



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Rt. Hon Alison Johnstone MSP
Presiding Officer
The Scottish Parliament

19 December 2024

Dear Presiding Officer,

Report of the Parliament's Gender Sensitive Audit

In May 2023, as part of its future work programme discussion the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee agreed to take forward one of the two recommendations in the Advisory Group's report [A Parliament For All: Report of the Scottish Parliament's Gender Sensitive Audit](#) namely Recommendation 6 that:

"The Equalities Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee consider holding an evidence session on MSP candidate diversity. Such a session could be with the party leader and/or individual(s) who have responsibility for selection procedures for each party, and take place following an election, mid-session, and one year prior to an election."

Members agreed it would be most helpful to consider this item closer to the Holyrood elections in 2026 and to invite officials to give evidence with a view to exploring with them further their policy commitments on gender equality and diversity.

The Committee noted that, at the last election, 59 out of 129 elected members (45%) were women; this is the highest proportion since 1999, but the proportion has fluctuated. As such, the Report stressed that political parties will need to take a proactive role in promoting equal representation and there has been a focus on mechanisms of how best to do this.

The Committee further noted a number of ways they can progress equality under guidance under the Equality Act 2010 including the use of positive action, reserved places and all women shortlists.

The Committee considered the recommendation and agreed it would be helpful to organise a formal committee meeting to hear from organisations who work to motivate, support and equip women to stand for leadership roles and political office before then hearing from party officials who have responsibility for selection procedures for each party represented in the Scottish Parliament. (The Scottish Liberal Democrats and Alba Party were unable to provide witnesses.)

Contact: Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP. Email EHRCJ.committee@parliament.scot. We welcome calls through Relay UK and in BSL through Contact Scotland BSL.

At its meeting on [Tuesday 19 November 2024](#), the Committee heard evidence from:

- Cat Murphy, Executive Director, Engender
- Dr Rebecca Mason, Research and Policy Lead, The Young Women's Movement
- Talat Yaqoob, Consultant and Co-Founder, Women 50:50

And then from:

- James Tweedie, Director, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party
- Ann McGuinness, Co-Convener, Women's Network, Scottish Green Party
- Sarah Boyack MSP, Scottish Labour Party
- Cailyn McMahan, Local Government Officer, Scottish National Party

The Committee was keen to explore a number of issues with stakeholders and parties such as:

- Why it is important to have equal representation
- What barriers women face and how these can be removed
- Positive action being taken by political parties
- What support structures are in place to deal with complaints and codes of conduct
- Why data on diversity is important
- What methods political parties are using to increase diversity and
- What more can be done more broadly to improve diversity

Approach taken by different political parties

The Committee heard about different approaches taken by political parties to the issue of how to achieve equal representation of women in Parliament:

The Scottish Conservatives have a focus on diversity and increasing female representation. This includes working with partner organisations such as Women2Win and Conservatives Women's Organisation Scotland to improve diversity and to promote female candidates through active recruitment, bespoke support, mentoring and strategic advice. At the last election, 25.8% of the party's MSPs were female.

The Scottish Greens run a women's network to empower women and provide peer-to-peer support. They work to identify and address barriers faced by women, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those with caring responsibilities, and/or disabilities. They also advocate for gender-sensitive policies within the Scottish Parliament, for example, crèche facilities and gender-balanced committees. At the last election (including yourself before your election as PO), the party had 5 out of 8-MSPs, i.e. 62.5% of women as elected members.

Scottish Labour use a "twinning" system to ensure women have an equal chance of being elected either from a constituency or via the list system. They also focus on addressing barriers like economic disadvantage, employer support, social attitudes and discrimination, particularly on social media. They offer mentoring, shadowing

opportunities and leadership roles within the party to increase women's involvement. At the last election, 45% of Labour MSPs are female, with equality in the shadow cabinet.

For the Scottish National Party, gender equality is a core value, embedded in its constitution. It implemented gender-balanced mechanisms to reach gender parity faster than expected: 53% of its MSPs are women and they also make up almost 60% of the Scottish Government. Its focus is on continuing to increase women's representation in leadership roles on committees and within the party.

For the Committee, the earlier some parties engage with this issue the better.

The importance of gender balance in parliament

The Committee heard that gender balance in parliament is essential for fairness, justice and democracy. Catherine Murphy of Engender explained that women have specific perspectives on how policy impacts their lives which differ from the historical norm of policy that has been developed primarily by white middle-class men. Women also have more experience at the coal face in terms of how those policies impact people's lives and of whether they improve them or not.

She told us that having a greater diversity of people elected to parliamentary spaces has an enormous potential to improve the quality of policy that is made and ultimately the outcomes which benefits society as a whole. She said that "Extensive research has been done on these issues globally and found some key trends in the representation of women in political decision making and leadership. Women leaders seem to create more equal and caring societies when they are given greater levels of power. There is evidence to suggest that more women leads to better implementation of welfare, education and health service infrastructure because women have a better understanding of how those systems work for the most marginalised."

She said that women tend to have a more "cooperative and inclusive leadership style" which can "lead to lower levels of corruption and greater overall trust in democracy. There is also an indication that women tend to do more work in their constituencies than male elected representatives".

However, the Committee heard that none of this comes about without significant and consistent efforts as women continue to live in a society where structural inequality remains.

Finally, Tess White MSP and Pam Gosal MSP wish to note that there is a case in the UK Supreme Court ongoing which is considering the definition of "woman" in law¹.

¹ UKSC 2024/0042.

Barriers faced by women

There is insufficient support to encourage women to stand

The Committee heard that political parties fail to engage with women and there is a lack of outreach during selection processes.

Talat Yaqoob from Women 50:50 said “There is still a very clear feeling that politics is a boys’ club. There is, beyond a few weeks before candidate selections open, a lack of outreach to women by political parties. There needs to be engagement, and resourcing for that kind of activity and outreach, throughout the year, deep within communities. We need to ensure that we are approaching women from marginalised communities and encouraging them to understand and participate in politics.

She told us “A wider issue, which concerns us across the board, is the erosion of trust in politics, which prevents women and those from marginalised communities wanting to participate in politics.”

Catherine Murphy said “Another factor is the underinvestment in networks for women. There is evidence that, historically, women’s networks within political parties and parliamentary spaces which can foster greater confidence and share information for women, have not consistently been given the prioritisation and funding that are needed.

Women who stand and are elected often choose not to stand for a second term because of their negative experiences throughout the selection process or as an MSP. This also discourages women who may have been considering standing from doing so.

The Committee heard that political spaces can be unwelcoming environments for women.

Catherine Murphy highlighted that the cultures in political and parliamentary institutions are not attractive for women. “They are seen as being particularly combative, hostile, dismissive and patronising. A lot of work needs to be done within those cultures not only to attract women to put themselves forward but to retain them. We also have a particular issue with retaining women in elected roles. There is a high level of drop-off across the board.”

She told us “elections and external communications have been built with ingrained bias that works against women so to situation yourself within those systems is exhausting. You have to exert so much energy, be so tough and push so hard to get elected only to find yourself in an elected space where you are up against it even more.”

While the threat of misogyny and threats online is often the dominant conversation Talat Yaqoob told what is not discussed so openly is the “everyday sexism and patronising and dismissive attitudes that are encountered in the political setting. That still exists. Those microaggressions, and multiple overlapping inequalities need to be tackled”.

She said “10 years ago it was an easier sell than it is now to talk to women about participating in politics. We have women who want to participate but what we have not succeeded with is taking responsibility for changing political culture and the actors within them.” That she said would require “tackling those cultures so that the women coming forward want to come in and do not just survive but thrive when they are there”.

There are financial and practical barriers such as childcare or caring responsibilities **and this makes it harder for women to campaign effectively.**

The Committee heard that women’s availability due to other responsibilities makes it harder for them to participate equally.

Talat Yaqoob told us “Women are disproportionately more likely to have caring responsibilities and take on care work. The idea that they can perhaps do campaigning in the evenings or at the weekend, without access to care and support, means that they are more likely to deselect themselves from participating in politics”.

She said “There is the issue of disposable income. Participating in politics comes with the need to have sufficient finances to campaign and engage, including the finances to access childcare, if that is what you require. The availability of disposable income has an impact on who has access to politics.”

Catherine Murphy agreed “We know not only that, overall, women do not have the same financial power in society as men, but that standing for election generates particular financial costs. Related to that, we also see a trend that presenteeism is often a factor in being selected to stand within parties. I refer to people having the time to do lots of leafleting, for example, or be really active and visible in their local party. However, there is a greater barrier to that for many women, particularly those who have childcare responsibilities, and there are costs associated with being so present. Therefore, we know that there are higher financial barriers for women”.

A sustained approach to gender equality is essential to avoid steps backwards. Policy needs to be in place for as long as societal inequality remains

The Committee heard that it would be naïve to think that having good representation in parliament for one term means you have changed the entire culture or society’s view of the political culture or space for women. The methods that are being used – the zipping of lists, twinning etc do make a difference. The use of all women shortlists are often the most impactful measure.

Talat Yaqoob told us “It is imperative not just for the sake of representative candidacy but for the sake of the quality of our Parliament and our councils that parties take measures seriously and pursue them. Having one-off measures in one year does not work, as was proven by the dip in women who were elected in the second and third Scottish Parliament elections after devolution in 1999. There is therefore not some linear thing, and those processes need to be in place for as long as there is societal inequality”.

She said we need “investment in and consistency of the range of different measures. All the measures have their space and position. What is missing is consistent use of the measures and tackling negative attitudes towards those processes inside parties”.

Engender has a comprehensive toolkit available for political parties to access which would enable each party to use all the tools available and take a consistent approach

The Committee heard that parties need to commit to gender equality.

Catherine Murphy told the Committee that Engender has a toolkit on its website “that works almost as a skeleton audit. It enables parties to go right through all their systems and processes and to audit what they are doing, with key recommendations and guidance, including on culture, recruitment, assessment processes and so on”.

As well as the toolkit, she signposted two other things. “First, we worked with 17 other organisations, including Women 50:50 and the Young Women’s Movement, to develop a theory of change. It has been signed by up to 17 different organisations, and it includes clear recommendations that go right across the board for parties and parliamentary spaces and that set out in a comprehensive way what we think we need to do in Scotland.”

“Secondly, we are doing some research that looks specifically at women’s experiences of selection and candidacy. In many ways, it is almost complementary to Talat Yaqoob’s work. We are just getting some of the information and research now—it will not be published until the new year—but it shows quite clearly that, although there are organisations such as Elect Her, which does amazing work to support women in becoming candidates and once they have been elected, that sort of thing is vastly insufficient.”

Online abuse and sexual harassment

The Committee heard that online abuse remains a significant issue.

Talat Yaqoob from Women 50:50 told us “There is online, and wider, abuse and increasing hostility within the political and public sphere, particularly for women. Women are disproportionately more likely to experience threats online simply for having an opinion. Unless that is tackled, that will act as a barrier to women coming forward and participating in politics”.

Dr Rebecca Mason agreed. She said “Misogynistic harassment and abuse online are a huge barrier. We all know that politicians, as elected representatives, are subject to scrutiny from the media and the public, as they rightly should be. However, the level of abuse and harassment that is directed at young women, and women in general, in politics is not acceptable. It is no wonder that that is putting young women off from standing as politicians. They do not want to face that in everyday life. That is huge and really needs to be tackled head on”.

There is a lack of robust and independent internal and external reporting mechanisms to address harassment, bullying or complaints

The Committee heard that bullying and complaints were not dealt with consistently or robustly or that there were no effective mechanisms in place.

Dr Mason told us “When women make a complaint after experiencing something from another party member or within their constituency, those complaints are not followed through. There has been no transparency. It is all about ensuring that parties are really clear about where complaints are going, who is involved and that they are being taken seriously as they should be”.

Women who would like to become involved in politics often feel it is inaccessible as a career and they do not know where to start

The Committee heard that more work needs to be done to demystify political spaces and make them more engaging and accessible.

Dr Rebecca Mason from the Young Women’s Movement said: “Young women told us that politics does not really feel accessible to them at the moment. They feel as if politicians do not communicate directly with them in accessible and engaging ways about the issues that matter to young women and have an impact on them.

The young women described feeling alienated by reports or committees in general—they felt as though they could not engage with that at their level. There is a lack of trust in the political system among young women, which puts them off engaging in democratic processes. Young women feel as if there is not a sufficient feedback loop for them to express their opinions or see active steps to make a real change. This year, some young women in the programme told us that Parliament feels like “too big a system” for them to be able to have a tangible impact on it. Young women often do not vote due to that disillusionment and their belief that nothing will change”.

Dr Mason told us that “it was really important to bring young women into the parliamentary space to demystify the Parliament because many young women do not really understand what goes on there and how it affects them” She said they would also appreciate “more video content from elected representatives on how to engage with them and more explanation of the various differences in the Parliament”.

Catherine Murphy said “Parties need to approach the issue with a level of transparency – it is not accessible to people who are not as steeped in internal party politics and operations. There is a basic need to have information that is easy to understand”. The same issue she told us needs to apply to recruitment – “Through research we are doing women have told us that recruitment panels ask highly sexist questions about childcare – not from the point of view of providing support but to problematise their reality”.

When women are elected there is a greater focus on gender specific issues in parliament and policy making – this sends a positive message to women and society that women are valued

The Committee heard that having women represented in parliament sends a positive message to women across Scotland.

Catherine Murphy told us “More women being elected to Parliament leads to the prioritisation of or greater attention being given to issues that are important to women. That is clear from the fact that there have been a lot of members’ bills in the Scottish Parliament on issues such as period poverty, breastfeeding and safe access zones. That also sends a message to all women that the Parliament care about the issues that they have. That is relevant to role modelling and communicating issues that have historically been under prioritised in parliamentary spaces”.

Data collection needs to improve to track and achieve better outcomes

The Committee heard that collection of diversity and intersectional data needs to be better.

Catherine Murphy told us “It is hard for us to track the changes that are occurring and to fully understand who has or has not been selected and the reasons why that has happened. That data is also a critical element of accountability for change” if we do not have oversight of who is being lost at the candidate selection stage it is very hard to hold parties or the broader culture to account or to understand how to make changes”.

Talat Yaqoob said “That data is needed and political parties should consider giving providing it to be a reputational matter, even if that is not made mandatory. At the moment, the emphasis should be on the enacting of Section 106 of the Equality Act”.

What can parliament and political parties do?

The Committee heard that there are a number of actions that political parties and the Scottish Parliament could take to address some of the barriers highlighted above.

Culture change

It is clear that there needs to be a significant culture change to make politics more accessible for women and to tackle discrimination in all forms.

Talat Yaqoob said, “There is a strategy on supporting women, but where is the long-term strategy on culture change, accountability and challenging sexism, misogyny and, in fact, any kind of discrimination across politics?”

The Committee believes this is something that all parties and the Parliament need to be working towards immediately.

Support for candidates

A genuine commitment by parties and the parliament to gender equality is essential if we wish to ensure gender equality in political spaces. There needs to be better resources made available for outreach work throughout the year and investments in women's networks and mentoring schemes which enable women to speak to other women who are MSPs or councillors and learn from their experiences.

Evidence shows that women are a good support for other women entering politics particularly in understanding how those women dealt with the barriers that they faced in one form or another, whether that be the financial barriers, caring responsibilities, access to maternity leave and other employment rights.

Addressing the financial and practical barriers to standing

Parties need to take proactive steps to address financial and practical barriers which women face. Without access for example to childcare and support, women will continue to be less likely to be able to campaign in the evenings and weekends and are more likely to deselect themselves from participating in politics.

Taking a consistent and sustained approach to measures which work

To avoid going backwards parties need to commit to consistently applying methods which have been successful under the [guidance on the Equality Act 2010 and political parties](#) such as positive action, reserved places on shortlists and all women shortlists.

The Engender toolkit

The equal representation in politics toolkit, developed by Engender is "a tool for parties to audit their internal practices which provides pointers and recommendations on everything from internal party culture to candidate selection processes, communication and engagement". All parties could use this toolkit to audit their systems and process and make improvements. Political parties should also adopt robust diversity and inclusion practices as any other employer would do.

Robust internal and external reporting mechanisms

Women need to know that if they experience harassment or bullying behaviour that they have a mechanism for this to be addressed through their party and/or parliament, that there are procedures in place and that their complaints will be taken seriously. This applies both to online harassment and to the everyday sexism, patronising behaviour and microaggressions which can have a significant impact.

Engagement with young women to access parliamentary spaces

More could be done by parliament to engage and involve women to demystify political spaces and make politics a more attractive career for women. Political parties also need more transparency about their processes and to provide information that is accessible, engaging and easy to understand.

Better data collection

Collection of diversity and intersectional data needs to be better to enable parties to track changes that are occurring, understand who has been selected and the reasons why. It helps parties to be held to account by the general public and understand how changes can be made.²

We trust this letter serves as a useful update for the Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group and welcome any feedback or thoughts on how we can further support the Group's actions.

The Committee recognises there remains much to be done in this area. We will monitor progress and formally revisit this aspect of our work as it relates to recommendation 6 as a priority following the 2026 election.

Yours sincerely,

Karen Adam MSP
Convener

² The Equality Act 2010, section 106, gives UK Ministers the power to make regulations requiring political parties to publish data on the protected characteristics, (excluding marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity) of all of their candidates at a relevant election. This provision is not yet in force.