

A HOUSE FOR EVERYONE

A Case for Modernising Parliament



Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at: info@fawcettsociety.org.uk

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A HOUSE FOR EVERYONE

A Case for Modernising Parliament

Fawcett Society January 2023

Alex Shepherd, Lizzie Ville, Catherine Marren,
Amy Whitelock-Gibbs & Andrew Bazeley

Fawcett 
Equality. It's about time.

About us

The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading membership charity campaigning for gender equality and women's rights at work, at home and in public life. Our vision is a society in which women and girls in all their diversity are equal and truly free to fulfil their potential creating a stronger, happier, better future for us all. We publish authoritative research to educate, inform and lead the debate; we bring together politicians, academics, grassroots activists and wider civil society to develop innovative, practical solutions and we campaign with women and men to make change happen.

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A note on language

In the UK, there are a number of terms used to describe a person's race and ethnicity. In this report, we have chosen to use the term Black and minoritised women – used by Imkaan (a UK-based, Black feminist organisation). As highlighted by Imkaan, "Political Blackness encompasses all women whose herstorys originate from African, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America, including the indigenous peoples of Australasia, the Americas and the islands of the Atlantic Indian and Pacific Oceans."¹ In addition, "global majority populations are designated with a permanent minority status. This is a label imposed by the state and society in the places where they settle regardless of the history of settlement, legal status and citizenship...used together, Black and minoritised identifies the struggle against racism of a global majority population."²

Fawcett follows the Social Model of Disability, which recognises that "people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference"³, rather than the Medical Model of Disability. Consequently, we use the term 'disabled person' rather than 'people with disabilities.' In addition, we note that societal prejudice means some people may not self-identify as disabled due to its perceived negative connotations and instead identify as having a long-term health condition. The use of the term 'disabled person' in this report therefore is inclusive of those who identify as having a long-term health condition.



The JRSST Charitable Trust has supported this work in recognition of the importance of the issue. The facts presented and the views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Trust.

1 Imkaan. "About Us." Accessed 6 December, 2022. <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/about-imkaan>

2 Ibid.

3 Scope. "Social model of disability." Accessed 6 December, 2022. <https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/social-model-of-disability/>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The underrepresentation of women in politics undermines our democratic system. The presence of women MPs in the rooms of power where decisions are made has undoubtedly transformed our laws and policies. And yet, while women have been leading the charge on these significant reforms, they have also faced significant challenges, especially Black and minoritised women, disabled women and women with long term health conditions. Parliament is a microcosm of our society. It reflects back at us deeply embedded structural and systemic inequalities, including prejudicial views and stereotypical norms about the role and value of women. It is not surprising then that just 37% of women compared to 55% of men MPs we surveyed agree that the culture in Parliament is inclusive for people like them.

The MPs who participated in this research spoke passionately about their motivations and the positive impact they can have. However, it is clear from our research that there are structural barriers hampering women's participation in politics and this is impacting their attitude and views about their job. Without urgent action, this will have consequences for equal representation and for democracy.

We cannot let this happen. Those who are elected to represent us and stand as MPs must reflect the voices and experiences of their constituents. For Parliament to be diverse and inclusive we must question the processes and procedures that underpin it. While progress has been made, our current Parliament is the most diverse ever,⁴ the pace is far too slow.

Fawcett's previous report *Strategies for Success*,⁵ highlighted that there are systemic barriers hampering women's participation in politics and it is clear that these challenges continue once women are elected and take up office. Analysis of the 2010 election found women MPs who left in 2010 had shorter tenures than men MPs⁶ and reflections by retiring women MPs indicate there are gendered differences in Parliament which are impacting MPs' attitudes about their job.⁷ Any evidence which suggests women are leaving Parliament with shorter tenures than men is concerning, especially as they are less likely to enter in the first place.

Consequently, this research set out to explore how current and former MPs view their jobs, whether they plan to stay in or leave politics and the changes needed to ensure a more representative and inclusive democracy. We conducted 20 in-depth interviews with former and current MPs, an anonymous online survey of 100 current MPs, and consulted with expert stakeholders.

We found that MPs' reflections on their roles provides valuable insights into their decision-making processes when considering whether to stay in or leave politics, which we summarise as push and pull factors. Push factors are those which make MPs think negatively about their job, whereas pull factors are those which make MPs reflect positively on their job. Despite facing similar challenges,

4 BBC. 2019. "Election 2019: Britain's Most Diverse Parliament." December 17, 2019. Accessed 1 December, 2022. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-50808536>.

5 Leah Culhane and Jemima Olchawski (Fawcett Society). 2018. "Strategies for Success: Women's Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament." <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/strategies-for-success>.

6 Christopher Bryne and Kevin Theakston. 2015. "Leaving the House: The Challenges Former MPs Face after Leaving Parliament." British Politics and Policy at LSE. December 4, 2015. Accessed 1 December 2022. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-political-afterlife-the-challenges-former-mps-face-after-leaving-the-house-of-commons/>.

7 Frances Perraudin and Simon Murphy. 2019. "Alarm over Number of Female MPs Stepping down after Abuse." *The Guardian*, October 31, 2019. Accessed 28 November, 2022. [https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/oct/31/alarm-over-number-female-mps-stepping-down-after-abuse](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/oct/31/alarm-over-number-female-mps-stepping-down-after-abuse;); Maya Oppenheim. 2019. "General Election: Women MPs Standing down over 'Horror Abuse', Campaigners Warn." *Independent*, November 1, 2019. Accessed 28 November, 2022. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/general-election-woman-mps-step-down-abuse-harassment-a9179906.html>

the implications of these experiences affect men and women differently, so there are gendered differences in how MPs weigh up these factors. Our research also found that the push and pull factors were quite similar amongst MPs from different political parties.

Pull factors

“Being an MP is one of the best jobs in the world, we’re very lucky and privileged to be MPs...Being able to help people and get positive feedback...the positives outweigh the negatives by huge margins.”

(Man interviewee)

Motivation and a commitment to have a positive impact along with enjoyment of the job are buttressing against the push factors.

Many MPs we spoke to reflected positively on the impact they have had. MPs had a strong sense of pride in their achievements in a variety of contexts, including in their constituency work, Ministerial roles and on Select Committees or All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs). As part of this, MPs emphatically highlighted how much cross-party work occurs in Parliament.

Ongoing family support, especially in taking up caregiving roles, is critical to MPs.

However, MPs who spoke about this highlighted that, if this support was to shift or be lost, it would become a push factor. It must also be noted that not everyone has these support systems, nor should it be such that families have to perform these functions. If that is the underlying assumption, a life in politics remains inaccessible for many.

For Labour MPs, a desire to be in Government was a strong pull factor.

Push factors

“It’s a vocation. It’s not like any normal job this...You need to be prepared for the fact that it’s full time plus, the fact that you have to find a way to protect yourself because people will disagree with you, you won’t please everybody and at times people will be deeply unpleasant and nasty and you need to find a way of coping with that and dealing with it. In any other job if you were dealing with people threatening you with sexual violence... it wouldn’t be tolerated or accepted but somehow as a woman MP it’s kind of something you can put on Facebook... ‘you should be hung from a lamppost’ or ‘you’re a traitor to the country.’”

(Woman interviewee)

MPs have expansive workloads and this, accompanied by long and unpredictable hours, is having an impact on MPs’ attitudes towards their role, including how it impacts their families.

Being an MP is an all-consuming job. There are many different facets, and the role is constantly evolving including to reflect changing constituency needs which, post Covid and in the current cost of living crisis, are increasing. While MPs are clearly committed to supporting their constituents and derive great purpose from this, this expanded workload is placing additional pressures on some MPs and their staff.

The impact of the job on family life was a key push factor cited by the women and men we surveyed. Difficulty achieving work-life balance and issues associated with this, including poor wellbeing, were also identified by surveyed women MPs as push factors.

As part of this, some MPs reflected on potentially leaving politics to pursue alternative pathways. Linked to this was a sense that they were getting older – with age a key push factor for the surveyed men MPs.

The systems put in place to help MPs with these challenges are not sufficient

Despite recent changes, more still needs to be done to facilitate more inclusive and flexible workplace practices especially to support those MPs with caring responsibilities and disabled MPs. Unsurprisingly, those with caring responsibilities were more likely to say the timings and unpredictability of the Parliamentary schedule has a negative impact on how they feel about being an MP – 47% compared to 37% of those without caring responsibilities.

Parliamentary procedures and practices including parental leave, online voting, and the business costs ('expenses') scheme, need to be re-designed so that caregiving is not a barrier to either becoming an MP or progressing into senior leadership positions.

Parliamentary culture is exclusionary

Women MPs we surveyed were less likely to agree that 'the culture in Parliament is inclusive for people like me' – 37% of women compared to 55% of men. Consistent with other research, sexism is very common. 69% of women MPs and 49% of all MPs we surveyed said that they have witnessed sexist behaviour in Parliament in the last five years. This exclusionary culture extends to a range of intersecting prejudicial attitudes and behaviors with MPs also reflecting on racism and ableism. Men also spoke about Parliament's exclusionary culture – recognising that the system benefits those with certain backgrounds. It is not surprising, then, that 62% of women we surveyed said that Parliamentary culture has a negative impact on how they feel about being an MP compared to 34% of men.

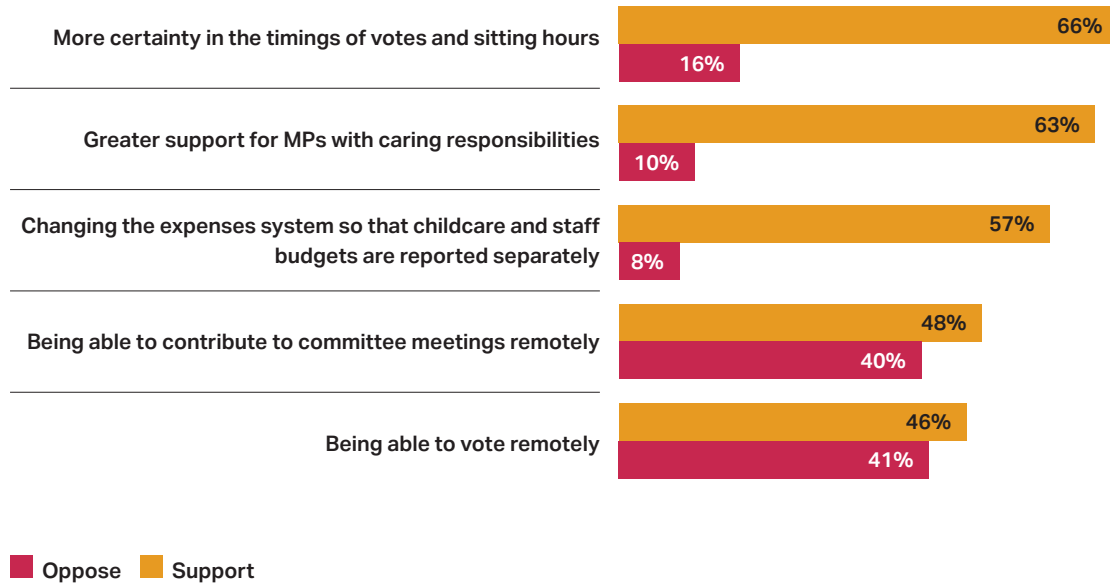
Online abuse is rampant with a significant majority of MPs worried about safety

Online abuse is taking a huge toll on all MPs, especially on women. 93% of women MPs reported that online abuse impacts negatively on their feelings about the job, compared to 76% of men. This abuse is highly gendered and misogynistic in nature, with many women MPs – particularly Black and minoritised women MPs – reflecting on the emotional toll it takes on them, their families, and staff. At its most extreme, the online abuse involves threats of violence, highlighting MPs' very real concerns about physical safety. Abuse was also a push factor for both women and men MPs in our survey.

Online abuse is also damaging democracy. Women MPs are particularly likely to censor what they talk about online as a direct result – 73% agreed that they 'do not use social media to speak up on certain issues because of the abusive environment online' compared to 51% of men.

The remainder of this report will explore these push and pull factors in greater detail, examining the changes that are essential to make Parliament a more inclusive and diverse workplace, some of which are highlighted in Figure 1 below. Critically, the recommendations point to the need for structural change which center intersectionality by recognising that intersecting inequalities often compound the discriminatory experiences faced by those with multiple and overlapping identities.

Figure 1. % MPs who support or oppose potential changes in Parliament⁸



8 N = 100 MPs polled between May and July 2022.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Political Parties

- Ensure women, especially disabled women and women from Black and minoritised backgrounds, are being selected in winnable seats.
- Strengthen MP induction and handover for new MPs, through:
 - embedding in-depth Parliamentary orientation sessions,
 - introducing a formalised mentoring programme; and
 - supporting the House of Commons Service to institutionalise a comprehensive support and development programme, with a focus on ongoing professional development, mental health and wellbeing
- Review candidate selection processes to ensure that there are no structural barriers hampering the participation of underrepresented groups including women, disabled and Black and minoritised candidates.
- Introduce quotas to increase women's representation. If quotas are not feasible then targets should be implemented. These should be accompanied by clear action plans to meet these goals. Furthermore, given the impact of quotas in increasing women's representation in Parliament we think this approach lends itself well to other underrepresented groups and would support organisations campaigning for such change.
- Review internal party sexual harassment and complaints policies to ensure they are transparent, quick, victim-focused and independent, and cover volunteers, employees and elected and appointed representatives. Any processes and policies implemented should be subject to ongoing review to ensure they are effective and fit for purpose.
- As outlined by the Disability Policy Centre, encourage and promote alternative campaigning techniques with equal validity and equality of assessment criteria.⁹

Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

- Increase budget allocations for MPs' staffing, office running costs and other resources required, so that MPs can fulfil the increasing demands of the role both in Westminster and their constituencies.
- Record business costs associated with having dependent children, including transport and accommodation costs, at an aggregate level.
- Cover after hours childcare costs for MPs while work is done by Parliamentary authorities to ensure it is more family friendly workplace including overseeing greater predictability in sitting hours.

⁹ Celia Hensman and Chloe Schendel-Wilson (Disability Policy Centre). 2022. "Breaking Down Barriers: Improving Disabled Political Representation & Participation across the United Kingdom." <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/619e1d7a522f9748f55d6a17/t/6217a1260df6fb6a8f05dcfa/1645715752837/Disabled+Representation+Paper+PDF.pdf>, 9.

Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme

- Consider how the Scheme can better identify and respond to inappropriate behaviour, including third party reporting.

House of Commons Service

- Work with political parties to review and institutionalise the professional and pastoral support currently offered to MPs including, expanding the offer to focus on induction, ongoing professional development training and mental health and wellbeing support.

House of Commons Commission

- Introduce a standalone training module for MPs covering Sexism and Sexual Harassment.

House of Commons Procedure Committee

- As identified in *The Good Parliament*,¹⁰ conduct an inquiry examining the introduction of (i) a 'division hour' and (ii) core business hours.
- Investigate the expansion of different voting methods, through:
 - launching an inquiry into the piloting of online voting; and
 - conducting regular reviews of proxy voting, including the scope and circumstances in which proxy voting is permitted.
- Launch an inquiry, using the recommendations from *The Good Parliament* as the basis, examining how to make the rules, structures, institutions, nomenclature and working practices diversity sensitive and inclusive.
- As identified by Daisy Cooper MP¹¹, examine alternative ways for MPs to indicate that they wish to speak during debate and, on a longer-term basis, ensure the inquiry into diversity sensitive and inclusive ways of Parliament (see recommendation above) is intersectional and reflects the experiences of disabled and Black and minoritised MPs.
- Review whether the current approach towards actions taken against MPs under investigation for sexual misconduct strikes the right balance, including whether there should be grounds to temporarily exclude MPs subject to investigations from Parliament.

Leader of the House of Commons

- As identified in *The Good Parliament*, set Parliamentary sitting dates further in advance and better match the Parliamentary calendar with school holidays, to give MPs greater predictability and facilitate improved work-life balance.

Speaker of the House of Commons

- Create a new body to drive diversity and inclusivity reforms in the House of Commons. This body should have responsibility to audit the recommendations made to date from various reports, including *The Good Parliament* and the *UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit*. Findings from this audit should henceforth form the basis of a public annual update to be provided by this body about the progress of recommendations from these reports.

10 Sarah Childs. 2016. "The Good Parliament." <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/news/2016/july/20%20Jul%20Prof%20Sarah%20Childs%20The%20Good%20Parliament%20report.pdf>

11 Daisy Cooper. "Written evidence submitted by Daisy Cooper MP." <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6247/html/>

Government

- Introduce legislation to allow MP sharing, as called for by a variety of civil society organisations including Disability Politics UK.
- Introduce legislation to ensure all MPs have access to parental leave guided by the principles identified in the Report. In the interim, while this is being developed, action should be taken to:
 - expand the scope of the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act 2021, to include paternity and shared parental leave while also clarifying it is an entitlement and not subject to discretion.
- Use the Houses of Parliament Restoration and Renewal Program to review the accessibility and inclusivity of Parliament. This should be done in an intersectional manner to ensure the barriers hampering political participation for all underrepresented groups are meaningfully challenged.
- Commence s106 of the Equality Act 2010, requiring political parties to collect and report candidate monitoring data – including candidates selected by each party, those elected and those that fail to be elected – so we have an accurate picture on the diversity of political candidates. This must be accompanied by cultural change which fosters more inclusive workplace environments as societal prejudice and stereotypes can mean that people are uncomfortable with disclosing this information.
- As outlined by the Disability Policy Centre,¹² require political parties to report annually to the relevant Minister on what actions they are taking to support the participation of disabled people in politics. We suggest this is also expanded to other underrepresented groups including women and Black and minoritised communities with reporting required to the Minister for Women and Equalities.
- Reinstate a formalised funding scheme for disabled candidates in England (Scotland and Wales already have a scheme).¹³ As part of this the “Cabinet Office must work with disabled people, and disabled women in particular, involved in politics to improve the process around the Fund.”¹⁴
- Reform legislation so MPs are protected against sexual harassment and have access to the same legal protections as employees.
- Ensure the Electoral Commission and local police are sufficiently resourced and equipped to enforce legal sanctions for intimidating candidates, campaigners, and representatives during election periods.
- Amend the Online Safety Bill to better address the disproportionate levels of online abuse experienced by women, especially those from Black and minoritised backgrounds, and increase the accountability of tech companies. In particular, we support the End Violence Against Women Coalition’s recommendations¹⁵ for:
 - the inclusion of a mandatory code of practice for tech companies.¹⁶ This would support companies to design their systems in a manner that reduces harm and violence against women and girls (VAWG) as a whole – beyond the Bill’s existing, narrow inclusion of certain criminal forms of VAWG.
 - expand the media literacy requirements within the Bill to highlight collective responsibility, beyond the current emphasis on users’ literacy.
- Direct a proportion of the Digital Services Tax toward funding for specialist support services, to support the women and girls subject to abuse online.

12 Hensman and Chloe Schendel-Wilson, “Breaking Down Barriers: Improving Disabled Political Representation & Participation across the United Kingdom”, 9.

13 Ibid.

14 CAG. 2022. “Overcoming the barriers to disabled women’s involvement in politics.” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f6c6785a30f513e35cda046/t/6284cef0eabf7339ed9db8cb/1652870897275/CAG+Overcoming+the+barriers+FINAL.pdf>, 6.

15 Parliament. 2022. “Written evidence submitted by the End Violence Against Women Coalition to the Online Safety Bill Public Bill Committee.” <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmpublic/OnlineSafetyBill/memo/OSB63.htm>

16 End Violence Against Women. 2022. “Coalition of experts announce new Code of Practice that would hold tech companies to account for online violence against women and girls.” <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/coalition-experts-code-of-practice-online-violence-against-women-girls/>

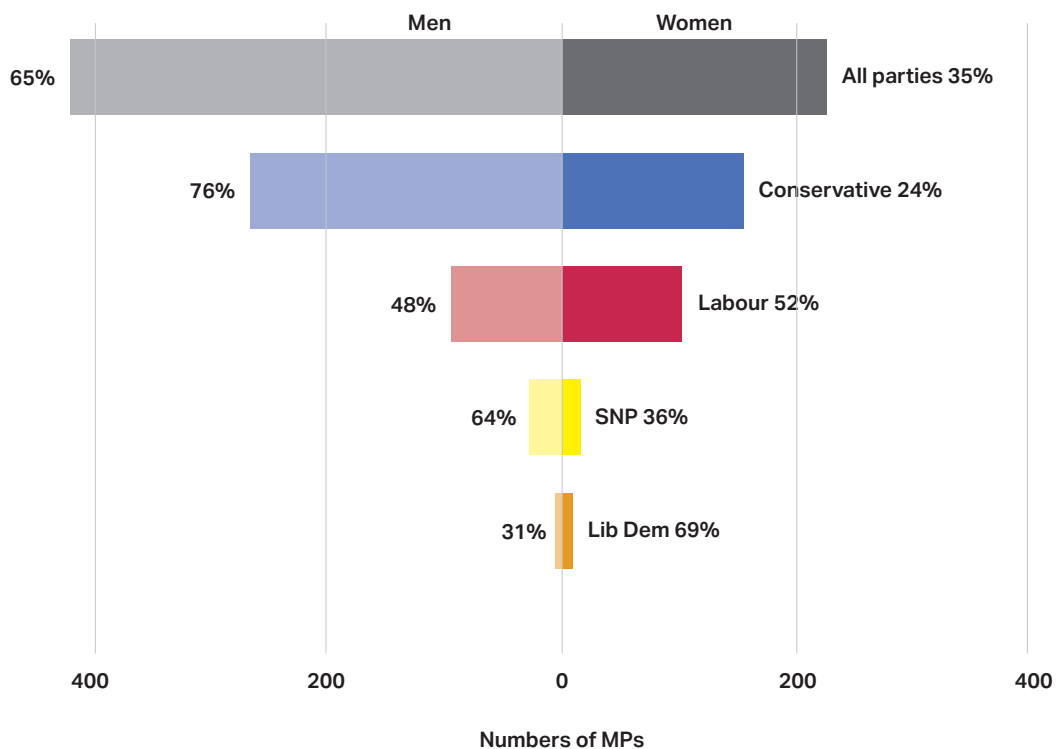
INTRODUCTION

Over 100 years have passed since the first woman was elected to the House of Commons, yet progress towards equal representation continues at a glacial pace.

Who are our MPs?

As shown in Figure 2, women continue to be underrepresented in Parliament. There are 225 women MPs, making up just 35% of the House of Commons,¹⁷ a mere 3 percentage point increase from 2017.¹⁸ Women MPs make up 52% of the Parliamentary Labour party but just 24% of the Parliamentary Conservative party.¹⁹ Of the 559 women ever elected to the House of Commons, 55% were elected as Labour, 31% as Conservative including 3 Conservative women Prime Ministers, 6% as Liberal Democrat and 5% SNP MPs.²⁰

Figure 2. Number and % of current MPs, by gender and by political party²¹



17 Elise Uberoi, Matthew Burton, Richard Tunnicliffe, Shadi Danechi and Paul Bolton (House of Commons Library). 2022. "Women in Politics and Public Life." <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01250/SN01250.pdf>, 6.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid, 8.

20 Ibid, 5.

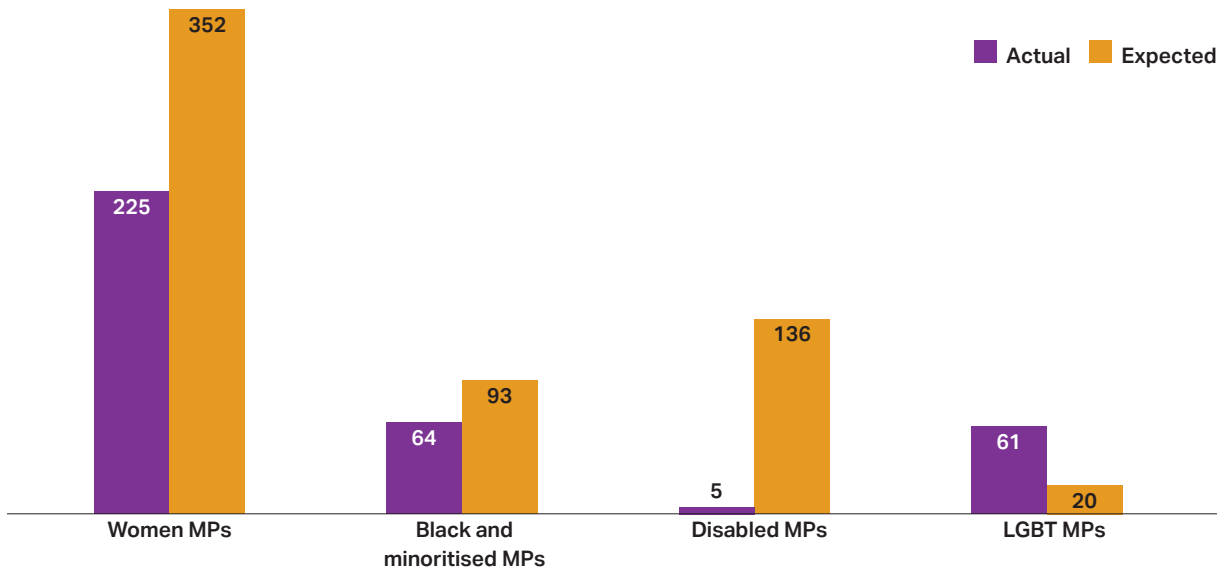
21 Ibid.

Figure 3 shows that if the House of Commons was truly representative, there would be around 93 MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds.²² However, according to Operation Black Vote, there are just 64 MPs, including 36 women, from ethnic minority groups.²³ In terms of party composition, there are 28 women MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds in the Labour Party, 6 in the Conservative Party and 2 in the Liberal Democrats.²⁴

Similarly, true representation would see 136 disabled MPs sitting in the House of Commons.²⁵ However, Disability Rights UK suggests that there are just 5 MPs who are open about having a disability, 3 of whom are women.²⁶

In terms of LGBTQ+ MPs, there are at least 61 who identify as LGBTQ+.²⁷ Of these, 14 are women.²⁸ Positively, the number of LGBTQ+ MPs is higher than would be expected (20),²⁹ although, more broadly, this may be an underrepresentation in ONS population statistics.³⁰

Figure 3. Actual counts of women, Black and minoritised, disabled and LGBTQ+ MPs compared with expected number if Parliament were representative of the general population.³¹



22 Elise Uberoi and Matthew Burton (House of Commons Library). 2021. "Ethnic Diversity in Politics and Public Life".
 23 Operation Black Vote. "MPs and MSPs". Accessed 6 December, 2022. <https://www.obv.org.uk/our-communities/profiles/mps#>
 24 Catherine Marren and Andrew Bazeley (Fawcett Society). 2022. "Sex and Power 2022." <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/sex-power-2022>.
 25 Ibid.
 26 Disability Rights UK. 2021. "All-Party Parliamentary Group for Disability inquiry into access to elected office in the UK." Accessed 6 December, 2022. <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2021/may/all-party-parliamentary-group-disability-inquiry-access-elected-office-uk>
 27 John Peart. 2022. "LGBT+ Members of Parliament." Accessed November 29, 2022. <https://mps.whoare.lgbt/>.
 28 Peart, J. "LGBT+ Members of Parliament." Accessed November 29, 2022. <https://mps.whoare.lgbt/>.
 29 Amanda Sharfman and Pamela Cobb. 2022 (ONS). "Sexual Orientation, UK - Office for National Statistics." Gov.uk. Office for National Statistics. Accessed November 30, 2022 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualidentityuk/2020>.
 30 ONS data (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualidentityuk/2020>) indicates a historical trend in the proportion of the UK population identifying as LGB. In 2020 it was 3.1% of the total population, with young people aged 16-24 the most likely to identify as LGB in 2020 (8%). This difference may stem from people not disclosing due to fear of prejudice and discrimination. The National LGBT Survey (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-lgbt-survey-summary-report/national-lgbt-survey-summary-report>) found that 70% said they had avoided being open about their sexual orientation for fear of a negative reaction.
 31 Data reflects sources cited above inc. footnotes 22-30.

Working Towards a Gender Sensitive Parliament

Overcoming the barriers hampering women's political participation has long been a focus of the Fawcett Society. Our 2018 report *Strategies for Success: Women's Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament*³² detailed the experiences of women at each stage of the process of becoming an MP, concluding that, in addition to political parties doing more to get women involved in politics, institutional and cultural change in Parliament is needed.

There is still a very widely held view that the "ideal candidate is not only male but white, middle-class and able-bodied"³³ and in turn this is reflected in the way that the House of Commons operates. Like for so many other working women, sexism, misogyny and women's unpaid care work, including the 'motherhood penalty' – whereby women see lower earnings and career setbacks after they have a child – combined with systemic racism and ableism, means the obstacles faced by women MPs do not simply come to an end once they are elected.

Recently, there has been heightened focus on sexism in Parliament, with the treatment of women and the culture of Westminster garnering attention. Fawcett, along with others, has led calls for intersectional gender sensitive practices to be embedded into Parliamentary reforms. Parliament must not simply accommodate diversity; it must be welcomed and celebrated – ensuring those with an interest and passion in representing their communities are not hampered from doing so because of discrimination and/or a lack of inclusive practices.

Professor Sarah Childs' 2016 landmark report *The Good Parliament* served as a "blueprint for a more representative and inclusive House of Commons."³⁴ It advanced a diversity-sensitive Parliamentary framework – "recognise that women are not the only groups underrepresented in the House of Commons."³⁵ Since publication, its findings and recommendations have underpinned the Parliamentary reform agenda, while also paving the way for subsequent reviews including the 2018 *Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit*.³⁶ While its success and ability to generate traction can be attributed to many factors, the establishment of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion (a report recommendation) ensured Childs' focus on recognition and accountability was embedded throughout reform processes.

With this in mind, Fawcett has welcomed the changes made by various actors to improve women's representation. Political parties have adopted their own strategies to support women's representation, ranging from the use of all women parliamentary shortlists to mentoring and support initiatives. These strategies have generated different outcomes – evidenced in the composition of the two main parties. At the broader institutional level, the creation of an onsite nursery, introduction of proxy voting and changes to working hours are all welcome steps to improving the inclusivity and diversity of Parliament.

However, many of these reforms have been inconsistently implemented. Furthermore, the House of Commons should be modelling best practice – leading the way for all of us in the implementation of innovative, inclusive and diverse workplaces. The establishment of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion institutionalised the reform agenda; 18 of the 43 recommendations from *The Good Parliament* have now been implemented.³⁷ Unfortunately, the Group's disbandment

32 Culhane and Olchawski, "Strategies for Success: Women's Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament.

33 Ibid, 8.

34 Childs, "The Good Parliament", 1.

35 Sarah Childs and Jessica C. Smith. 2021. "Written Evidence Submitted - Gender Sensitive Parliament." <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/25329/html/>, 1.

36 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.

37 Childs and Smith, "Written Evidence Submitted - Gender Sensitive Parliament", 2.

in 2018 means reforms are now reliant on individuals driving change. Events over the last couple of years also demonstrate there is still much more that needs to be done.

There are worrying signs that the way Parliament works may be creating a retention issue that disproportionately impacts women.

Objectives of this Research

This report explores how current and former MPs – men and women – view their job as an MP, whether they plan to stay in or leave politics, and the changes needed to ensure a more representative and inclusive democracy. It is to be expected that MPs will retire and stand down from politics. However, there needs to be consideration as to whether MPs are leaving prematurely because of a failure to embrace diversity and a lack of inclusivity in the House of Commons. The APPG on Women in Parliament's 2014 report *Improving Parliament* highlighted the "style of parliamentary politics and the workings of the House of Commons" can impact women MPs' views on retention.³⁸

Our report builds upon the pre-existing research, providing valuable insights into MPs' decision-making processes when deciding whether to stay in or leave politics. It highlights that, while there are similarities in women and men's experiences of Parliament, these have different implications – attributable to societal expectations and views of women which, in many ways, are amplified by Parliament's culture and practices.

In particular, the research set out to understand more about who our MPs are – their motivations, why they enter politics, what exactly the job of an MP entails, how the culture in Parliament impacts the way they do their job, and their views on whether they will seek re-election. This allows us to gain valuable and unique insights into the decision-making processes MPs use when weighing up whether they plan to stay in or leave politics, i.e. the push and pull factors, and what are the challenges and what are the uniquely rewarding aspects of being an MP. In balancing these factors, we have also been able to identify the strategies MPs use to cope with these challenges, not just for themselves but their families too. In turn, this reveals the changes that need to be made by and to Parliament, to ensure it is truly a modern-day workplace which fosters inclusivity and diversity to ensure all voices are heard.

At the onset, it is important to note there may be differences between the needs and preferences of those who are already MPs and those that are not. Previous research³⁹ tells us about the significant barriers to entry into politics and to becoming an MP – especially for particular groups – and how this is reflected in the makeup of Parliament. This research does not delve into those issues but on the barriers to retention to those already in the House of Commons. It is a fair assumption that those who have been elected, in spite of those challenges, likely had access to at least some support networks, financial resources and social capital – although this may not have been the case for all. We therefore recognise the needs and preferences identified through this research are reflective of those who have already passed through the hurdles and not of those who may be facing additional barriers and pressures.

Nevertheless, we hope our recommendations have positive implications for entry as well as retention, as they seek to make Parliament a more inclusive workplace for all.

38 APPG Women in Parliament. 2014. "Improving Parliament - Creating a Better and More Representative House." <http://appgimprovingparliamentreport.co.uk/download/APPG-Women-In-Parliament-Report-2014.pdf>.

39 Culhane and Olchawski, "Strategies for Success: Women's Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament."

METHODOLOGY

The research comprised 20 one-to-one in-depth interviews with former and current MPs, and an anonymous online survey of 100 current MPs.

Interviews

Data collection. Current and former MPs took part in a mixture of in-person and online one-to-one, hour-long interviews with Fawcett researchers, between March and July 2022. Current MPs were invited to take part by email and phone via their Parliamentary and constituency offices, whilst former MPs were approached by email.

To gather data encapsulating a diversity of experience, a sampling frame reflecting representativeness by gender, political party, ethnicity, and disability was used, with a final sample of 20 participants, including:

- 16 current and 4 former MPs
- 17 women and 3 men
- 9 Labour, 9 Conservative, and 2 participants from other parties
- 4 participants from Black or minoritised backgrounds and 16 white participants
- 1 LGBTQ+ participant

Researchers used a semi-structured discussion guide to conduct the interviews ensuring that relevant topics were covered consistently. The study was explained to participants prior to participation and interviews were video and/or audio recorded with participant consent. Researchers also met with sector experts – seeking their insights on the issues they perceive, their feedback on the types of questions we might like to examine and reflect in the discussion guide, and then subsequently testing draft findings and recommendations with them.

Analysis. Framework, a thematic approach developed at the National Centre for Social Research,⁴⁰ was used to manage and analyse the qualitative interview data. An analytical matrix framework was developed, with rows for each case and columns representing themes. Data were compared and contrasted both between (exploring different participants' views / experiences on the same issue) and within (exploring how participants' views / experiences on a topic relate to those on other topics) cases.

Limitations. LGBTQ+ people were underrepresented in the interviews and we were unable to analyse their experiences as a group. Disabled people were underrepresented in the interviews, and so we ensured the experiences of disabled MPs were reflected in discussions as part of our sector expert consultation.

In addition, the power to make change is also held by those working alongside or adjacent to MPs, including civil servants and political advisors. Womens' representation and experiences within these roles are important issues which are crucial to a fair democracy, but were beyond the scope of this report.

⁴⁰ Nicola Gale, Gemma Heath, Elaine Cameron, Sabina Rashid and Sabi Redwood. 2013. "Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research". *BMC Med Res Methodology*. 2013 Sep 18;13:117; and Aashish Srivastava and S Bruce Thomson. 2009. "Framework Analysis: A Qualitative Methodology for Applied Policy Research". *Journal of Administration and Governance*. 2009;4(2).

Survey

Data collection. Savanta ComRes, a member of the British Polling Council, were commissioned by Fawcett to conduct an anonymous online survey of MPs between 11th May and 25th July 2022. MPs were invited to take part in the survey via email to their parliamentary inbox. Approximately 450 MPs were contacted, excluding MPs who had opted out of Savanta email communications, and any Ministers, Junior Ministers, or other MPs on the Government payroll, due to the Ministerial Code. The final sample consisted of 100 MPs (Table 1). During analysis, data were weighted by party and region to be representative of the House of Commons.

Table 1. Characteristics of surveyed 100 MPs (unweighted).

	Count	
Gender	Men	70
	Women	30
Party	Labour	35
	Conservative	47
	Other parties	18
Ethnicity	White	96
	Ethnic minority background	4
Caring responsibilities	Yes	40
	No	60
Length of service	Pre 2001	12
	2001-2009	15
	2010-2016	38
	2017-2018	8
	2019+	27
Date of Birth	Born before 1960	30
	Born between 1960 – 1969	17
	1970 - 1979	26
	1980+	27
Country	England	74
	Wales	19
	Scotland and Northern Ireland	17

Survey questions were developed by the Fawcett Society to test the prevalence of initial themes and experiences highlighted by the interviews.

Analysis. Data were cross tabulated by Savanta ComRes to produce percentages and frequencies of survey responses for different demographic groups, and Z-tests were conducted to explore whether differences in responses by group were statistically significant at the 90% level. Open-ended questions were coded, with codes collated and qualitatively analysed by Fawcett researchers.

Limitations. The survey sample size of 100 MPs meant that for particular subgroups comprising less than 30 individuals, it was not possible to run comparative statistical tests. For example, a very small number of MPs from Black and minoritised backgrounds (4 before weighting) were reflected in the survey sample, since this is a small group which is further reduced by the exclusion of MPs on the Government Payroll, and we did not collect information on whether participants identified as LGBTQ+. Due to the small number of disabled MPs in Parliament, it was not possible to collect data on disability

whilst maintaining survey participants' anonymity. Therefore, since the views of these groups are not adequately explored in the survey analysis, we explored the views of MPs from Black and minoritised backgrounds in the interviews and supplementary research and spoke to an expert stakeholder regarding the experiences of disabled MPs in as well as supplementary research.

Finally, the survey relies on participants' self-report, and primarily focusses on perceptions and attitudes. Therefore, we cannot make claims about cause and effect, but instead can provide clear information on the various common experiences and views of MPs.

Ethical considerations

Some of the interview questions concerned experiences of abuse or threat and posed a risk of distress to participants. Researchers explained this to participants prior to the interview and let them know that they could skip questions, stop or pause the interview at any time. All individuals who took part in interviews were signposted to a list of organisations providing resources and support.

Due to the potential impact of a breach of confidentiality given the high profiles of participants, personal interview data was stored securely on Fawcett's file systems – to which only core researchers had access - and in accordance with GDPR. Interview participants were provided with a privacy notice detailing how their data would be used and were verbally informed of their right to withdraw their data at any stage prior to report publication. All personal data will be deleted after the report is published.

Similarly, Savanta ComRes adheres to the strictest global data protection / security standards based on the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), while also taking into account the requirements of their ISO 27001 certified ISMS. Savanta ComRes' privacy policy details the ways in which they use anyone's data and is published on their website (<https://savanta.com/privacy-policy/>).

1. WHAT DRIVES MPS INTO POLITICS?

To examine whether MPs are choosing to leave politics prematurely, suggesting that there may be a retention issue in politics, it is helpful to consider MP's motivations for entering politics and their expectations of the role.

Motivations

MPs have multiple motivations. The majority of those we spoke to entered politics because they wanted to have an impact (a disposition often stemming from their own lived experiences), by both representing their constituencies and overseeing policy reforms. For many, this is the pull factor keeping them in politics. On the flip side, an inability to achieve progress or change was identified as a push factor. Contrastingly, one interviewee reflected their view that not all MPs are motivated by impact – power is an attraction for some.

“I knew that politics could really affect people...seeing some policies that were being enacted that were really detrimental and I wanted to change them.”

(Woman interviewee)

“I don't make any apologies for wanting power, but I know what I want that power for, and the power is to be able to make change. Not power for the sake of power which a lot of politicians have.”

(Woman interviewee)

A desire to have an impact runs parallel to other motivations. Entering politics because they witnessed others in the job and thought they could do better, and a desire to increase women's representation, were also identified as motivating factors.

“A really useless man had just been selected as a candidate...and I thought if he can do this, I can do it.”

(Woman interviewee)

“Having more women in Parliament, that was quite a big thing for me.”

(Woman interviewee)

Expectations

The majority of interviewees had some expectations about what the job of an MP was like; there was a sense it would be *'full on.'* For some women with caring responsibilities, this meant they were apprehensive about standing.

“I had decided I couldn’t manage life as an MP together with my caring responsibilities...but equally...it was an opportunity which, if I let it go by, I might never forgive myself for not doing it.”

(Woman interviewee)

Contrastingly, while men reflected on the job’s impact on their families, their roles as carers did not seem to influence, as much, their views on whether the job of an MP was something they could take on.

2. AN “ALL-ENCOMPASSING” JOB: THE DAY-TO-DAY REALITIES OF BEING AN MP

This chapter will explore how, upon entering the halls of Westminster and opening their constituency offices, the expansive workload and its ripple effects on family begin to impact negatively on MPs, with these having the potential to amount to push factors out of politics.

“Everyone will hate you. You will lose your private life completely. You don’t get much time off; it is all-encompassing. It doesn’t matter what you do, it will be wrong, and that’s quite hard to take. If your majority is small, then it will be more wrong than if your majority is a bit bigger. And, being able to live out of a suitcase is not for everyone.”

(Woman interviewee)

A Multifaceted Role

The job of an MP is a unique one. MPs are not employees; they do not have the same rights and protections as other workers and neither, as reflected by interviewees, is there a job description with concrete objectives. The breadth of MPs’ responsibilities, combined with the job’s opaqueness and uniqueness of Parliamentary system means newly elected MPs embark on a steep learning curve, trying to balance a vast array of responsibilities, while also learning how to influence the Parliamentary agenda.

“It’s not PMQs...that’s a tiny part of being an MP...a lot of the grunt work which people don’t see and know about.”

(Woman interviewee)

Constituency Work and Parliamentary Responsibilities

Reflecting their commitment to achieving results for their constituency, the majority of interviewees emphasised the importance of constituency work. Some comments indicate how events of the past couple of years, combined with stretched public resources, mean the needs of constituents have become greater albeit this can often be constituency dependent in terms of boundaries and demographics.

“Times have changed. It’s made things a lot more difficult. We’re expected to do more with less so, for example, the work life/balance I suppose I expected is very different because, since the pandemic and since the cuts to public services, more people are relying on their MP for support so there is more work to do but we’re not given much more resources and by resources, I mean funding for staff.”

(Woman interviewee)

While MPs enjoy and derive great satisfaction from their constituency work, indeed this is often a pull factor into politics, the breadth of this workload caused some to reflect on its sustainability, including suggestions that there may be too much time spent on constituency issues. This may pose a retention risk - MPs' workloads becoming too much may push them out of politics. Amongst some interviewees, there was a sense some issues, which may previously have been delegated to local Government, were now expected by constituents to be dealt with by MPs.

“There needs to be a real national debate about what can be expected of a Member of Parliament...you have a real issue for English MPs...expected effectively to do the work in Westminster of councilors as well as member of Parliament and it's become a thing...he or she is spoken about as being a good constituency MP.”

(Man interviewee)

This interviewee subsequently reflected on the bind this creates “*answering emails about drains and dogs is seen as being a good MP*” yet this is extremely time consuming and also not necessarily their responsibility. For some MPs, the ever-expanding remit of what it means to be an MP is placing great pressure upon them.

“Either it has to come with a big health warning, that this is not a job, it's a lifestyle, or you need to change the focus of what MPs do.”

(Woman interviewee)

APPG – A cross-party group, with no official Parliamentary status made up of MPs and Peers interested in a specific topic. They often host events and can write reports examining specific issues.

Select Committee – Cross-party groups which work in both Houses. While their function varies, they are often “charged by Parliament with a specific role or with investigating a specific issue. Select Committees are one of Parliament's main tools for holding Government to account.”⁴²

Increases in MPs' workload are especially likely to impact those in marginal seats, as they are likely to experience extra pressures and workload, including year-round campaigning, to maintain visibility in their party and amongst the public. This is particularly relevant for women MPs as historically they are more likely to be selected in and represent marginal seats.⁴¹ The pressures of managing marginal constituencies were also identified by some as push factors out of politics.

In addition to representing constituency issues, MPs are also responsible for setting national and international policy agendas. Many interviewees spoke about their broader legislative and policy work, including their participation in APPGs and Select Committees. However, there are signs the workload of Ministerial roles are particularly challenging to balance with an MP's pre-existing workload, especially if an MP has caring responsibilities (as will be discussed in the next section).

It is clear that the job of an MP and, in turn, the work expected of their staff is increasing and that for many this is becoming challenging. Not only does this pose a retention risk but it impacts constituents too. Either we reassess what is expected of an MP, particularly in terms of local issues, or we examine whether the current budget allocation for MPs' staffing expenses, overseen by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) is reasonable and sufficiently covers increased workload.

41 Sue Maguire (IPR). 2018. “Barriers to Women Entering Parliament and Local Government.” <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/barriers-to-women-entering-parliament-and-local-government/attachments/barriers-to-women.pdf>, 7.

42 The Institute for Government. 2020. “Select Committees.” Accessed 23 November, 2022. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/select-committees>.

This was recently a focus of the Scottish Parliament where a review was done on Member's Staff Cost Provision resulting in an increase to accommodate an additional FTE caseworker.⁴³ We note IPSA's 2020 review⁴⁴ acknowledged the growing pressures on MPs, which resulted in the staffing allowance and salary scales for MPs' staff being increased - although this did not reflect increased funding for additional staff which remains at 4 FTE. The ongoing effects of Covid, combined with the cost-of-living crisis alongside reduction in public spending and local services that previously supported residents, is placing increased pressure on MPs. Increasing the budget to allow MPs to hire more staff must be considered by IPSA.

Responsibilities of a 'Small Business Owner'

Some interviewees were also surprised to find themselves effectively running small businesses. In addition to their Parliamentary and constituency responsibilities, MPs are also employers; responsible for managing their staff and running two workplaces. While some had not anticipated the scale of this work, others simply had not envisaged it as something which MPs do and thought it added additional pressures to an already expansive workload.

“I had no idea I was going to be personally employing people, and that I was responsible for their HR...allow MPs to focus on being MPs rather than running a small business.”

(Woman interviewee)

Recommendations

While the job of an MP is a rewarding one, it is all-consuming with varied and often unexpected responsibilities. To support the retention of MPs from diverse backgrounds, changes to the scope of an MP's role need to be considered alongside expanding the support MPs receive to undertake their roles so that the job of an MP can be an option for more people.

Political Parties

- Ensure women, especially disabled women and women from Black and minoritised backgrounds, are being selected in winnable seats.

Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

- Increase budget allocations for MPs' staffing, office running costs and other resources required, so that MPs can fulfil the increasing demands of the role both in Westminster and their constituencies..

43 Rebecca McKee (The Constitution Unit). 2022. "As the House of Commons Begins to Look at New Employment Model for MPs' Staff, We Should Look to Other Legislatures to See What We Can Learn from Them." The Constitution Unit Blog. August 25, 2022. Accessed 30 November, 2022. <https://constitution-unit.com/2022/08/25/as-the-house-of-commons-begins-to-look-at-a-new-employment-model-for-mps-staff-we-should-look-to-other-legislatures-to-see-what-we-can-learn-from-them/>

44 IPSA. 2020. "Policy Review: Funding for MPs' Staff" https://assets.ctfassets.net/nc7h1cs4q6ic/1Qpj1SkPE2oTGgY3HewrsP/4ffe673e548e157b022da5697c51d807/policy-review-funding-for-mps-staff_v2.pdf

“It’s completely unsuited to anybody who has a family”: The impact on MPs’ personal lives

Like many of their constituents’ whose jobs require long and unpredictable hours, MPs’ expansive workloads are having a negative impact on some MPs’ wellbeing, with ripple effects on their family. This, in turn, affects MPs’ attitudes towards their job. Interviewees also reflected on a desire to spend more time with family as a push factor, along with a general sense that the role of an MP is just too consuming. This did not just extend to hours worked but the significant upheaval to everyday life.

Long and Unpredictable Hours

The lack of work-life balance was widely acknowledged. Of those we surveyed, both men and women MPs highlighted work-life balance was a critical factor impacting how they view their role. As shown above in Figure 1, **the most supported change to Parliament that we asked MPs about was ‘more certainty in the timings of votes and sitting hours’**. Overall, 66% were supportive, and those with caring responsibilities were significantly more supportive than those without (84% vs 54%). Nearly all MPs we spoke to reflected on the long hours and lack of predictability in their jobs and the difficulties this presented. Interviewees without caring responsibilities acknowledged the difficulties faced by colleagues with caring responsibilities. The working patterns and hours of MPs are also impacting the participation of disabled MPs (see discussion in Chapter 4).

“The honest truth is that there is no balance...the truth is that being an MP is a 7 day a week job.”

(Woman interviewee)

“We do have a nursery on site but what’s the point if it closes before the votes finish, how does that help? Obviously, I know it may seem unreasonable to be able to keep children until 10pm when a last vote may be but if that’s the case then the job is unreasonable isn’t it, if we can’t keep it around childcare.”

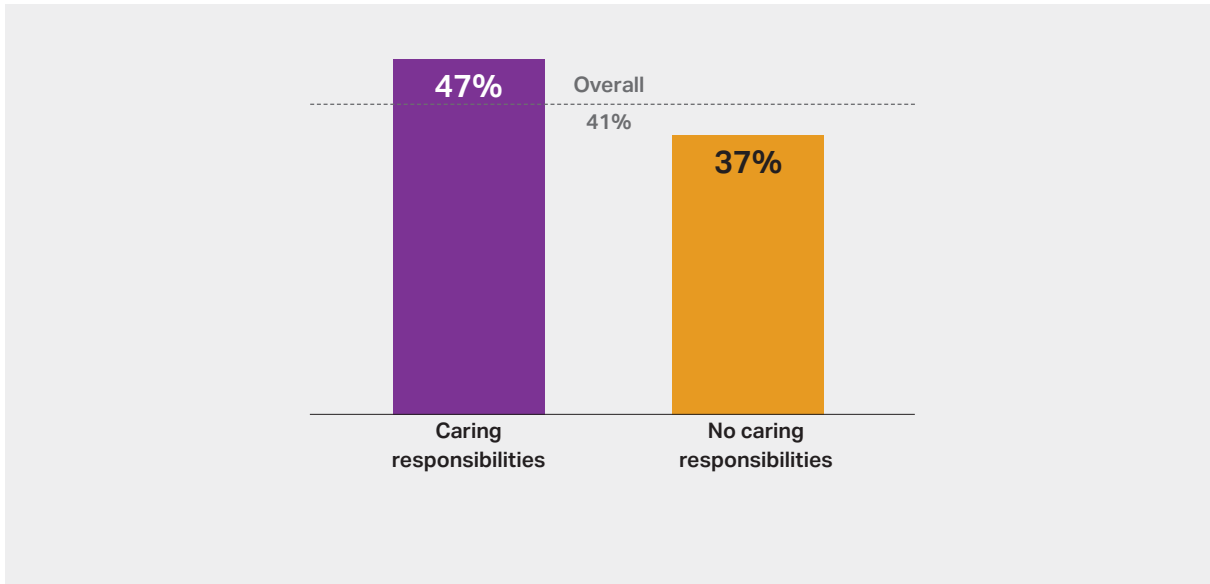
(Woman interviewee)

“I’m of this generation where our mothers tried to do it all and then we realised that they couldn’t...We’ve sort of gone back to trying to have it all and as women its hard...I don’t know how those with families do it, I really don’t.”

(Woman interviewee)

While many interviewees spoke about the challenges associated with long and unpredictable hours, this was particularly prominent for those with caring responsibilities. This is clearly having an impact on MPs’ attitudes towards their role. As shown in Figure 4, **MPs with caring responsibilities were more likely to report that the timings and predictability of the Parliamentary schedule has a negative impact on how they feel about being an MP (47%) compared to those without caring responsibilities (37%).**

Figure 4. % MPs reporting that the timings and predictability of the Parliamentary schedule has a negative impact on how they feel about being an MP⁴⁵



“It’s completely unsuited to anybody who has a family. I mean it’s really suited for single people, because you’re there late at night, every night, and then you have to work so hard at the weekends.”

(Woman interviewee)

“Sitting hours are ridiculous, they just need to be normal office hours, with maybe a little bit of flex when you’ve got to get through some important legislation.”

(Woman interviewee)

Despite the long hours, some women interviewees reflected on the strategies they use to facilitate work-life balance. Having considerable autonomy and agency in managing time was identified as critical in offering a degree of flexibility to create this balance.

“Parliament is a great place to be for a woman MP. I think it’s flexible and there are few jobs of this seniority and leadership that facilitate such flexibility...You are largely in control of your diary and day to day operations of how you work...It is different for those who are based in London and those who have to travel...I have caring responsibilities...all of which are manageable – it requires planning...”

(Woman interviewee)

While these reflections are encouraging and could indicate the reforms implemented to date are gradually (albeit far too slowly) undoing the motherhood penalty, we must examine this in further detail. The lack of women in senior leadership positions including Parliamentary committees suggests that caring responsibilities may be a barrier. As outlined above, ministerial positions further expand an already extensive workload. This is likely to have implications for MPs with other family or personal

45 N = 100 MPs (39 with caring responsibilities and 61 without caring responsibilities, after weighting).

responsibilities including caregiving, which continues to disproportionately impact women. We need to ensure women are not just in the halls of Westminster but also around the Cabinet table, at the heart of decisions that will impact us all.

More broadly, women MPs' experiences highlight the need for Government-led policy interventions which tackle the harmful gender norms and stereotypes underpinning women's disproportionate undertaking of unpaid care work. All families in the UK should be better supported through more robust childcare, flexible work and parental leave policies, which support women to pursue employment opportunities not constrained by societal perceptions and expectations that they are primary carers while also supporting men to take up caring roles and responsibilities

The varying distances MPs travel to Westminster also impacted their views about the job. Interviewees with constituencies in or near London often empathised with the challenges faced by colleagues whose constituencies are further away. Having a workplace in dual locations (i.e. constituency and Westminster) was also identified as something which made balancing caring responsibilities harder. As part of this, MPs reflected on the difficulty in developing solutions to overcome the challenges posed by long hours and a lack of predictability that could work for everyone.

“I know that some colleagues are keen on a more 9-5 approach but that’s not much help to me or many of my colleagues who live more than a day’s commute from London.”

(Woman interviewee)

Efficiency can help to facilitate predictability. One interviewee noted the introduction of card readers had sped up voting processes, making it more efficient, and that this could be built upon by allowing MPs to cast multiple votes at once. This could be achieved through a 'division time' as suggested by Childs in *The Good Parliament* "whereby multiple votes could be taken together at a particular point of the Parliamentary sitting."⁴⁶ This would ensure MPs have greater predictability in their scheduling. This approach has attracted criticism, namely that separating votes from debates means MPs are not open to being challenged or persuaded. However, given time constraints, MPs are often not present at all debates, and in practice whipping means that, for the most part, MPs tend to vote according to party lines rather than in response to specific debates. Although, if a division time was implemented, MPs would still be encouraged to attend Parliamentary debates.

A Job that Impacts the Whole Family

Many interviewees spoke about how having a supportive partner and/or family was integral for them to carry out their job, especially for those with caring responsibilities. Partners were described as not only providing emotional support but also being the ones who 'pick up the slack' at home, with many MPs describing the sacrifices their partners had made. MPs also valued having a partner who understood politics and the lifestyle that it entails. Beyond this, there was a sense that families also had to be invested in the political cause.

“I’m very lucky...my partner is selfless, puts up with constant changes...although she has her own life...it is built around what I do...and that is pretty selfish and I can see that others might not want to have that set up.”

(Man interviewee)

“It’s such a calling for the whole family...this will affect everyone in your family and you all need to be on board.”

(Woman interviewee)

Having a supportive partner is so critical that many MPs described losing this support as a push factor. However, this was spoken about with great empathy – there was significant understanding of the sacrifices made by partners to support their careers. The necessity of having a supportive partner is not only a barrier to initial participation – not everyone has that support network to begin with – but poses a retention risk as many MPs we spoke to identified many familial relationships break down in Parliament.

An MP’s workload has repercussions on their families. MPs spoke about spending little time with their families. **73% of those we surveyed agreed being an MP has made their family life and relationships more difficult.** MPs with children thought their job negatively impacted on the time spent with their family. Much of this was attributed to the long hours and unpredictable nature of the job. While the presence of an on-site nursery was considered a great step – some MPs remarked that it did not align with the hours worked by MPs, with votes sometimes going until 1am.

“People don’t understand how much we sacrifice...I did not see my [child] between Monday to Thursday when [they] were growing up.”

(Woman interviewee)

“The hours can be stretched beyond imagination... that doesn’t work for a lot of people. A lot of my colleagues are in the corridor saying goodnight to their kids on FaceTime. They know that that’s going to happen but it’s something to be aware of – the impact on family life and how little time you’ve got for that.”

(Woman interviewee)

Recommendations

Parliament’s long and unpredictable hours need to be changed, with the lack of work-life balance a push factor out of politics and, in turn, a key retention risk.

House of Commons Procedure Committee

- As identified in *The Good Parliament*,⁴⁷ conduct an inquiry examining the introduction of (i) a ‘division hour’ and (ii) core business hours.

Leader of the House of Commons

- As identified in *The Good Parliament*, set Parliamentary sitting dates further in advance and better match the Parliamentary calendar with school holidays, to give MPs greater predictability and facilitate improved work-life balance.

3. THE SYSTEMS DESIGNED TO HELP MPS NEED IMPROVEMENT

This chapter will explore how the systems put in place to help MPs with the challenges outlined above, particularly those with caring responsibilities, are not enough. **We asked MPs in our survey which reforms they would like to see and the second most supported change was 'greater support for MPs with caring responsibilities', supported by 63% of MPs. Women were significantly more likely to support this – 76% compared with 56% of men.** Not everyone thought action was required – believing that while it was a challenge to balance their work with family life, that is the way it should be given the nature of the role. However, these reflections suggest that perceptions about how Parliament should work and operate often reflect societal norms and expectations which maintain the status quo. These norms limit who can engage and participate in politics. Combined, a lack of effective support systems can be a push factor out of politics.

“Family should have a place in Parliament as well - as that reflects society.”

(Woman interviewee)

“If it's important to you that you spend half your time with your family, this may not be the job for you...As much as I'm desperate for more women and for Parliament to be more representative, I don't think we should keep trying to change Parliament to enable that to happen.”

(Woman interviewee)

Whips – “Are MPs or Members of the House of Lords appointed by each party in Parliament to help organise their party's contribution to Parliamentary business.”⁴⁸

Whips have a range of responsibilities including “making sure the maximum number of their party members vote, and vote the way their party wants [and]... managing the pairing system.”⁴⁹

Whips

Party whips can play a crucial role in creating a supportive culture for MPs – especially those with caring responsibilities. This is because there are informal and formal conventions including pairing which they can use to extend flexibility, where required, to MPs.

Many of the women and men MPs, including those with caring responsibilities, we interviewed reflected on the pastoral support they received from their whips. The whips' role in ensuring Parliamentary business runs according to schedule was also reflected on as something which helps facilitate work-life balance. These insights align with our survey data. **65% of MPs we surveyed agreed they feel comfortable approaching whips for advice and support;**

but there was a gender difference – men (72%) are more likely to feel comfortable than women (52%). As implied by some interviewees (below), this could be a reflection of the demographic background of those who tend to be appointed as whips.

48 UK Parliament. 2022. “Whips.” Accessed 23 November, 2022. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/principal/whips/>.

49 Ibid.

“The whips office and the people who set the business can really have a positive or negative effect in that if they can get business through...then colleagues can be off home on Wednesday evening and spend Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday back in their constituencies with family and that does make a big difference.”

(Woman interviewee)

“In terms of my interactions with the whips office they couldn’t be more supportive.”

(Woman interviewee)

Contrastingly, others had fewer positive reflections on how whips support work-life balance. For some MPs, this stemmed from a feeling that whips do not understand family life and do not extend flexibility, even where it would have no consequence on Parliamentary business. There was a sense this may reflect the dominance of men MPs in the whip’s office.

“They are notionally the HR function but they don’t perform that function at all... oscillate between cajoling and bullying...there are too few women in the whips office.”

(Woman interviewee)

“Going to the whips office fills me with utter dread and I think I need to get over that because actually I get on very well with the Chief and the Deputy...It seems to be a bit of a dark art that some people are better at than others.”

(Woman interviewee)

Pairing – “An arrangement between two MPs of opposing parties to not vote in a particular division. This enables an MP to be absent without affecting the result of the vote as they effectively cancel each other out. Pairing is an informal arrangement which is not recognised by the House of Commons but must be registered with the whips. Pairing is not allowed in divisions of great political importance.”⁵²

The mechanisms which whips can use to support MPs requiring flexibility or absences, like pairing, have previously attracted criticism for being “informal, opaque, and rarely understood by the public. Nor do all parties participate in pairing, and they are not always honoured”.⁵⁰ The discretionary nature of these conventions can protect MPs’ privacy, often in relation to sensitive personal issues – a benefit identified by MPs themselves.⁵¹ However, there needs to be greater transparency about how these mechanisms operate, although this should not come at the cost of MPs’ privacy. This also needs to be accompanied by greater respect for the operation of these Parliamentary conventions as it is clear that, in certain circumstances, these conventions have broken down.

“Pairing system broke down a long time ago and that was the way in which MPs could, by agreeing with their pair not to go to a vote, could arrange matters around their family life...so that is an area that has to be reformed if you want to get people to come in who perhaps have young families...”

(Man interviewee)

50 Jessica C Smith and Sarah Childs. 2021. “The Remotely Representative House.” <https://www.centenaryaction.org.uk/publications/remotely-representative-parliament>, 13.

51 Procedure Committee. 2022. “Proxy Voting and the Presence of Babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall.” <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmproced/383/report.html>.

52 UK Parliament. 2022. “Pairing.” Glossary - UK Parliament. Accessed 23 November, 2022. <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/pairing/>.

“I haven’t had a problem with slipping...but different for me...I don’t have children...so I don’t need to be slipped...but we don’t get slips granted with enough notice...”

(Woman interviewee)

Support for parents with young children

As the Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) noted “conventional maternity, paternity and adoption leave for MPs is problematic because MPs are individually elected officeholders rather than employees.”⁵³ Consequently, the support that is offered to MPs for parental leave does not reflect that which is traditionally available to employees. Instead, the supports that are offered are an amalgamation of different systems built over time.

Maternity Leave

While there is a *Maternity Allowances Act* which sees Government Ministers and some Senior Opposition members eligible for 6 months paid leave, the purpose of this legislation stems from the Government needing to be able to “designate a Minister wishing to take maternity leave as a ‘Minister on Leave’ [in such a way that does] not count towards the overall number of Ministers when calculating the statutory limits. This means the Prime Minister can then also appoint someone else to the role vacated by the Minister going on maternity leave, without exceeding the statutory limits on the number of Ministers.”⁵⁴ Consequently, a Minister does not need to resign from their position when they go on leave. In turn, this ensures Ministers are not financially penalised for having children as they still receive their Ministerial salary. However, they are not guaranteed their previous ministerial position upon their return.

Proxy Voting

The introduction of proxy voting in September 2020, after a successful pilot, marked a significant step forward for the inclusion and diversity agenda in the House of Commons. Proxy voting allows an MP to cast a vote on behalf of another MP for up to a maximum of seven months. It is available to anyone who meets the criteria. Currently, it is available to all MPs who are absent from Parliament because of childbirth, caring responsibilities for an infant or newly adopted child, or where there have been complications relating to childbirth. In effect, proxy voting serves as quasi parental leave – ensuring that someone else is casting an MP’s vote enabling them to be absent from Westminster. Those who make use of proxy voting continue to receive their full salary with additional supports offered by IPSA (see discussion below).

Many MPs we spoke to thought proxy voting should be expanded. Some thought it should be broadened to support MPs in other circumstances, including those with caring responsibilities for older children and adults, and those with health conditions. Given this, we welcome the recently announced pilot extending proxy voting to include serious long-term illness or injury.⁵⁵

Broader changes have also been made to the proxy voting scheme which will boost inclusivity. Removing the discrepancy in entitlements for parents, ensuring women and men MPs have equal rights when it comes to proxy voting, is a significant change. Its previous structure reinforced gender norms regarding primary caregiving. Similarly, we welcome clarification that makes clear it applies to parents who have children via surrogacy or those who experience complications, miscarriage and baby loss.

53 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/>, 15.

54 Chris Rhodes, Daniel Ferguson and Brigid Francis-Devine (House of Commons Library). 2021. “Ministerial and Other Maternity Allowances Bill 2019-2021.” <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9133/>, 3.

55 Kelly, “Proxy Voting in Divisions in the House of Commons.”

This is critical in ensuring the scheme's inclusivity as it recognises a variety of different circumstances may necessitate MPs using proxy voting.

IPSA's – Parental Leave and Absence Budget

Recent changes by IPSA have sought to improve the support offered to MPs.⁵⁶ Through the MP Parental Leave and Absence Scheme, IPSA gives MPs extra funding to employ additional staffing resources to cover their absence. However, this does not extend to supporting someone to take on an MP's responsibility in the House of Commons including in debates and Parliamentary committees. "Constitutionally no one can take on the full roles and responsibilities of a Member of Parliament, who is an officeholder elected by the general public."⁵⁷ Any such changes require legislative reform. Separately, we welcome recent changes to the Scheme to cover other forms of absences including ill health and broader caring responsibilities.

What's missing?

While the introduction of proxy voting and IPSA's Parental Leave and Absence Fund has been a significant step forward for gender sensitive Parliamentary reforms more needs to be done. As highlighted above, the supports that are offered to new parents reflect an amalgamation of different systems. The system needs to be made simpler and more inclusive. Firstly, the Maternity Allowances Act is only applicable to birth mothers. This is exclusionary and reinforces gender norms about primary carers. It must be extended to include paternity and shared parental leave. It must also be clarified that this is an entitlement for anyone who is eligible – there is no discretionary basis. Secondly, proxy voting can only be used for seven months by parents. This is out of kilter with what is statutory maternity leave arrangements. Thirdly, proxy voting does not take into account the pressures and challenges faced by MPs with caring responsibilities for older children and adults. The scheme must be extended to support these MPs.

As the Mother of Parliaments, the House of Commons must be innovative and explore alternative ways to engage and retain MPs from a variety of different backgrounds. There needs to be greater support mechanisms offered to MPs with caring responsibilities and this should not be limited by the scope of what is currently available. Measures to support MPs with caring responsibilities may also encourage younger candidates. However, any changes must be underpinned by a core principle of choice – MPs must have the choice to make decisions that work for them, their family and their constituencies.

The guiding principle for broader reforms should be that paid parental leave is available to all MPs. The provisions should not reinforce gender norms and instead support women and men to be actively engaged in childcare. Critically, parental leave should not be discretionary. Alongside this we call for the Government to urgently reform the current maternity and parental leave systems to make it more equitable - the current system simply does not work. It has failed to address gendered care dynamics and the payments are too low.

The current distinction which means that MPs' constituency work can be covered while on leave, but their Parliamentary work cannot, must also be reconciled. The Government must introduce legislation so that this function can be covered while an MP is on parental leave. We note that other European countries, such as Denmark, allow the appointment of a substitute during this time.⁵⁸ A failure to facilitate this is not just a potential push factor out of politics but it is also undermining democracy.

56 Women and Equalities Committee. 2022. "Equality in the Heart of Democracy: A Gender Sensitive House of Commons: Responses to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2021-22." <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22678/documents/166671/default/>.

57 IPSA. 2021. "IPSA provisions for parental leave." Accessed 30 November, 2022. <https://www.theipsa.org.uk/news/ipsa-provisions-for-parental-leave>.

58 Anne Bonewit (Director General for Internal Policies – European Parliament). 2016. "Preparing a Harmonised Maternity Leave for Members of the European Parliament – Legal Analysis." [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/556937/IPOL_IDA\(2016\)556937_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/556937/IPOL_IDA(2016)556937_EN.pdf)

While proxy voting ensures votes are cast, constituents are not being represented in other ways including debates and through oral questions.

MP job sharing could also help to make the role more accessible to more people. This includes those with caring responsibilities and, as highlighted by Disability Politics UK, it could also improve disabled people's participation in political and public life.⁵⁹ The landmark 2015 Phipps and Cope case concluded this issue was not for the court to debate and determine,⁶⁰ so the impetus lies with the Government to look beyond a narrow conceptualisation of what is possible and consider these changes which would dramatically change the dynamics of Parliament – ensuring it really is an inclusive place.⁶¹

Business Costs

Some MPs feel as though the business costs system (previously referred to as the expenses scheme), regulated and administered by IPSA, is not fit for purpose, especially for those with caring responsibilities and whose constituencies are further away.

IPSA oversees the public funding which is given to MPs so that they can fulfil their roles and responsibilities in their constituency and also in Westminster. As part of this, IPSA regulates MPs' staffing and business costs and determines MPs' pay and pensions.⁶² As IPSA makes clear, the "majority of MPs' funding, 87% in 2020-21, is for their staff and constituency office."⁶³ MPs who are not London based can also claim for travel and accommodation costs within pre-defined limits. Critically, MPs can only claim for accommodation costs in relation to a property at one location; the accommodation they have in London or in their constituency.⁶⁴ This reflects IPSA's recognition that the job of an MP is an unusual one as they are regularly required to work in two locations and so they have to travel and maintain two residences.⁶⁵ IPSA also provides funding for security and disability measures⁶⁶ in addition to funding to support MPs with caring responsibilities.

Despite IPSA's recent changes, it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure that the Scheme truly supports inclusivity and diversity in Parliament by allowing anyone to be an MP.

“Expenses system is designed for a single person living in a flat on their own, not for people to have their families with them.”

(Woman interviewee)

The scheme needs to be improved to ensure it adequately supports those with caring responsibilities. While MPs with dependent children have increased accommodation allowances for rental properties to enable them to “meet any additional costs...associated with having dependents” our research suggests this increased amount is not sufficient. Of those we spoke to, some suggested it is not sufficient as it does not cover having a flat with additional bedrooms (especially given increased rental costs associated with London housing).

59 Disability Politics UK. Accessed 19 December, 2022. <https://www.disabilitypolitics.org.uk/>

60 Fawcett Society. (2017). “Job-Sharing for MPs Supported by Women Candidates for Most Parties.” <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/job-sharing-for-mps-supported-by-women-candidates-for-most-parties>.

61 Fawcett Society. 2017. “Reflections on the possibility and practice of MPs job-sharing”. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=bb90467f-174b-4f68-801a-4ae04e4fd33c>

62 IPSA. “Who We Are.” Accessed 30 November, 2022. <https://www.theipsa.org.uk/who-we-are>.

63 IPSA. 2022. “MPs' business costs aren't expenses.” Accessed 30 November, 2022 <https://www.theipsa.org.uk/news/mps-business-costs-arent-expenses>.

64 IPSA. 2021. “The Scheme of MPs' Staffing and Business Costs.” https://assets.ctfassets.net/nc7h1cs4q6ic/6FJW4RDyApa0L6l1M3ZRnT/0a3e2e21057677af588c084bfbcf0cb/The_Scheme_of_MPs____Staffing_and_Business_Costs_2021-22.pdf#page=20

65 IPSA. 2015. “MPs claiming dependent uplift for accommodation” Accessed 30 November, 2022. <https://www.theipsa.org.uk/freedom-of-information/2015-16/cas-28593>.

66 IPSA. MPs' business costs aren't expenses.”

Childcare is also an issue. While ideally changes to ensure greater predictability and standardisation of hours, alongside voting reform, would support those with caring responsibilities we acknowledge that, as with any reform, these changes will take time. In the interim, greater support should be given to MPs with childcare responsibilities. Currently, the cost of “childcare services does not fall within the rules of IPSA’s Scheme.”⁶⁷ Given MPs’ unpredictable and long hours, like many other working parents, those with young children are likely to find themselves requiring after hours childcare in addition to paying for childcare during normal working hours.

However, the lack of affordable and accessible childcare may amount to a barrier or a push factor for some MPs out of politics. This damages the representative nature of our democracy – caregiving cannot be a barrier to being an MP. It also highlights the need for the Government to implement a comprehensive childcare policy that both supports early childhood development while also supporting working parents. Alternatively, some MPs suggested more extensive re-working of the system including greater centralization e.g. allocation of flats to MPs when they are in London and not having MPs employ staff directly, so business costs do not include staff salaries.

“If you go to places like Sweden, Parliament owns flats and can accommodate the entire Parliament... which seems to me a very sensible approach”.

(Man interviewee)

“Make IPSA the employer of staff...you would still get to choose staff...but IPSA would be the employer...and it takes it out of your expenses.”

(Woman interviewee)

Generally, there was also a sense amongst some that the system is misunderstood by the public with MPs’ attributing this to media coverage. MPs feel the scheme is portrayed wrongly in the press and that, while the media contributes to the public’s misunderstanding, the way in which IPSA collates and presents data is also a problem. For example, costs incurred by MPs with dependent children are reported individually, rather than on an aggregate level, meaning some MPs could be perceived as having higher costs than others with this potentially generating criticism. This is at odds with the Parental Leave and Absence Fund which is reported at an aggregate level.

Some MPS also thought that the making of claims and utilisation of allowances needed to be normalised in the public sphere as something which is critical for them to do their job. As part of this, it seems some MPs may be underplaying expenses to avoid negative media coverage.

“It’s not expenses, 80% of the costs... are staff...they’re people’s jobs...even though the press knows this, they will always talk about expenses as a gross figure simply because your staff are classified as expenses... One thing that could be done which would really help MPs is to take... staff costs out of the classification of expenses...it’s couched in a language which makes MPs really wary...MPs are deliberately underplaying expenses because they are so afraid of being pilloried in the press.”

(Man interviewee)

67 IPSA. 2020. “Details of expense claims relating to childcare.” Accessed 30 November 2022, <https://www.theipsa.org.uk/freedom-of-information/cas-156993>.

MPs had mixed sentiments towards IPSA. Some said they found their day-to-day interactions with IPSA challenging, bureaucratic and difficult to navigate while others were relatively neutral.

“It’s appalling. I cannot make head or tail of the system...the way it’s designed the way the information comes out...it’s my staff or printers - they’re not expenses and the abuse we get on the back of the release of expenses...It’s bureaucratic, they never answer your calls, it’s impossible to get a call back, they make endless errors....It all just increases the atmosphere that we should be hated.”

(Woman interviewee)

Online Parliament

During the early stages of Covid, the House of Commons swiftly implemented hybrid Parliamentary measures, including virtual participation, which received global plaudits.⁶⁸ However, the continuation of online Parliamentary procedures divided those who participated in our research.

While MPs recognised online Parliament was critical to the continuation of Government throughout Covid, many did not support its continuation once lockdowns were lifted. Critiques of online Parliament centred on a perception it impacted the quality of debate and the capacity of MPs to scrutinise Government and, more broadly, that it affected the sense of connection between MPs. MPs missed the in-person aspects and felt it became more transactional, as casual interactions were no longer possible.

“Online relationships are transactional they’re not personal...much easier talking to Ministers... in Parliament you can grab them in the voting lobbies if you’ve got an issue to raise with them...we did the best we could...I’m really pleased we’re back to normal.”

(Woman interviewee)

The continuation of online Parliamentary procedures divided MPs in our survey. The majority of those who supported it, considered it something that should either be rolled out to help people in specific circumstances or just for certain aspects of Parliamentary work. 46% supported an extension of online voting (41% opposed), while 48% supported online contributions to committees, including 66% of women MPs. Of those we interviewed, support for universal online voting stemmed from a belief it facilitated better use of MPs’ time, thereby supporting work-life balance. Others who supported did so on a more targeted basis e.g. as an option for MPs in specific circumstances.

We note, however, that other research and feedback has provided insights more supportive of online Parliamentary processes. In particular, the Labour Women’s Network praised its transformative effect saying the withdrawal of hybrid accesses “is regressive, potentially discriminatory, and demonstrates a disappointing failure of leadership, when employers in many sectors across the country are looking to do work differently long term.”⁶⁹ More broadly, extending online Parliamentary procedures would not just support those with caring responsibilities it would have a substantial impact on disabled MPs extending flexibility, where required, to ensure MPs can continue to engage in Parliamentary procedures and represent their constituents.

68 Smith and Childs, “The Remotely Representative House”, 8.

69 Labour Women’s Network’s. 2021. “Written Evidence Submitted by Labour Women’s Network’s.” <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/25386/pdf/>, 2.

Recommendations

The systems put in place to help MPs with the challenges they face are insufficient. This impacts on how MPs feel about their role, with implications for their retention and more broadly for others who have not yet managed to overcome the initial barriers hampering their entry into politics. Critically, the solutions to these problems must not be limited by current norms and conventions.

House of Commons Procedure Committee

- Investigate the expansion of different voting methods, through:
 - launching an inquiry into the piloting of online voting; and
 - conducting regular review of proxy voting, including expanding the scope and circumstances in which proxy voting is permitted.

Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

- Record business costs associated with having dependent children, including transport and accommodation costs, at an aggregate level.
- Cover after hours childcare costs for MPs while work is done by Parliamentary authorities to ensure it is more family friendly workplace including overseeing greater predictability in sitting hours.

Government

- Introduce legislation to allow MP sharing, as called for by a variety of civil society organisations including Disability Politics UK.
- Introduce legislation to ensure all MPs have access to parental leave guided by the principles identified in the Report. In the interim, while this is being developed, action should be taken to:
 - expand the scope of the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act 2021, to include paternity and shared parental leave while also clarifying it is an entitlement and not subject to discretion.

“Very Hit and Miss”: Where’s HR?

Training and ongoing professional development

Westminster is not a normal workplace – underpinned by the fact that MPs are not employees. While there is HR support offered at a party and Parliamentary level, some MPs reflected that this is often ad-hoc and not necessarily institutionalised as formal practice. In addition, it appears MPs want more than what is currently provided.

“There’s no feedback in Westminster...some have said ‘There’s no rulebook...how do you know what to do...and actually that’s frowned upon if you do that and in any other walk of life that’s not frowned upon, you’re encouraged to do that. The feedback and pastoral care they’re trying to make better but it’s very hit and miss...”

(Woman interviewee)

“No induction, no books given to us about do’s and don’t’s about being a rookie or new MP...yet people expected to have known, so it doesn’t allow us to attract people from professional backgrounds...no one talking you through about what happens [only a] few hours of induction...If I was designing an induction package would say these are examples of each department with some questions...how to use library services. There wasn’t any [information] about... what roles you can play.”

(Woman interviewee)

Some MPs referred to the whips as being a quasi-HR department. However, as mentioned previously, others also reflected they were not particularly supportive or interested in MPs’ experiences or development needs. In addition, the workload of an MP is already so expansive that the expectation of whips to perform this function (to the extent of HR departments in other ‘typical’ workplaces) is unreasonable.

“[In reference to the whips] People say it’s an HR role. Maybe in a limited way but not in any conventional way that you might understand an HR department to be in the outside world.”

(Woman interviewee)

Some women interviewees reflected there was inadequate induction and training. Part of this was connected to what some interviewees reflected as being the very specific ways of working in Westminster. Even interviewees who had prior involvement in, or exposure to, politics reflected on how the intangible aspects of the job, i.e. understanding how to influence to effect change, took a while to master. While Parties may already be offering these training sessions, consideration needs to be given to how accessible these are and also whether they reflect the needs and interests of MPs e.g. provision of training on media and public speaking, team management and budgets, and inclusion. MPs also expressed interest in access to ongoing professional development, including coaching and mentoring.

“House of Commons is really dreadful at having continuous professional development...career planning and progression.”

(Woman interviewee)

Parties should also work with Parliamentary Services to ensure greater linkages and synergies between the support provided by each organisation. As part of this, Parliamentary Services should consider expansion of support currently offered, including mechanisms through which their support could be more institutionalised. Lastly, the methods used by Parties and Parliamentary Services to communicate training and development programmes should be reviewed to ensure there is greater awareness of the support currently available to MPs.

Women’s reflections on induction and orientation also point to some broader issues concerning retention. While it was a small sample size, the difference in interview responses suggests this may be a gendered issue. The men we spoke to did not focus reflections on a lack of induction or training, perhaps suggesting the pathways through which they come into politics provide greater exposure to these things or that the continued dominance of a Parliamentary ‘boys’ club’ provides men with more informal networks through which they can develop this knowledge. This applies to others from underrepresented and marginalised groups, including Black and minoritised women and disabled women. The power of mentoring, networking and pastoral support – not just as a means to selection and election but ongoing including throughout a Parliamentary term – must be extended to all.

Recommendations

MPs, especially women, feel there is not enough training and ongoing professional and pastoral support to support them in their roles.

Political Parties

- Strengthen MP induction and handover for new MPs, through:
 - embedding in-depth Parliamentary orientation sessions,
 - introducing a formalised mentoring programme; and
 - supporting the House of Commons Service to institutionalise a comprehensive support and development programme, with a focus on ongoing professional development, mental health and wellbeing

House of Commons Service

- Work with political parties to review and institutionalise the professional and pastoral support currently offered to MPs including, expanding the offer to focus on induction, ongoing professional development training and mental health and wellbeing support.

4. “A MALE PLACE”: PARLIAMENT’S CULTURE

This chapter will explore Parliamentary culture and its impact on MPs. Notwithstanding MPs’ reflections on cross-party collaboration, there was a sense amongst many that Parliament can be an exclusionary place. Parliamentary culture is negatively impacting MPs, and this may be a push factor out of politics. In many ways Parliament is a microcosm of society – reflecting back at us deeply embedded and intersecting discriminatory attitudes about women and leadership. Men interviewees also commented on this exclusionary culture.

“It’s a lot harder for women...we now have more women than men on Labour benches but that’s not the end of the problem. The more structural inequalities in our society still make their way into politics.”

(Man interviewee)

The ideal political candidate remains “white, male, middle-class and able-bodied.”⁷⁰ Unsurprisingly, these characteristics are carried through the political pipeline into Westminster. It is still a boy’s club. Women interviewees reflected on having to make decisions about whether they conform or call out behaviour.

“The easiest way to get on in this place is just to become one of the lads, to blend in, to not cause any ructions.”

(Woman interviewee)

Our research shows Parliament is a very gendered environment. The question of whether MPs are treated differently on the basis of gender elicited differing perceptions. Some said they have never observed sexism while others explicitly spoke about sexist and misogynistic behaviour. However, given the research findings which highlight how prevalent sexism is in Parliament, interviewees who downplayed its presence suggests that sexist attitudes and behaviors may have been normalised within Parliament – as a reflection of wider society.

“It’s a very gendered environment... Some of that I guess is brought forward by tradition...those institutional failings of women in our society which is still replicated in this place.”

(Woman interviewee)

“I worked [elsewhere previously] and there I had proper sexism, this is nothing like it. There are a group of women at Westminster who need to man-up and get on with it, I think it’s really got out of hand.”

(Woman interviewee)

Interviewees reflected that while there have been improvements, most obviously in terms of numbers of more diverse MPs, it is still very much “a male place.” However, despite it being more than 100 years since the first woman was elected to Parliament, women remain outnumbered, especially Black and

70 Culhane and Olchawski, “Strategies for Success: Women’s Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament”, 8.

minoritised women and disabled women. This truly exposes the myth of meritocracy, which can only be remedied through proactive policies that recognise the existence of structural barriers, including through quotas and targets. This is exemplified in the fact that Labour’s decision to field all women shortlists since 1997 has transformed their party composition.

While quotas and targets are critical steps, they are not enough. They cannot address underlying “gendered practices of political institutions.”⁷¹ For women MPs, Parliamentary culture is greatly impacting their attitudes about the job of an MP – this has strong implications on retention and the health of our democracy. At an institutional level, as highlighted in *The Good Parliament*, “inclusive, effective and representative Parliament is about more than simply increasing the diversity of members...it also requires their equal and effective participation therein.”⁷²

While the Chamber’s adversarial and combative nature impacts everyone, interviewees acknowledged dynamics in the Chamber were particularly gendered. Some reflections focused more on the practicalities of being a woman in the Chamber, including struggling to project voices loud enough to be heard. Others explicitly called out the treatment of women in the Chamber, including how people’s identity is weaponised through rhetoric reflected in the quote below. More broadly, some women spoke about inappropriate sexist behaviour they, or their colleagues, had experienced, and how this makes Parliament an unsupportive and unpleasant working environment.

“there’s nothing off limits in terms of using it as a weapon to attack your opponent ...and for some people that will mean using racist, sexist, homophobic insults... using people’s disabilities against them...”

(Woman interviewee)

Interviewees described how Parliamentary culture is significantly influenced by the behaviour and attitudes of those in senior leadership roles. This extended from broader reflections regarding the tone of debate and the way politics is conducted, including factional politics, to more specific observations around the role of leadership in tackling sexism. While the Speaker and Chief Whips were identified as significant figures responsible for upholding standards, some MPs reflected it was ultimately the Prime Minister who was responsible for setting the tone.

“It’s still an all-boys club...and there is no leadership, either from Party hierarchy, leader of House, Prime Minister, Chief Whip...no leadership shown from any of those individuals about how you crack down on sexism and harassment and abuse in this place – they would much rather sweep it under the carpet.”

(Woman interviewee)⁷³

Sexism and Sexual Harassment

Sexism and sexual harassment are a continuum of behavior driven by a culture which oppresses women. Any behaviour on this continuum within Parliament harms those subjected to it while also detrimentally impacting our democracy as it may amount to a push factor out of politics. Sexism and sexual harassment are widespread throughout society; at a minimum around 40% of women experience workplace sexual harassment,⁷⁴ and Parliament is no exception. The prevalence of sexism

71 Maguire, “Barriers to Women Entering Parliament and Local Government”, 8.

72 Childs, “The Good Parliament”, 6.

73 Interview conducted in March 2022.

74 Molly Mayer, Helen Mott, Alison Henderson, Catherine Marren and Andrew Bazeley (Fawcett Society). 2021. “Tackling sexual harassment in the workplace”. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=8eabc7f1-07c0-4d7e-9206-de431524301e,7>

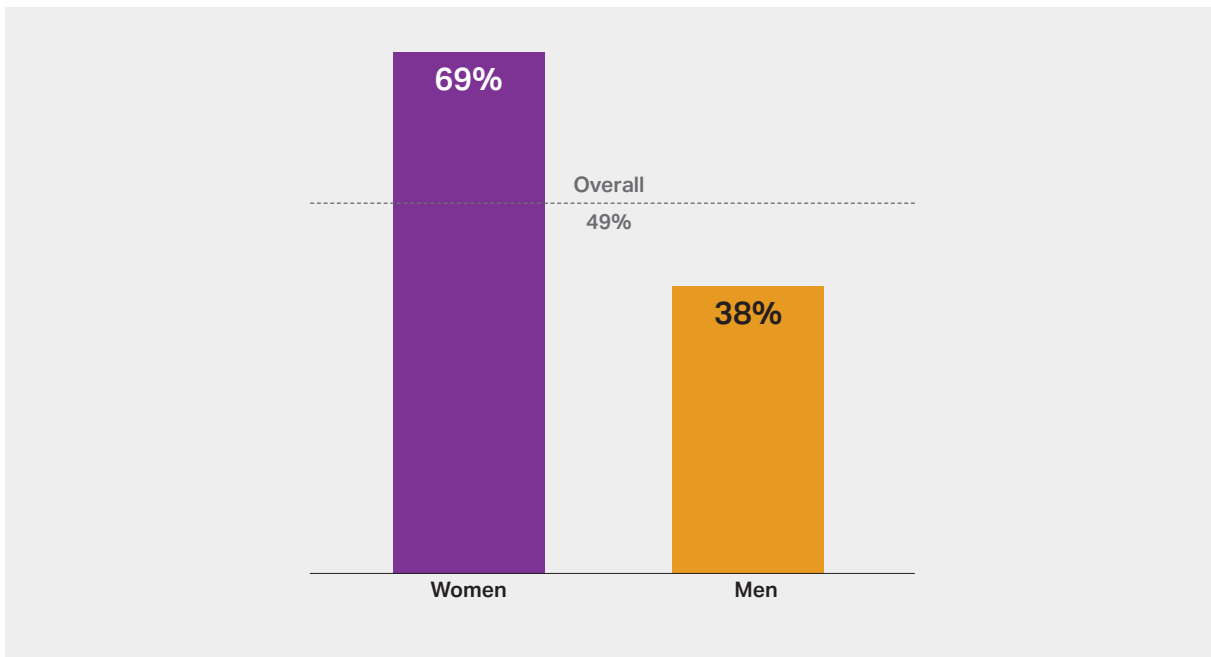
in Westminster is well documented⁷⁵ and was confirmed by our research. As shown in Figure 5, **our survey indicated that 69% of women MPs, 38% of men MPs, and 49% of MPs overall said they had witnessed sexist behaviour in Parliament in the last five years.** This difference between women and men was statistically significant and may reflect the phenomena in which men are less likely to notice sexism and/or those who observe sexism are less likely to consider it as such.⁷⁶

There are aspects unique to Parliament which may increase the prevalence of sexism and sexual harassment. This stems from Parliament being a workplace underpinned by power imbalances and there being an overarching culture of impunity. Even amongst MPs themselves, there are power imbalances reflective of age, tenure, position and other factors.⁷⁷ This is combined with “democratic traditions that serve to emphasise parliamentary privilege.”⁷⁸

“There’s rabid sexism and double standards...it’s tough being a woman in Parliament...sometimes it’s pretty horrible... inappropriate touching, inappropriate comments, inappropriate looks and if you call it out you get pilloried for it.”

(Woman interviewee)

Figure 5. 'I have witnessed sexist behaviour in Parliament in the last five years', % agreement by gender.⁷⁹



75 Culhane and Olchawski, “Strategies for Success: Women’s Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament”, 8.

76 Benjamin J. Drury and Cheryl R. Kaiser. 2014. “Allies against sexism: The role of men in confronting sexism”. *The Journal of Social Issues*, 70(4), 637–652.

77 Leah Culhane (Fawcett Society). 2019. “Sexual Harassment in Parliament.” <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/sexual-harassment-in-parliament-report>

78 Dame Laura Cox. 2018. “The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff – Independent Inquiry Report”, 25.

79 N = 100 MPs (34 women and 66 men, after weighting).

We note that, in response to a number of inquiries, new Parliamentary policies and procedures have been developed including a “Behaviour Code for Parliament; an independent complaints and grievance scheme to underpin the Code, together with associated policies and appropriate sanctions; procedures to deal with reports of sexual harassment, including the provision of specialist Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (ISVAs); a system of training to support the Code; an independent human resources support service for staff employed by Members of Parliament or jointly by political parties; and a handbook for these staff.”⁸⁰

In practice, this means MPs are required to adhere to the Behaviour Code, which stipulates the nature and manner of interaction with others in Parliament, there is a free helpline to report any concerns, and all staff including MPs have been invited to complete inclusion training (with 92% of MPs having done so as of June 2021).⁸¹ There is also an Independent Bullying and Harassment Helpline and a separate Independent Sexual Misconduct Advisory Service – where complainants and respondents can access confidential advice.⁸² Combined these things should be working to promote inclusive and respectful behaviour thereby generating broader cultural change to eliminate sexism and sexual harassment.

However, the continued prevalence of sexism and sexual harassment in Parliament, notwithstanding the measures outlined above, highlights more must be done. From our research, there was a sense politics needs to be ‘cleaned up’ – especially the culture of sleaze and sexual misconduct. One MP reflected that having MPs subject to investigations still working in Parliament contributed to an unpleasant working environment and we note there have been suggestions to temporarily exclude MPs who are subject to investigations for sexual misconduct.⁸³

A key ongoing issue in Parliament is that MPs are elected representatives and not employees, so they have no formal legal protections against sexual harassment.⁸⁴ However, the approaches adopted in other countries highlight steps that can be taken. For example, in Australian states and territories, the relevant legislation is drafted such that MPs receive the protections conferred to any other employee in a workplace.⁸⁵

There is also scope for the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) to be strengthened. We note improvements have been made since its establishment in 2018 – namely the creation of an Independent Expert Panel to determine sanctions against MPs. The Women and Equalities Committee recently noted feedback in relation to the Scheme has been broadly positive, especially since the creation of the Independent Expert Panel. However, concerns remain including the impact of investigation processes on claimants with broader questions raised about the role of third party reporting i.e. instances where someone other than the affected individual could report an incident. Power imbalances, which can stem from a variety of intersecting factors alongside other aspects of Parliamentary culture and politics, can create barriers to reporting and we know that often other people observe instances of inappropriate behaviour. Enabling third party reporting to be captured under the ICGS remit, albeit perhaps differently in terms of reporting mechanism and status to how an affected individual directly makes a claim, is likely to help to address some of these challenges.

Critically, political parties themselves must be accountable. Parties must ensure their own policies are effective and adequately address sexual harassment. For these policies to be successful they must ensure they are transparent, quick, victim-focused and independent, and cover volunteers, employees, and elected and appointed representatives.

80 Culhane, “Sexual Harassment in Parliament”, 4.

81 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/>, 32.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid, 35.

84 Culhane, “Sexual Harassment in Parliament”, 8.

85 Ibid.

Sexism Beyond Westminster

While many MPs reflected on having positive relationships with their constituents, some interviewees said relationships with their local party branches, associations and stakeholders can be difficult. There was a sense this is underpinned by sexism and misogyny, with gender stereotypes meaning they are treated differently, especially during the selection process. Some interviewees reflected that they were asked about childcare responsibilities, yet men were not. This is consistent with pre-existing Fawcett research which found the structure of local parties and associations, including the way they are run, can hamper the participation of those from marginalised and underrepresented backgrounds.⁸⁶

“If their MP was male, they wouldn’t be speaking to me like that.”

(Woman interviewee)

A Culture of Othering

Parliament’s culture encompasses a range of prejudicial views and attitudes. Consequently, intersecting inequalities often compound the discriminatory experiences faced by those with multiple and overlapping identities thereby amplifying barriers to political participation and engagement.

Racism

The intersection of racism and sexism means this exclusionary culture is amplified for women from Black and minoritised backgrounds. The underrepresentation of Black and minoritised MPs undermines the representativeness of Parliament, as diverse voices and experiences are not being heard and reflected in policy development and implementation. According to a survey conducted by Black Equity Organisation, “over half of Black respondents felt that Black people elected as MPs or local councilors are more likely to represent them.”⁸⁷ It was even higher for young Black people – 67%.⁸⁸

As reflected in the methods section, we were unable to fully reflect the experiences of MPs of Black and minoritised backgrounds, due to the under-representation of this group in Parliament. Broader research highlights MPs’ experiences of racism - a survey of Black, Asian and minority ethnic MPs found 62% of respondents said they had experienced racism or racial profiling while working in Westminster, with 51% saying they experienced this from other MPs.⁸⁹ This is consistent with research which highlights the challenges which Black and minoritised women face in the workplace. “The challenges of structural racism, including micro-aggressions, embedded bias and lack of representation exist in all institutions... For so many women of colour, the workplace is a site of constant negotiation between their identities and the ability to progress.”⁹⁰

MPs have reflected on experiences of exclusion and othering. As part of this, Black and minoritised MPs have previously spoken about being mistaken for other Black and minoritised MPs and Parliamentary staff members in addition to being removed from Parliamentary spaces.⁹¹ Similar reflections were made by an interviewee in our research. In a 2020 Business Insider interview, Florence Eshalomi MP said

86 Culhane and Olchawski, “Strategies for Success: Women’s Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament.”

87 Beth Swords and Ramya Sheni (Black Equity Organisation). 2022. “Systemic Change Required: Black Lived Reality: Why We Need Systemic Change.” <https://blackequityorg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Systemic-change-required-V10.pdf>, 15.

88 Ibid.

89 Laurie Tritschler. 2020. “Most Non-White UK MPs Have Experienced Racism, Study.” POLITICO. February 17, 2020. Accessed 29 November, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/most-non-white-uk-mps-have-experienced-racism-study-itv/>.

90 Michelle Gyimah, Zaimal Azad, Shabna Begum, Alba Kapoor, Lizzie Ville, Alison Henderson and Monica Dey (Fawcett Society and Runnymede Trust). 2022. “Broken Ladders: the myth of meritocracy for women of colour in the workplace.” <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/broken-ladders>, 8.

91 Kate Proctor. 2020. “Back MPs Tell of Being Confused with Other Politicians.” The Guardian, January 12, 2020. Accessed 5 December, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jan/12/black-mps-tell-of-being-confused-with-other-politicians>.

“People were always going to question whether you should be there and I thought ‘wow, is this going to be how it is going to be?’ But that never stopped me and that never deterred me.”⁹² The clear message being sent to Black and minoritised MPs is that Parliament is not a place for them. This reflects broader racist and discriminatory attitudes about leadership – in previous research we found that “being a woman of colour was significantly associated with being seen as a less acceptable leader.”⁹³

“Better than I imagine it has been in the past few years...it’s not always been the most welcoming environment...[in reference to having show Parliamentary pass] you can rise to one of the highest positions and still be asked to prove that you’re meant to be there.”

(Woman interviewee)

Racism is negatively impacting MPs at all points of their careers. It makes entry into politics more difficult, with 92% saying it made it harder to get elected in the first place, and it makes being an MP more challenging with 83% saying it made it harder to do their Parliamentary work.⁹⁴ Research also shows that Black and minoritised women are more likely to receive online abuse. This will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter. Given that we know, experiences of racism and discrimination at work have an impact on mental health and well-being⁹⁵ it is likely that this is creating a retention risk and is a potential push factor out of politics.

Ableism

While our research sample underrepresented disability, other research highlights Parliament’s ableist culture. The Disability Policy Centre has highlighted how Parliament’s infrastructure has “clear failings in accessibility such as unusable ramps, limited accessible bathrooms, limited handrails, a lack of self-opening doors, limited availability of lifts.”⁹⁶ This extends to the Chamber itself including the “inaccessibility of the despatch box and the inadequate provision of hearing loops for d/Deaf MPs”⁹⁷ and also neuro-diverse MPs not being provided with alternative forms of briefing materials. As per the Social Model of Disability “the inaccessibility of the social environment is the cause of any inability to participate and engage, not the disability itself.”⁹⁸ Given this, Parliament’s ableist culture must be

Ableism – “The discrimination of disabled people favoring individuals without disabilities.”⁹⁸

challenged by facilitating alternative and different ways of doing things so that Parliament becomes more inclusive, including more flexible work practices and online voting, enabling being an MP to be an option for more people.

Parliament’s exclusionary culture towards disabled MPs extends beyond physical infrastructure. Disabled MPs are substantially underrepresented in Parliament. According to the Disability Policy Centre, 72% of disabled people and those with long term health conditions, who are engaged and participating in politics as Councillors, activists or MPs, say they are not comfortable declaring their

92 Adam Bienkov and Adam Payne. 2020. “Black Politicians Speak out about the ‘white Male Club’ of British Politics and How Black Lives Matter Gives Them Hope.” Business Insider, October 8, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/black-history-month-uk-mps-lammy-lewis-eshalomi-oppong-asare-black-lives-matter-2020-10>.

93 Gyimah, Azad, Begum, Kapoor, Ville, Henderson and Dey, “Broken Ladders: the myth of meritocracy for women of colour in the workplace”, 11.

94 Laurie Tritschler. 2020. “Most Non-White UK MPs Have Experienced Racism, Study.” POLITICO. February 17, 2020. Accessed 29 November, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/most-non-white-uk-mps-have-experienced-racism-study-itv/>.

95 Gyimah, Azad, Begum, Kapoor, Ville, Henderson and Dey, “Broken Ladders: the myth of meritocracy for women of colour in the workplace”, 11.

96 The Disability Policy Centre. “Accessibility of Parliament. <https://thedisabilitypolicycentre.org/accessibility-of-parliament>.

97 Ibid.

98 Celia Hensman and Chloe Schendel-Wilson (Disability Policy Centre). 2022. “Breaking Down Barriers: Improving Disabled Political Representation & Participation across the United Kingdom.” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/619e1d7a522f9748f55d6a17/t/6217a1260df6fb6a8f05dcfa/1645715752837/Disabled+Representation+Paper+PDF.pdf>, 11.

99 Ibid

disability to their political party for fear of discrimination.¹⁰⁰ The underrepresentation of disabled women in politics reflects structural socio-cultural barriers hampering engagement and participation, including stereotypes and prejudice which often centre disability as inherently negative.¹⁰¹ Greater numbers of disabled people in Parliament would not only increase democratic representation but bring distinct advantages in terms of diversity of experience and ways of thinking – crucial to fostering representative policy.

Parliament's exclusionary culture will impact a disabled person from the very moment they start engaging in politics. To start with, as highlighted by the Disability Policy Centre, campaigning techniques are still grounded in traditional approaches which favour 'in person' activities like door knocking which are not accessible for everyone.¹⁰² The long hours and cultural issues in Parliament are detrimental to all MPs, especially disabled MPs. These issues are highlighted by Daisy Cooper MP, in her submission¹⁰³ to the Procedure Committee which details how Parliamentary procedures simply do not consider the differing experiences of MPs and how in turn, as an MP who self identifies as having a hidden disability, this has impacted her health and her ability to represent her constituents. Many of her concerns centre upon the need to be physically present in the House for long periods, the lack of predictability and the difficulties faced when attempting to leave the Chamber suddenly due to health concerns. For example, as Daisy Cooper MP identifies, currently if an MP wishes to indicate that they would like to speak during debates they 'bob' up and down in their seat to get the Speaker's attention. However, this is often not possible for disabled MPs, thereby hampering their participation in Parliamentary processes.

There are also financial barriers. "On average, it costs a candidate £11,118 to contest an election, and research shows that it takes women, on average, three times as long to be elected as their male counterparts. For disabled people this cost is even higher."¹⁰⁴ All of those interviewed by the Disability Policy Centre said "Government is not doing enough to plug the gap of the extra financial implications that are burdened onto disabled people who wish to seek election at a local or national level."¹⁰⁵ Disabled people incur additional costs when running, including paying for scribes or increased transportation costs.¹⁰⁶ However, there is not currently a formal funding scheme for disabled candidates.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, the "unfair financial implications of standing for elected office... fall upon the candidate."¹⁰⁸ Given disabled people already face additional financial pressures in their day to day lives, on average an additional £583 per month,¹⁰⁹ the financial burdens associated with running for Parliament mean it can often be an unobtainable goal.

100 Ibid.

101 Celia Hensman. 2021. "Celia Hensman: The disabled community must be better represented in Parliament and local councils." Accessed November 30, 2022. <https://conservativehome.com/2021/08/23/celia-hensman-the-disabled-community-must-be-better-represented-in-parliament-and-local-councils/>

102 Hensman and Schendel-Wilson, "Breaking Down Barriers: Improving Disabled Political Representation & Participation across the United Kingdom", 9. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/619e1d7a522f9748f55d6a17/t/6217a1260df6b6a8f05dcfa/1645715752837/Disabled+Representation+Paper+PDF.pdf>

103 Daisy Cooper. "Written evidence submitted by Daisy Cooper MP." <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6247/html/>

104 CAG, "Overcoming the barriers to disabled women's involvement in politics", 3.

105 Hensman and Schendel-Wilson, "Breaking Down Barriers: Improving Disabled Political Representation & Participation across the United Kingdom", 7.

106 Ibid, 51.

107 Ibid, 32.

108 Ibid, 35.

109 Scope. "Disability Price Tag." <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/disability-price-tag/>

Classism

Reflections by some interviewees suggest the procedures underpinning how Parliament works, along with its infrastructure, are outdated and anachronistic. This further contributes to an exclusionary culture. As the Clerk of the Commons, Dr John Benger, notes, “it was built for an exclusively male Parliament, and everything about it supports that.”¹¹⁰ One interviewee reflected there is adherence to “*convention for convention’s sake*” while another reflected on Parliament’s “*pomposity*.” These comments suggest Parliament’s practices may be considered by some MPs as anachronistic.

Reflections by one man interviewee suggests those who are familiar with the practices and traditions of certain institutions are less likely to feel excluded, with another women interviewee reflecting that class issues continue to impact Parliament.

“It feels like an Oxford/Cambridge university debating club in the Chamber.”

(Man interviewee)

“Getting rid of this bloody pomposity...It’s a class issue as much as a gender issue. There are class structures in there which have got to be torn down if you’re going to make it truly representative in class as well as on gender and ethnicity.”

(Woman interviewee)

Underpinning this exclusionary culture is likely a sense of classism and elitism. This is evident when analysing how many MPs were privately educated. As of June 2019, 29% of MPs were privately educated – 4 times higher than the general population.¹¹¹ As highlighted by the Social Mobility Commission, “the reasons why some groups continue to be over-represented in certain professions are complex and include access to education opportunities, financial barriers and the accumulation of social and cultural capital.”¹¹²

One woman MP we interviewed reflected on not having an academic background in politics, which compounded the feeling of ‘not belonging’ at Westminster:

“My politics was really basic equality, fairness, and justice...I didn’t understand Marxism...I didn’t understand the terminology of politics... I suppose I’m an exception to the rule and then that makes you wonder what the actual rule of politics is.”

(Woman interviewee)

The potent combination of misogyny and classism which can impact women MPs is exemplified by the treatment of Angela Rayner MP, Deputy Labour Leader, by both her colleagues in Parliament and by the media. In response to media reports in April 2022, she commented that sexist comments made about her publicly by a male MP were “steeped in classism [...] about where I come from, how I grew up and that I must be thick and I must be stupid because I went to a comprehensive school.”¹¹³

110 “Oral Evidence: Gender-Sensitive Parliament.” 2021. <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/2750/pdf/>, 18.

111 Social Mobility Commission. 2019. “Elitism in Britain, 2019.” Gov.uk. Accessed 28 November, 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/elitism-in-britain-2019>.

112 Ibid.

113 Sophia Sleight. 2022. “Angela Rayner Blasts Sexist Basic Instinct Story as ‘Steeped in Classism.’” Huffpost UK. April 26, 2022. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/angela-rayner-sexist-basic-instinct-story-was-steeped-classism_uk_6267a569e4b0dc52f49b815a#:~:text=Angela%20Rayner%20has%20claimed%20that%20a%20newspaper%20report,comments%20about%20her%20to%20the%20Mail%20on%20Sunday.

Parliament’s Culture is Negatively Impacting MPs

MP’s expansive workload and Parliament’s exclusionary culture, combined with a lack of support systems, is impacting how MPs think about their jobs – for both women and men. **The women MPs we surveyed were less likely than men to agree that ‘the culture in Parliament is inclusive for people like me’ – 37% of women agreed compared to 55% of men** (Figure 6). This has implications on their feelings about being an MP.

Women MPs are significantly more likely to report that Parliamentary culture has a negative impact on how they feel about being an MP than men – 62% do so, compared to 34% of men.

This outdated and sometimes toxic culture is impacting MPs’ mental health and wellbeing, which in turn undermines democracy. While this culture is impacting women more than men our data shows men are also impacted. A more inclusive and supportive culture will make Parliament a better place to work, and in turn our democratic system more representative.

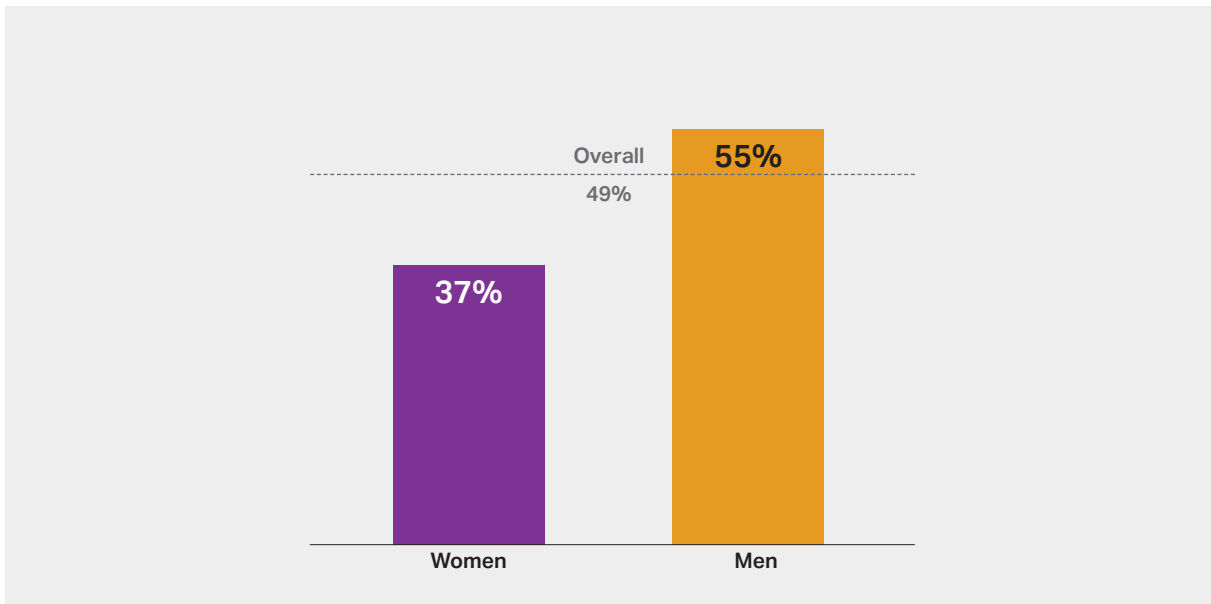
“Parliament is not conducive to mental health, physical health unless you’re white middle class, male, single.”

(Woman interviewee)

“It needs to be more welcoming environment for all people regardless of their race and gender.”

(Woman interviewee)

Figure 6. ‘The culture in Parliament is inclusive for people like me, % agreement by gender.’¹¹⁴



114 N = 100 MPs (34 women and 66 men, after weighting).

Alarming, these findings follow a degree of attention on these issues, including over the past six years or so whereupon Child's *The Good Parliament* spurred more concerted attention within Parliament on the changes that need to be made to make it a more inclusive and diverse workplace. However, it is clear that the reforms which have been implemented to date have not gone far enough to achieve the kind of change that will make Parliament a house for all - urgent action is needed for greater change.

A clear weakness in the reform agenda stems from the inability to monitor the implementation of recommendations made to date. There are no mechanisms for specific actors to be held accountable, on an institutional basis, for the actions they need to take to improve inclusion and diversity. As Professor Sarah Childs and Dr Jessica C. Smith emphasised "Gender Sensitive Parliaments do not just happen. They require much and, importantly, sustained individual and institutional political and administrative will."¹¹⁵ A body needs to be made accountable for overseeing these changes; yet this body must have the appropriate remit and scope of inquiry able to scrutinise not just Government but Parliament as a whole.

Recommendations

Parliament's culture is negatively impacting MPs, especially women, and this may be a push factor out of politics.

Political Parties

- Review candidate selection processes to ensure that there are no structural barriers hampering the participation of underrepresented groups including women, disabled and Black and minoritised candidates.
- Introduce quotas to increase women's representation. If quotas are not feasible then targets should be implemented. These should be accompanied by clear action plans to meet these goals. Furthermore, given the impact of quotas in increasing women's representation in Parliament we think this approach lends itself well to other underrepresented groups and would support organisations campaigning for such change.
- Review internal party sexual harassment and complaints policies to ensure they are transparent, quick, victim-focused and independent, and cover volunteers, employees and elected and appointed representatives. Any processes and policies implemented should be subject to ongoing review to ensure they are effective and fit for purpose.
- As outlined by the Disability Policy Centre, encourage and promote alternative campaigning techniques with equal validity and equality of assessment criteria.¹¹⁶

House of Commons Procedure Committee

- Launch an inquiry, using the recommendations from *The Good Parliament* as the basis, examining how to make the rules, structures, institutions, nomenclature and working practices diversity sensitive and inclusive.
- As identified by Daisy Cooper MP¹¹⁷, examine alternative ways for MPs to indicate that they wish to speak during debate and, on a longer-term basis, ensure the inquiry into diversity sensitive and inclusive ways of Parliament (see recommendation above) is intersectional and reflects the experiences of disabled and Black and minoritised MPs.

115 Sarah Childs, and Jessica C. Smith. 2021. "Written Evidence Submitted - Gender Sensitive Parliament." <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/25329/html/>.

116 Hensman and Schendel-Wilson, "Breaking Down Barriers: Improving Disabled Political Representation & Participation across the United Kingdom", 9.

117 Daisy Cooper. "Written evidence submitted by Daisy Cooper MP." <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6247/html/>

- Review whether the current approach towards actions taken against MPs under investigation for sexual misconduct strikes the right balance, including whether there should be grounds to temporarily exclude MPs subject to investigations from Parliament.

Speaker of the House of Commons

- Create a new body to drive diversity and inclusivity reforms in the House of Commons. This body should have responsibility to audit the recommendations made to date from various reports, including *The Good Parliament* and the *UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit*. Findings from this audit should henceforth form the basis of a public annual update to be provided by this body about the progress of recommendations from these reports.

House of Commons Commission

- Introduce a standalone training module for MPs covering Sexism and Sexual Harassment
- Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme
- Consider how the Scheme can better identify and respond to inappropriate behaviour, including third party reporting.

Government

- Use the Houses of Parliament Restoration and Renewal Program to review the accessibility and inclusivity of Parliament. This should be done in an intersectional manner to ensure the barriers hampering political participation for all underrepresented groups are meaningfully challenged.
- Commence s106 of the Equality Act 2010, requiring political parties to collect and report candidate monitoring data – including candidates selected by each party, those elected and those that fail to be elected – so we have an accurate picture on the diversity of political candidates. This must be accompanied by cultural change which fosters more inclusive workplace environments as societal prejudice and stereotypes can mean that people are uncomfortable with disclosing this information.
- As outlined by the Disability Policy Centre¹¹⁸ require political parties to report annually to the relevant Minister on what actions they are taking to support the participation of disabled people in politics. We suggest this is also expanded to other underrepresented groups including women and Black and minoritised communities with reporting required to the Minister for Women and Equalities
- Reinstate a formalised funding scheme for disabled candidates in England (Scotland and Wales already have one) as called for by many disability organisations including the Disability Policy Centre.¹¹⁹ As part of this the “Cabinet Office must work with disabled people, and disabled women in particular, involved in politics to improve the process around the Fund.¹²⁰
- Reform legislation so MPs are protected against sexual harassment and have access to the same legal protections as employees.

118 Hensman and Schendel-Wilson, “Breaking Down Barriers: Improving Disabled Political Representation & Participation across the United Kingdom”, 9.

119 Ibid.

120 CAG. “Overcoming the barriers to disabled women’s involvement in politics”, 6.

5. POLITICAL POLARISATION AND ONLINE ABUSE

This chapter covers how increasing political polarisation makes it harder to be an MP and sets out how extreme levels of online abuse, threats and harassment are damaging democracy in three key ways:

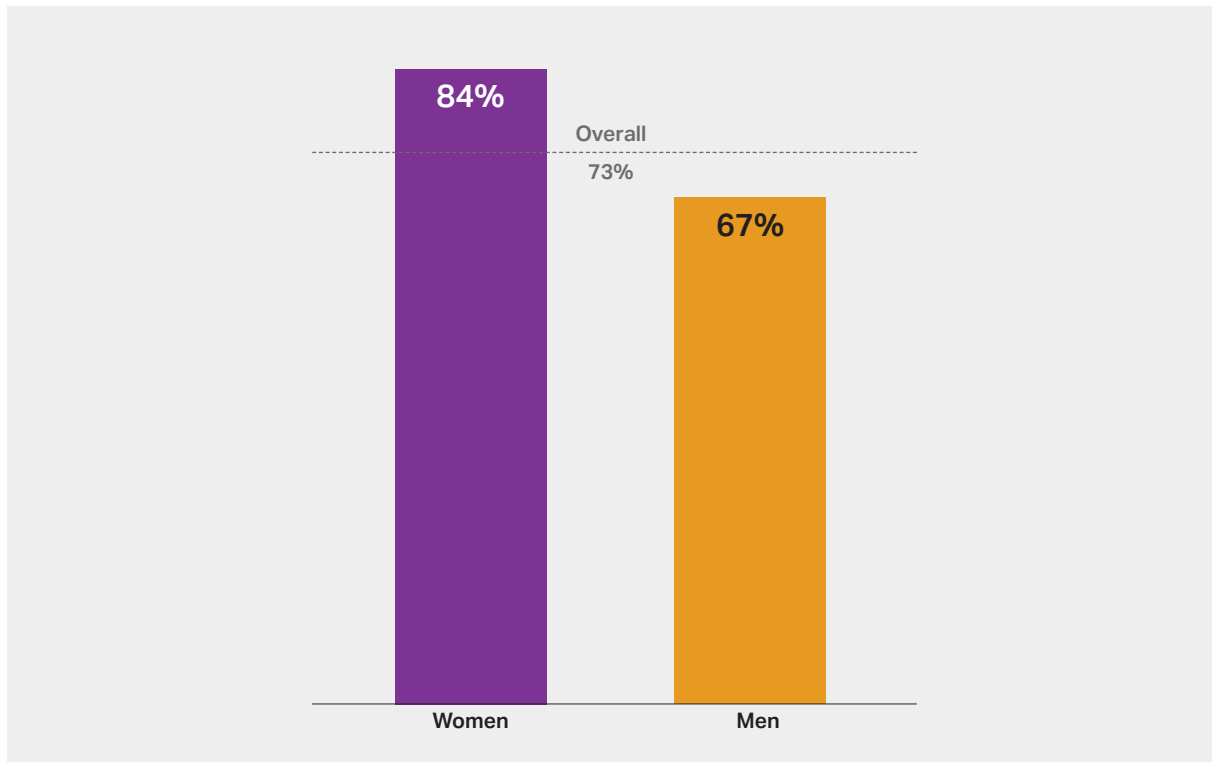
- women MPs and Black and minoritised MPs are more likely to experience this abuse and therefore experience this as a push factor, increasing the chances that they voluntarily leave Parliament early, exacerbating underrepresentation,
- MPs are being silenced online on issues, particularly women; and
- at its most extreme, online abuse toward MPs is leading to offline threats and incidents, and necessitating constraining safety measures.

Our research showed that a sense of increasing political polarisation – a divergence toward more extreme viewpoints alongside increasing levels of aggression toward alternative perspectives – is having a profound impact on the lives and experiences of MPs in their roles, across parties and genders. In the survey, **73% of current MPs agreed increased polarization in politics has made it harder to be an MP**, with greater agreement among women (84%) than men (67%) (Figure 7). In the interviews, current and former MPs cited the role of social media, traditional media, and politicians in amplifying and developing this polarisation. They reflected on the impact of the horrific murders of Jo Cox MP and Sir David Amess MP, and the high levels of abuse, online and offline, that MPs experience.

This chapter explores perspectives on the drivers of polarisation, and the impact it has had on MPs' day to day work, sense of safety, and relationship with social media, and the ways in which this is gendered and racialised.

Whilst a sense of increasing polarisation was the prevailing view, it is important to note that some MPs in the interviews expressed that politics was just as polarised in the past as it is now, or that they had not been within politics for long enough to compare whether polarisation had increased over time.

Figure 7. 'Increased polarisation in politics has made it harder to be an MP', % agreement by gender.¹²¹



'Creating political and cultural dividing lines': media, social media, and politics

Many current and former MPs positioned polarisation as external to Parliament, highlighting their view of day-to-day working relationships within Parliament as strong and collaborative across party lines. Politicians noted increased polarisation had not hindered their everyday work, and that they had managed to achieve their goals and 'get things done' through working together despite differing political viewpoints. MPs reflected positively on their day-to-day experiences of cooperative cross-party work, for example in All Party Parliamentary Groups and on Select Committees, contrasting this with the public perception of combative, polarised debate in the chamber. MPs often viewed polarisation as a non-partisan phenomenon, with differences in society running along generational or economic lines instead.

“I always had very good relations with everybody on both sides of the House and managed to achieve things. And really that is how most of parliamentary life works, through select committees and all party groups.”

(Woman interviewee)

“I don't think it [polarisation] has stopped that collaboration, and I think people [the public] just don't see it because in politics all you see is the two seconds of yah-booing... You can get things done.”

(Woman interviewee)

121 N = 100 MPs (34 women and 66 men, after weighting).

For the MPs we spoke to, social media played by far the most prominent role in feeding into and amplifying political polarisation. Participants spoke about online connectedness as a catalyst for the amplification of extreme worldviews and of the role of anonymity in facilitating misinformation, extreme viewpoints or abuse online. They highlighted what they saw as a need for greater accountability from both individuals and social media platforms. Participants described social media as a relatively new phenomena that society in general needs to learn to navigate, offering a mixture of positive and negative views of the proposed Online Safety Bill which proposes requirements for social media companies in preventing and tackling harm online – with some highlighting it as a positive step forwards and others saying it does not go far enough. MPs also described the practical ease with which people can post online as compounding the ‘reinforcing’ effect of social media on extreme or inaccurate perspectives.

“Before ‘angry man’ would have to find a piece of notepaper, find an envelope, a pen that worked and a stamp, and walk to the postbox. Now they just sit on their sofas and do it. And the way that all social media works... it just reinforces often quite inaccurate views of the world.”

(Woman interviewee)

Of those MPs who talked about polarisation as external to Parliament, many also spoke of the media as a key driver of polarisation. They saw the media as focusing on controversial and extreme views in order to find sensational stories, and discussed how this leads to divergence in public opinion. For example, MPs viewed the Brexit process as a particularly polarised time, in which media reports tied viewpoints on the referendum to personal identity as either a ‘remainer’ or a ‘leaver’.

“For a long time, the media reporting of politics was also very polarised. We got used to this idea that you were either a remainer or a leaver, and because there was only ‘either or’, there was no alternative option and therefore it became that sort of black and white.”

(Woman interviewee)

This was in stark contrast to the way in which MPs self-identified as compromisers. They saw compromise as a fundamental necessity for everyday politics, and described a political system which is ‘give and take’. While both men and women MPs in the interviews perceived themselves as compromisers, some highlighted this as a strength that women, in particular, bring to politics. Conversely, for those who had left politics, there was a sense that being political was at odds with teamwork and collaboration, and that this was a key reason for their departure.

“Probably, the reason I’m not an MP anymore is I obviously just don’t have the mechanisms or the physiology or the temperament to be an MP, because I don’t like fighting. I like to conciliate people and bring people to common ground.”

(Woman interviewee)

This view of polarisation as externally driven by media was not shared by all, with some Labour MPs highlighting the role of political leadership in generating political and cultural divide. That is, they saw political leaders as setting an example which deprioritises negotiation and the understanding of alternative perspectives.

“That is the art of politics; negotiating to a position where you’re open to understanding another point of view, and that’s where leadership comes in. That’s missing.”

(Woman interviewee)

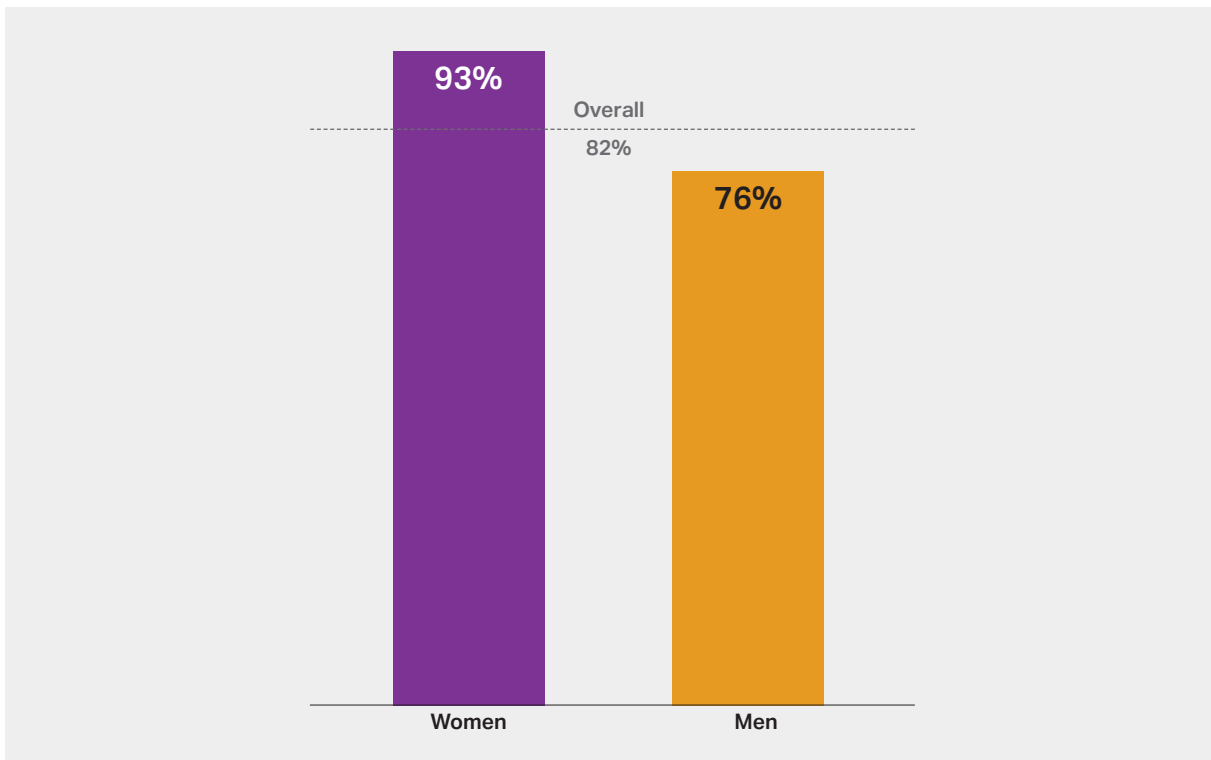
“Politics is not now ever about the national interest; it’s all about creating political and cultural dividing lines.”

(Woman interviewee)

‘Internally it breaks you.’ The impact of polarisation.

For the MPs we interviewed, one of the key outcomes of increasing levels of political and societal polarisation was increasing amounts of online abuse directed towards them. This was highly gendered, with abuse often misogynistic and racist in content, frequently including threats of violence, and targeted at women and Black and minoritised MPs to a greater degree than their white or men counterparts – although men MPs did also receive abuse. Our survey reflected the interviews, with abuse and threats consistently highlighted as the most challenging thing about their role in our open-ended survey question. Furthermore, 93% of women and 76% of men reported that online abuse or harassment was negatively impacting how they feel about being an MP – with a statistically significant difference between the genders. All MPs we surveyed that were from ethnic minority backgrounds reported a negative impact, compared to 81% of white MPs.¹²²

Figure 8. % MPs reporting that online abuse or harassment negatively impacts their feelings about being an MP, by gender.¹²³



122 Sample included 3 MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds and 97 white MPs, after weighting.

123 N = 100 MPs (34 women and 66 men, after weighting).

Our research showed that the impact of this online abuse was strongly felt among women MPs. The majority interviewed had received threats of violence to themselves online, whilst those who had not, spoke of other women MPs they knew receiving them. Many reacted by compartmentalising their feelings about it or saw themselves as ‘thick skinned’. Being tough and able to withstand abuse was seen as an attribute which was necessary to being an MP.

“I’m quite good at covering myself in a kind of film of plastic, not allowing the really awful stuff to get through the plastic, and I kind of just don’t let it get to me.”

(Woman interviewee)

However, for those for whom the abuse was most extreme, they spoke of a significant toll on their mental health and a sense of persistent, heightened scrutiny and isolation. There was a recognition from these MPs that mental toughness was externalised and often a way of protecting others around them, particularly their loved ones – for whom the abuse also took a significant toll and was a source of deep concern.

“My kid came home and said ‘Mum why do so many people hate on you’. And you’ve got to externally put on a really really brave face, and a fighter face, and internally it breaks you.”

(Woman interviewee)

As a result of the online abuse, MPs reported disengaging with social media. They saw social media as unfit for the purpose of engaging their constituents or the public in politics. Instead, they described using social media sparingly or as a one-way broadcast to share news and events, without engaging with responses. This has strong implications for democracy, since it means that MPs are limiting levels of engagement with the public, and not using online spaces to promote debate and free discourse. MPs also highlighted the role their employed staff played in filtering and protecting politicians from abusive comments and managing their social media pages more generally. This filtering was seen as necessary for protecting MPs’ mental health, although there was acknowledgement of the impact of reviewing abusive comments online on staff, and a need for greater support and training for this. Indeed, there was also a sense of need for greater support for MPs to handle online abuse, particularly as its scale presents a significant challenge to new incoming politicians. However, MPs did highlight the positive support they had received from the whips or from their loved ones.

“I think that’s [resilience] not something that everyone naturally has and it’s probably an acquired skill, so more training on that front would be helpful.”

(Woman interviewee)

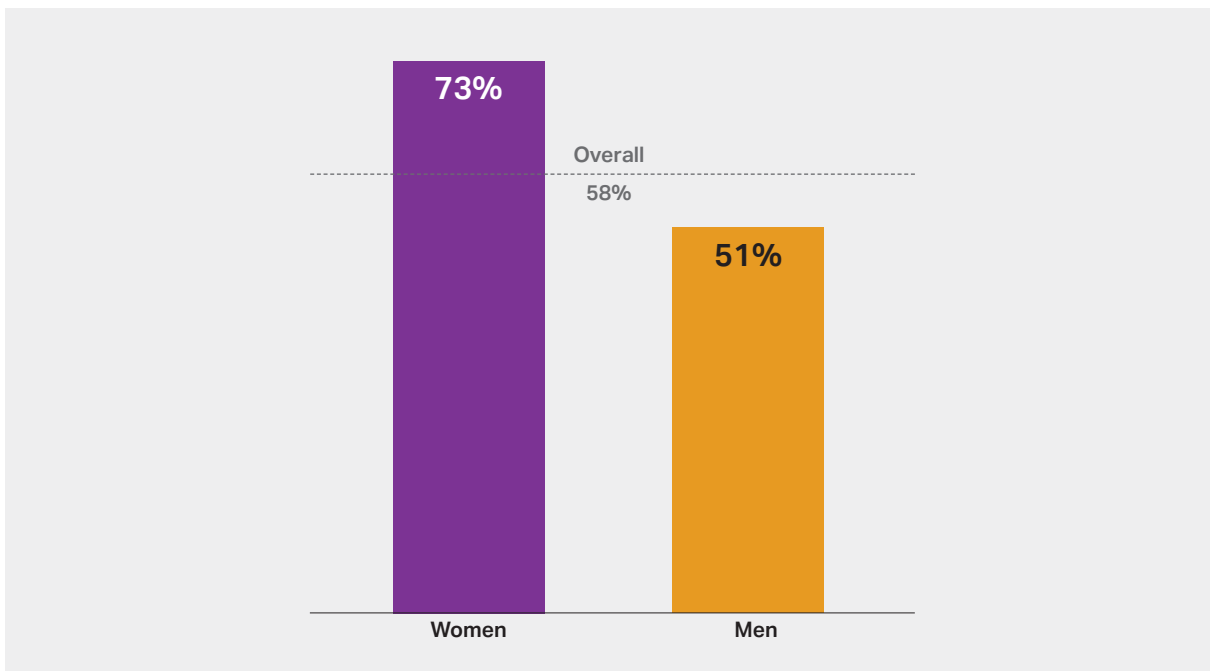
“It’s [online abuse] something we haven’t got quite right for new MPs coming in. It is a real change to your life.”

(Woman interviewee)

MPs talked about moderating or censoring the content they broadcasted online in the interviews. They described themselves as being ‘deliberately uncontroversial’ or ‘placating’, in order to limit or avoid high levels of abuse. Moreover, they avoided speaking out on certain issues such as those deemed particularly polarising, highlighting the damage to democracy that this reflected. The survey highlighted the gender disparity, in that significantly more women (the vast majority, at 73%) than men (51%) MPs agreed with the statement ‘I do not use social media to speak up on certain issues because

of the abusive environment online'. Since online abuse is disproportionately directed toward women and people of colour, this silencing effect has significant implications for free political discourse and representation among these groups.

Figure 9. 'I do not use social media to speak up on certain issues because of the abusive environment online', % agreement by gender.¹²⁴



At its most extreme, the online abuse involved death threats and threats of sexual violence, and impacted MPs' sense of everyday safety offline. For some of the women we spoke to, they had needed to involve the police due to the online threats or related offline incidents. Black and minoritised women, in particular, gave examples of their experiences of more extreme levels of online abuse and related incidents offline, compared to white women and men MPs.

Women MPs highlighted a series of personal security measures that they had taken, such as not publicising where they will be, working with the police to increase their home security, not running face to face constituency surgeries, taking out restraining orders, and avoiding staying alone in their homes overnight. This highlights how entrenched gender inequality is at all levels in society – even the most powerful women in our country are having to make restrictive adjustments to their behaviour to avoid threat, as do women from all walks of life.¹²⁵ The men we spoke to reported a lower level of threat and of being concerned with their safety to a lesser degree, although they acknowledged the need for caution and highlighted some of the steps they had taken to mitigate risks, such as requesting a barrier in their constituency office. This need for safety mitigation has strong implications for reducing MPs' - of all genders - ability to carry out their democratic work, particularly with respect to engaging with and thus representing their constituents.

¹²⁴ N = 100 MPs (34 women and 66 men, after weighting).

¹²⁵ Nick Stripe (ONS). 2021. "Perceptions of Personal Safety and Experiences of Harassment, Great Britain." Gov.uk. Office for National Statistics. August 23, 2021. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/perceptionsofpersonalsafetyandexperiencesofharassmentgreatbritain/2to27june2021>.

“You need to feel that you have a bit of a thick skin to go into politics... But you also need to be in an environment where people don’t throw sticks and stones. I think the physical violence which people have experienced is really completely intolerable in politics. I think we’ve got to make sure people feel safe everywhere really.”

(Woman interviewee)

In addition to the practical constraints necessitated by this threat, women MPs in particular spoke of a significant emotional toll of feeling unsafe, in relation to the disproportionate levels of online abuse and threats they received, in comparison to their men colleagues. This impact was not limited to the MPs’ themselves, who reported fear and concern among their families and loved ones, as well as nervousness and protectiveness among their personal staff. There was a widespread sense of unresolved grief in response to the murders of MPs Jo Cox and Sir David Amess. This fed into a need to reassess and increase levels of security, to ensure MPs and the people around them feel, and are, safe.

“What happened to Sir David in broad daylight...did shake us to the core and there were MPs up in Westminster that have been there 30 years who said it was the worst week they’ve had...With so many other things going on, we haven’t really had the opportunity to properly grieve or reassess how we’re able to do our jobs in light of what happened.”

(Woman interviewee)

The prevalence of safety fears, and a disproportionate impact on women were reflected by the survey. **72% of MPs overall – 82% of women and 67% of men – felt their safety and that of their family and employees impacted negatively on how they feel about being an MP.** All MPs of Black and minoritised backgrounds in our survey reported a negative impact of safety fears, reflecting the more extreme experiences of abuse and/or threat to people of colour which were brought out in our interviews.¹²⁶

Abuse and polarisation in context

These findings are reflected by recent research by Collignon et al.¹²⁷ which found a widening gap between men and women in the levels of harassment, abuse, and intimidation between the 2017 and 2019 election campaign periods. The authors also highlighted the significantly higher levels of abuse experienced by Black and minoritised women, as seen in our research, and directed toward LGBTQ+ women. This also reflects evidence from the EHRC, highlighting the effects of the intersection of race and gender on abuse – with Black and Asian women receiving 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs, and Diane Abbott MP receiving nearly a third of all abuse in that survey.¹²⁸

Collignon et al. highlighted the impact of harassment, abuse, and intimidation, both online and offline. They noted high levels of concern, annoyance, and fear as a direct result of abuse, with a greater impact in 2019, compared with 2017 – suggesting an escalating problem. Indeed, in 2019, several women MPs cited abuse and harassment as key reasons for their departure.¹²⁹

126 Sample included 3 MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds and 97 white MPs, after weighting.

127 Sofia Collignon, Rosie Campbell, and Wolfgang Rüdiger. 2022. “The Gendered Harassment of Parliamentary Candidates in the UK.” *The Political Quarterly* 93 (1): 32–38.

128 EHRC. 2021. “Written Evidence Submitted by Equality and Human Rights Commission.” Accessed 28 November, 2022. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/25407/pdf>.

129 Perraudin and Murphy, “Alarm over Number of Female MPs Stepping down after Abuse.”

Overall, the disproportionate impact of political polarisation, online abuse, and offline threat directed toward to women MPs, and Black and minoritised women MPs in particular, has important implications for democracy. The significant toll and challenge posed by the abuse and safety fears of women in office may disproportionately discourage potential women, particularly Black and minoritised women candidates from becoming MPs in the first place and/or play out as a push factor, reducing the likelihood of those in office from standing at the next election. Moreover, our research indicates that abuse is having a silencing effect; but where MPs do not speak up on issues important to them for fear of misogynistic or racist abuse, this reduces their ability to freely and democratically represent the interests of their communities.

Recommendations

Our research highlights that reducing this harm to women and particularly Black and minoritised women MPs, ensuring sufficient support is available when abuse does occur, and increasing the accountability of Parliament, parties, and online platforms are all critical steps to a free and fair democracy.

Government

- Ensure the Electoral Commission and local police are sufficiently resourced and equipped to enforce legal sanctions for intimidating candidates, campaigners, and representatives during election periods.
- Amend the Online Safety Bill to better address the disproportionate levels of online abuse experienced by women, especially those from Black and minoritised backgrounds, and increase the accountability of tech companies. In particular, we support the End Violence Against Women Coalition's recommendations¹³⁰ for:
 - The inclusion of a mandatory code of practice for tech companies.¹³¹ This would support tech companies to design their systems in a manner that reduces harm and violence against women and girls (VAWG) as a whole - beyond the Bill's existing, narrow inclusion of certain criminal forms of VAWG.
 - Expand the media literacy requirements within the Bill to highlight collective responsibility, beyond the current emphasis on users' literacy.
 - Direct a proportion of the Digital Services Tax toward funding for specialist support services, to support the women and girls subject to abuse online.

130 End Violence Against Women Coalition. 2022. "Written evidence submitted by the End Violence Against Women Coalition to the Online Safety Bill Public Bill Committee." <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmpublic/OnlineSafetyBill/memo/OSB63.htm>

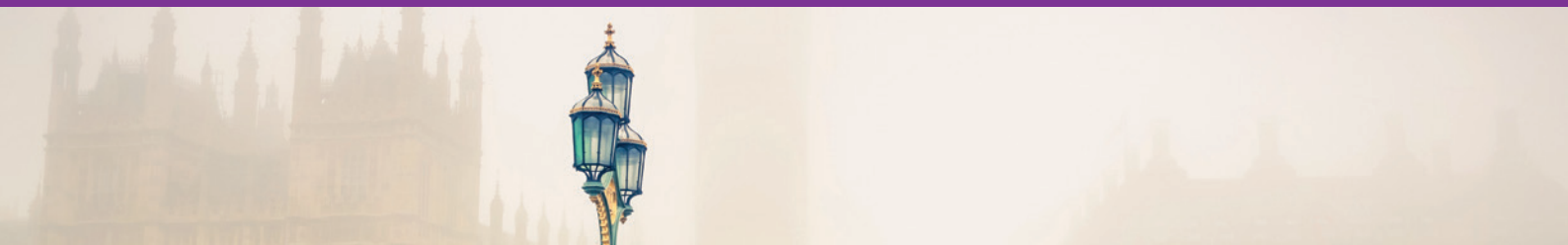
131 End Violence Against Women. 2022. "Coalition of experts announce new Code of Practice that would hold tech companies to account for online violence against women and girls." <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/coalition-experts-code-of-practice-online-violence-against-women-girls/>

CONCLUSION

The case for modernising Parliament is stark. The systems, workload, culture and abuse that form a core part of our democracy act as substantial barriers to women's participation in politics and can push MPs, particularly women and minoritised people, to leave Westminster prematurely. This report underlines the gendered differences in experiences of being an MP. Women MPs are highly concerned about the impact of this "all-consuming" job on their families, and more likely to report feeling that the culture is not inclusive for them, to have witnessed sexist behaviour, to say that online abuse has a negative impact on how they feel about being an MP, and to not speak up on certain issues due to the abusive environment online. These 'push factors' conspire to shut many women's voices out of politics.

We hope this report is an important contribution to the Parliamentary reform agenda, but we acknowledge its gaps. Further research and investigation is required to fully understand the intersectional discrimination faced by disabled, Black and minoritised, LGBTQ+ and working-class MPs and aspiring politicians.

Urgent and wholesale action is needed to achieve equal, diverse and inclusive representation in parliament. The Fawcett Society urges the Government, Parliamentary authorities and political parties to adopt our recommendations, so that together we can create a House for Everyone.



The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading membership charity campaigning for gender equality and women's rights at work, at home and in public life. Our vision is a society in which women and girls in all their diversity are equal and truly free to fulfil their potential creating a stronger, happier, better future for us all.

Fawcett Society
Unit 2, E.11 Rich Mix
35-47 Bethnal Green Road
London E1 6LA

www.fawcettsociety.org.uk
Registered charity No.1108769