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Where are the Women? Historic election returns men in grey suits.

Alex Salmond may have declared that a "wind of change" is blowing through Scottish politics - but it looks suspiciously like a return to politics by men in grey suits. The women's organisation ENGENDER has warned that one of the consequences of the SNP's historic victory has been the first drop in the number of female MSPs since the creation of the new parliament in 1999.

Since devolution, Scotland has been one of the world leaders in women's representation. Substantial proportions of women were elected in 1999 and 2003 elections – putting Westminster to shame. The female face of the Scottish parliament was widely regarded as one of the 'success stories' of devolution and as evidence of a new politics.

However, the latest elections have resulted in the Scottish Parliament slipping from fourth to 13th place in world league tables on women in parliament.¹ Women have taken just 43 out of 129 seats in Holyrood (33.3 per cent), compared with 39.5 per cent in the 2003 elections.

Women are 12 of the 47-strong SNP group (25 per cent); 23 of the 46 Labour MSPs (50 per cent), five out of 17 Conservatives (29 per cent), two out of 16 Liberal Democrats (12.5 per cent). The two Green MSPs are both male and the one Independent returned is a woman.

Why do numbers matter? Research has shown that having high numbers of women in the parliament changed the focus of the traditional political agenda and the way politics was carried out.

Niki Kandirikirira, Director of Engender, said:

“A reduction in women MSPs brings with it the threat of a reduced focus on issues that concern a large proportion of the population: equal pay, The cost of caring, violence against women and children, and poverty.

The SNP needs to show that, despite its dismal performance in terms of women's representation that in government it will prioritise these issues and represent the concerns of women in Scotland”

Engender asked the parties to take action to promote gender balance in candidate selection last year. However analysis by Dr Fiona Mackay and Meryl Kenny, political scientists at the University of Edinburgh, shows that most parties did little or nothing to

promote gender parity in candidate selection. And, where they did, women candidates were generally placed in unfavourable positions.

This election proves that equal representation cannot be left to chance. If we want government to truly represent the people then it must first of all reflect the make up of society.

Table 1: Scottish parliament elections by party and gender 2007

	female	male	total
SNP	12	35	47
Labour	23	23	46
Conservatives	5	12	17
Liberal Democrats	2	14	16
Others	1	2	3
Total	43 (33.3%)	86 (66.6%)	129

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. In 2003, Scotland was fourth in world league tables behind Wales, Rwanda and Sweden. It has now slipped to 13th, falling behind countries such as Argentina, Spain, Mozambique and Belgium.
2. Statistics compiled by Dr F. S MacKay and Meryl Kenny, School of Social & Political Studies, University of Edinburgh are attached.
3. Engender is a membership organisation that works in Scotland and Europe on an anti-sexist agenda to increase women's power and influence and make visible the impact of sexism on women, men and society. It provides information, analysis, training, advice and networking to those people, organisations and institutions who seek to achieve equality and justice.
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