						
House of Commons	67	119	4	12	6	208
House of Lords	63	64	34	-	49	210
National Assembly for Wales	3	15	1	-	6	25
Scottish Parliament	6	11	0	27	1	45
Northern Ireland Assembly				-	27	30
London Assembly	1	6	1	-	2	10
European Parliament (UK Members)	6	11	1	-	11	29
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP	Other	Total
<b>% female</b>						
House of Commons	21%	45%	33%	34%	25%	32%
House of Lords	25%	32%	34%	-	20%	26%
National Assembly for Wales	27%	52%	0%	-	32%	42%
Scottish Parliament	19%	46%	0%	43%	17%	35%
Northern Ireland Assembly	-	-	-	-	30%	28%
London Assembly	13%	50%	100%	-	50%	40%
European Parliament (UK Members)	30%	55%	100%	-	37%	40%

**Notes:**

1. Membership of the House of Commons 23 June 2017.
2. House of Lords membership at 23 February 2017. Excludes peers on leave of absence, suspended, or disqualified as senior members of the judiciary, for example.
3. Membership of Scottish Parliament as of 5 May 2016 elections.
4. Membership of the European Parliament following the May 2014 elections.
5. Membership of the Northern Ireland Assembly as of 2 March 2017 elections.
6. Membership of the London Assembly as of 5 May 2016 elections.
7. Membership of the National Assembly for Wales as of 5 May 2016 elections.

**Sources:**

Houses of Parliament 'Members Names' database

House of Commons Library Briefings: CBP 7599 *Scottish Parliament Elections: 2016*; CBP7920 *Northern Ireland Assembly Elections: 2017*

CBP 7594 *National Assembly for Wales Elections: 2016*; RP14/32 *European Parliament Elections 2014*

## Engagement

The Hansard Society conducts an annual Audit of Political engagement. The latest report, [Audit 14](#), found the public do not think that Parliament is doing a good job for them. Fewer than a third of people were satisfied with the way that Parliament works, and just 29% think that Parliament is doing a good job of representing their interests. Women were less satisfied than men in the system of governing and fewer women (42%) than men (51%) believe that Parliament holds the Government to account

Women were also less likely to claim they feel knowledgeable about politics, with only 40% of women feeling knowledgeable compared to 59% of men). It should be noted, however, that in previous Audit studies, when claimed knowledge has been put to an actual test, the authors have found that men tend to over-claim and women to underestimate what they know.

In terms of those likely to have been politically active there is no gender gap but those who are most likely to have been politically active in the last year are white, older, more affluent, and better educated citizens.

## Parliament

Some of the reports conducted into trying to raise the number of women MPs have also heard evidence that the culture and working practices in Parliament do not encourage women to participate.

A BBC article of 25 January 2017, [Mistreatment of women MPs revealed](#), reports the results of a BBC survey of the Westminster Parliament which was conducted in December 2016. Almost two-thirds of respondents said they had received sexist comments from fellow workers or MPs - with one told she should be "in the kitchen washing the dishes". Three respondents had experienced sexual assault of some sort.

On 31 January 2017, the *Guardian* reported comments that Harriet Harman made to a press gallery lunch. The article began:

Parliament has not moved into the modern world yet when it comes to sexist habits, Harriet Harman has said, after a Conservative MP barked at a female SNP colleague in the House of Commons this week.

The former acting Labour leader, who was also the elected deputy under Gordon Brown, said there needed to be a change in the culture and atmosphere of the Commons, as women were still experiencing misogyny.<sup>1</sup>

The All-Party Parliamentary Group Women in Parliament drew attention to bad behaviour in the Chamber, in general, without giving specific examples, in its report [Improving Parliament – Creating a better and](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Rowena Mason, "[Harriet Harman says sexist habits still rife in parliament](#)", *Guardian*, 31 January 2017

more representative House (July 2014). It called for “Zero tolerance in the Chamber”.

The *Good Parliament* report, by Professor Sarah Childs, recommended that the Speaker secure cross-party support for a concord regarding unacceptable and unprofessional behaviour in the Chamber, and more widely in the House.

Other reports have recommended that Parliament should adopt a more family friendly working environment by improving the predictability of the parliamentary calendar and helping MPs balance parliamentary and constituency priorities fairly.

In 2010 the House of Commons nursery opened with space for up to 40 children. ‘The Good Parliament’, included a recommendation for a crèche as well as a nursery. Kirsty Blackman, SNP Member for Aberdeen North, has pointed out the need for a crèche for Members who live further from London. She has pointed out that her children can’t attend the nursery because they are not based in London full time, but there is no creche for more ad-hoc arrangements (Guardian article, [SNP MP says Westminster needs to be more child friendly](#), 26 July 2016).

The issue of family friendly sitting hours has been considered before by the House. The Procedure Committee last considered it in its 2012-13 report [Sitting hours and the Parliamentary calendar](#). It heard lots of evidence from Members with views on how sitting times could affect Members with different family circumstances but concluded that:

it is simply not possible effectively to combine the many and varied roles of a Member of Parliament into 9 to 5 office hours each day. We note the view, expressed in particular by the Speaker’s Conference on Parliamentary Representation, that reform of sitting hours is necessary to ensure that certain sections of society are not deterred from standing as Members of Parliament. We note also, however, that current sitting hours, while they may deter some from becoming an MP, have not prevented a wide variety of people from all walks of life, including those with young children, from entering Parliament.

This was in part because other Parliamentary business, such as committees taking evidence from the public, do not generally take place in the evenings.

Between May and October 2016, IPSA consulted on a comprehensive review of the MPs’ Scheme of Business Costs and Expenses. It had been encouraged by the AAPG Women in Parliament in its report *Improving Parliament: Creating a Better and More Representative House*, and by Sarah Childs in *The Good Parliament*. The APPG said that:

Many noted that the changes to the expenses system since 2009 have produced a number of unintended consequences. Our recommendations therefore focus on a review of the current system and a gender audit of IPSA rules.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Women in Parliament, [Improving Parliament: Creating a Better and More Representative House](#), July 2014, p36

And that “In our survey, ‘Reforming IPSA financial support for families’ was third most popular suggestion for encouraging more people to become MPs”.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Childs recommended that a Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion should be established. Her report suggested the Group should “commission a comprehensive diversity and equality audit of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), and submit its findings to the IPSA consultation”.<sup>4</sup>

IPSA made a number of changes to its Scheme with effect from 1 April 2017. It substantially increased the support available for dependants (from £2,425 per dependant in 2016/17 to £5,435 in 2017/18) and lifted some restrictions on spouses’ travel. It also made changes to the rules relating to the use of late night taxis.

In September 2017 the Fawcett Society [issued a pamphlet](#) making the case for a change in the law to allow MPs to job share. In 2012, John McDonnell MP introduced a Ten Minute Rule Bill - *Representation of the People (Members’ Job Share) Bill* – to amend the law to allow for MPs to job share. The issue has so far not been taken forward.

## Intimidation

Shortly after the 2017 General Election Sheryll Murray, Conservative MP for South East Cornwall, highlighted the problem of intimidation and abuse of candidates at the first Prime Minister’s Questions of the new Parliament. Both Mrs Murray and the Prime Minister highlighted the concern that intimidation could be deterring people from becoming candidates.

In a [Westminster Hall debate on 12 July](#) - Abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public in UK elections - Members expressed a similar view that such abuse could be deterring people from entering politics, particularly women.

The University of Sheffield and BuzzFeed News conducted an [analysis of tweets](#) sent to a range of politicians during the general election campaign. All MPs experienced abusive tweets but women were more likely to receive gendered abusive words.

The Prime Minister has asked the Committee on Standards in Public Life to [conduct a short review](#) of the issue of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates. This will include [oral evidence sessions](#) in the Macmillan Room in Portcullis House, Westminster on Thursday 14 September 2017.

A general debate in Government time - [Abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public during the General Election campaign](#) – will be held on Thursday 7 September 2017.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p41

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Childs, [The Good Parliament](#), July 2016, p18

## All-women shortlists

The All-Party Parliamentary Group Women in Parliament recommended that the use of all-women shortlists should be allowed beyond 2030 and should be allowed for mayoral elections and those of police and crime commissioners.

In the run up to the 1997 General Election the Labour Party used all women short lists to increase the number of women candidates. In the 1997 election Labour had 38 candidates resulting from all-women shortlists and 35 of them were elected. The use of all-women shortlists was subsequently found by an employment tribunal to breach the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975* (the *Jepson* case).<sup>5</sup>

The *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002* amended the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975* to allow political parties to use all-women shortlists to select candidates for parliamentary elections; elections to the European Parliament; elections to the Scottish Parliament; elections to the National Assembly for Wales; and most local government elections.<sup>6</sup>

The *Equality Act 2010* extended the life of the *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002* which will now continue in effect until the end of 2030.<sup>7</sup> Its life can continue to be further extended by Order.

The Conservative Party rejects the use of all-women shortlists. The Liberal Democrats rejected them at their conference in 2001 but at their Spring Conference of 2016 the party passed a motion that if any of the existing MPs chose not to stand again in 2020, their replacement must be drawn from an all-women shortlist.<sup>8</sup>

Section 106 of the *Equality Act 2010* also gave ministers the power to make regulations requiring political parties to publish data relating to the diversity of party candidates seeking selection. This section is not yet in force. The background is detailed in the Library briefing [All-women shortlists](#).

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<sup>5</sup> *Jepson and Dyas-Elliott v the Labour Party and others* [1996] IRLR 166

<sup>6</sup> *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002* (chapter 2), section 1

<sup>7</sup> *Equality Act 2010* (chapter 15), section 105

<sup>8</sup> [Liberal Democrats agree to all-women shortlists](#)

## 2. Recent reports

In recent years various reports have looked at how to improve the representation of women in Parliament.

### Women and Equalities Committee

In January 2017 the Committee published its report on *Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 election* (HC 630 2016-17). It concluded that evidence shows that diversity helps to improve the effectiveness of decision-making bodies and increasing women's representation is a key part of achieving this. It acknowledged that the parties had the primary responsibility for candidate selection but recommended that the Government should introduce certain statutory measures.

It recommended that:

- The Government should set a domestic target of 45 per cent representation of women in Parliament and local government by 2030 in response to the United Nations indicators for Sustainable Development Goal 5.5
- The Government should seek to introduce a statutory minimum proportion of female parliamentary candidates in general elections for each political party, set at a minimum of 45% and parties failing to do so should face some sort of sanction
- The Government immediately bring into force the statutory requirement for political parties to publish their parliamentary candidate diversity data for general elections, as set out in Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010
- The time for which the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 is in force, in order to allow political parties to use all women shortlists, should be extended beyond its current limit of 2030 and that all women shortlists should be allowed for mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections.

The Committee also recommended that Parliament as an institution should actively encourage women to participate in democracy through its outreach initiatives, and continue to investigate ways of making the working environment of Westminster one that does not present unnecessary actual or perceived barriers to women's participation. The [Government response](#) to the report rejected all of the recommendations made by the Committee.

### Fawcett Society

[Open House? Reflections on the possibility and practice of MPs job-sharing](#)

Edited by Professors Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs, the report brings together contributions from job-sharing experts, Parliamentary candidates, and lawyers to inform discussion about the idea. It explores the 2015 High Court case brought by Clare Phipps and Sarah Cope who sought to stand as job-share candidates in Basingstoke.

## The Good Parliament Report

The Good Parliament report was launched on 20 July 2016. It makes recommendations on how the House of Commons can meet the InterParliamentary Union's globally influential "Gender Sensitive Parliaments" framework.

The report was written by Professor Sarah Childs, who was seconded to the House of Commons, from the University of Bristol, in September 2015 to work on the report, at the request of the Speaker.

Professor Childs made 43 recommendations. Each is attached to a named, responsible decision-maker. The recommendations focus on three elements:

- **Equality of participation.** The report asks how a diverse group of MPs might be selected for, and elected to, Parliament and how, once present they could be most effective in representing their constituents' interests, scrutinising laws and holding the government to account. Specific recommendations are made to the new Reference Group, the Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, the House of Commons Commission, the Women and Equalities Committee, and the political parties.
- **Parliamentary Infrastructure.** This covers everything from the buildings and furniture of Parliament to the official rules and working practices. Recommendations are made to the Speaker, the House of Commons Commission, the Leader of the House, the Liaison Committee, and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.
- **Commons Culture.** This dimension looks beyond the formal rules to examine Parliamentary culture and its effect on diversity. Recommendations are aimed at the Speaker of the House, the House of Commons Commission, the Women in Parliament All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), and the Works of Art Committee.

## The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Women in Parliament

The Group was set up in 2010 with the aim to make Parliament more representative of the country it serves. In July 2014 it published its report [Improving Parliament: Creating a better and more representative House](#).

The Inquiry's scope was to look at the elected House of Commons and identify barriers, challenges and improved ways of working for the future. It was examined in three stages:

1. **Supply** – outreach to women from all backgrounds and changing the perception of MPs
2. **Selection** – a review of progress in each of the political parties since the Speaker's Conference 2008-2010
3. **Retention** – how the working environment in Parliament can be improved

In its Executive Summary, the APPG noted:

**Finally**, the retention of female MPs was explored, in particular, examining if there was anything about the style of parliamentary politics and the workings of the House of Commons that detrimentally impacts women. A number of factors were identified which, together increase pressure upon Members and in some cases, prompt them to consider that life as a Parliamentarian is not something they wish to continue:

- An unpredictable Parliamentary calendar
- The challenges of managing two, often geographically distant, workplaces
- The poor public perception of MPs
- The changing role of a MP
- The perceived 'masculine' culture of Parliament
- A lack of clarification on support available for MPs with primary caring responsibilities
- A lack of institutionalised support for Members

### 3. Press Articles

*Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.*

#### **Harriet Harman: Give MPs six months' paid maternity leave**

BBC News

9 September 2017

Members of Parliament should be given six months' maternity leave, during which a colleague can cast votes on their behalf, Harriet Harman has said. A cross-party parliamentary group is due to discuss her proposals next week."

#### **Jacob Rees-Mogg is a 'deadbeat dad', says Harriet Harman**

Guardian, Anushka Asthana

9 September

"Men who don't change nappies are deadbeat dads" said Harman, who is campaigning for MPs to be allowed to have a formal maternity or paternity leave system for the first time.

#### **Increase women MPs or face fines, parties told**

BBC News

10 Jan 2017

Political parties must face fines if they do not ensure at least 45% of general election candidates are female, MPs have recommended.

The Women and Equalities Committee said the fact that 30% of current MPs were women represented a "serious democratic deficit", for "no good reason".

#### **Why the new women and work all-party parliamentary group matters**

Guardian, Flick Drummond MP and Jess Phillips MP

13 Jan 2016

"As two working women, and as mothers, we hope to coordinate a timely and crucial response to growing interest in the role of women within the economy, and barriers to full participation."

#### **There ARE barriers to women participating in politics**

The journal ie

20 Jan 2012

Political scholar Claire McGing says a gender quota for elections is one step to balance – but meaningful change requires more than that.

## 4. Parliamentary material

### Commons debate on Women in the House of Commons

HC Deb 12 Jan 2017 c619 c484

**Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con):** I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make a statement to the House on the fifth report of the Women and Equalities Committee on women in the House of Commons after the next general election, in 2020.

### Westminster debate on Houses of Parliament (Family-friendliness)

HC Deb 10 Nov 2015 c32-

**Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab):** That this House has considered the family-friendliness of Parliament.

### Commons debate on Parliamentary Representation

HC Deb 27 Feb 2014 c475-515

**Dame Anne Begg (Aberdeen South) (Lab):** That this House welcomes the fact that there are now more women hon. Members and hon. Members from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in the UK Parliament than at any time in history; [...] and calls on the Government and political parties to fulfil commitments made in response to the Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) in 2010, including commitments in respect of candidate selection and support for candidates.

### Commons debate on Parliamentary Representation

HC Deb 12 Jan 2012 c403-42

**Dame Anne Begg (Aberdeen South) (Lab):** That this House welcomes the fact that there are now more women hon. Members and hon. Members from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities than in any previous Parliament; notes that the need for greater diversity in the House has been accepted by the leadership of the three main political parties at Westminster; [...] and calls on the Government and political parties to fulfil commitments made in response to the Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) in 2010, including the commitment to secure the publication by all parties of diversity data on candidate selections.

## 5. Further reading

### 5.1 Commons Library briefings

Commons Debate Pack, *The Good Parliament*, 1 November 2016  
Compiled ahead of the 90-minute debate on The Good Parliament report held on Wednesday 2 November 2016 in Westminster Hall.

Commons Debate Pack, *The family-friendliness of the Houses of Parliament*, 9 November 2015

Compiled ahead of the debate on the family-friendliness of the Houses of Parliament held on Tuesday 9 November 2015 in Westminster Hall.

Common Library briefing, *General Election 2017: full results and analysis*, 13 July 2017

[See section 3.3 on candidates](#) for information on the number of women candidates by party.

Commons Library briefing, *Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary representation*, 9 Jan 2012

The Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary representation was established at the end of 2008 'to consider and make recommendations for rectifying the disparity between the representation of women and ethnic minorities in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large.

### 5.2 Comparative study

European Parliament: Think Tank, *Preparing a Harmonized Maternity Leave for Members of the European Parliament - Legal Analysis*, 20 April 2016

Upon request by the FEMM Committee, the Policy Department has examined the Member States' different national legislations for maternity or parental leave for national members of Parliament. Furthermore, the rules concerning absence and leave for Members of the European Parliament have also been explored. The overview of the European and national rules provide insights in the different ways how maternity or parental leave is regulated for members of parliament at both levels. It concludes that the provisions of the European Electoral Act prohibit presently the introduction of rules for maternity or parental leave with a possibility of temporary replacement for MEPs.

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