

Engender Parliamentary Briefing: Debate on the Gender Sensitive Audit of the Scottish Parliament

13th June 2023

BACKGROUND

Engender is Scotland’s feminist policy and advocacy organisation. Our vision is a Scotland where women and men have equal access to power, resources, rights and safety.

The Scottish Parliament’s Gender-Sensitive Audit¹ helps ensure Scotland’s alignment with international best practice for building a gender-equal society. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) states, “inclusive and accountable democratic institutions and processes are only possible if gender equality and inclusion of marginalised groups in democratic processes and institutions is attained”.² The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has carried out extensive work on the benefits of gender-sensitive parliaments over the past decade.³ This Audit better equips the Scottish Parliament to ensure that parliamentary processes, structures and culture facilitates the equal participation of women and men in law-making. Taking intersectional gender equality into account in all aspects of its work means Parliament can lay the foundation for increased gender equality in wider society through gender-sensitive policy and service design.

As an organisational member of the Advisory Group for this Audit, Engender welcomes the publication of its findings and Parliament’s decision to hold this debate. We urge MSPs to support the recommendations from the report in full as an important first step towards ensuring women’s equal representation and participation at the highest level of decision-making.

¹ The Scottish Parliament (2023) A Parliament for All: Report of the Parliament’s Gender Sensitive Audit. Available at: <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/spcb/gender-sensitive-audit.pdf>.

² International IDEA (2023) Gender Equality and Inclusion in Democracy. Available at: <https://www.idea.int/our-work/what-we-do/gender-democracy>.

³ IPU (2023) Gender-sensitive parliaments. Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/impact/gender-equality/gender-sensitive-parliaments>.

KEY ASKS

In relation to the Audit:

- Scottish Parliament should support the findings and recommendations made by this Audit as an important first step towards more gender-equal representation, participation and policy creation in Scotland, in line with international best practice.
- We urge Parliament to adopt the Audit’s recommendation to create and provide appropriate resourcing to an Advisory Group to oversee progress on recommendations, monitor progress and develop future work in this area.
- The work of the Advisory Group must have an intersectional framework embedded from the outset, which considers intersecting and other forms of marginalisation alongside and in addition to gender.
- Parliament must recognise it has responsibility for reducing barriers to women becoming MSPs and also to ensure women are equally able to remain in the role for multiple terms.

Other Considerations:

- Political parties should commit to using candidate selection processes that support the achievement of gender balance in the eventual outcome – including ensuring women are placed in “winnable” seats.
- Political parties should commit to auditing their own practice and culture through accessing the Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit.⁴
- Action is needed to improve the viability of elected office for a wider diversity of people, including women. This means increasing the salaries of local councillors, improving access to parental leave and changing outdated working practices. These actions and others are identified in the “Making it Happen for 2027: Transforming Local Democracy for Women” campaign, which focuses on making local politics more feasible for women.⁵
- Alongside the Audit’s recommendations to improve collection of diversity data within Parliament, we need better data on candidates that are both successful and unsuccessful in being elected. This will allow us to fully understand the barriers to political participation. We recommend Scottish

⁴ Equal Representation Coalition (2023) Our Vision & Background. Available at: <https://www.equalrepresentation.scot/our-vision--background/>.

⁵ Engender (2022) Making It Happen For 2027: Transforming local democracy for women. A Call to Action from Engender, Elect Her and Women 50:50. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/files/1.-making-it-happen-for-2027.pdf>.

Government considers how to improve and replicate the 2022 Local Government Candidate Diversity Survey for all future elections.

- Without legally binding gender quotas on candidates for election, there remains a risk that progress will stall or go backwards. The Scottish Parliament should examine what learning could be taken from work in the Welsh Senedd to introduce gender quotas.⁶

ONGOING REVIEW AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

It is crucial that this Audit results in tangible, measurable change. We are calling on Parliament to swiftly take action on the first recommendation of the Audit – to create and resource an Advisory Group to oversee delivery of the Audit’s recommendations, to carry out further work in this area and to monitor progress.

Once established, the Advisory Group should look to embed a comprehensive intersectional framework at the outset in order to ensure Parliament is accessible and responsive to the needs of all who experience exclusion from political spaces. It is important to recognise that the experiences of women in political spaces are impacted by other forms of marginalisation. For example, Black and minoritised women, disabled women and trans women will experience specific barriers, and it is crucial that such experiences are fully incorporated if we are to improve democratic quality for those experiencing the highest rates of exclusion.

WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN SCOTLAND - AN UNEVEN PICTURE

This Audit is a crucial part of ensuring the Scottish Parliament is leading from the front on the wider issue of achieving more gender-equal political representation. This is especially important given the varied picture for women’s representation in Holyrood to date. Ensuring women’s diverse needs are equally represented in decision-making is one part of ensuring Parliament is better able to meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Women’s representation has fluctuated, from 39.5% in 2003 to a low of 33% in 2007, before stagnating at 35% for two terms.⁷ In May 2021, this figure reached a record high of 45%,⁸ which has been widely celebrated. However, there is no

⁶ Williams J (2022) ‘Senedd: Gender quotas “absolutely core” to proposed reforms’. BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-62029577>.

⁷ Merson A (2021) ‘Historic’: Record number of women elected to Holyrood and first female BAME MSP’. The Press and Journal. Available at: <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/politics/scottish-politics/3124045/holyrood-women/>.

⁸ McCall C (2021) ‘Scottish Parliament most diverse ever but more can be done, says presiding officer’. Daily Record. Available at: <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/scottish-parliament-most-diverse-ever-24259790>.

guarantee that this forward trajectory will be maintained. Progress to date has not been linear – indeed, it has taken until 2021 for the first women of colour to be elected to the Scottish Parliament. In the absence of legally binding mechanisms such as gender quotas for candidates (for further information on quotas, see Engender’s Equal Voice, Equal Power report)⁹, there is a **very real possibility that progress will backslide** at future elections. While we recognise that to date, gender quotas have been a reserved matter, we would urge Parliament to consider recent success around gender quotas in Wales, led by the Diverse 50:50 Campaign,¹⁰ and how this could potentially be replicated in a Scottish context.

While Parliament does not have direct power over who is elected, by examining internal practice, processes and culture, there are opportunities to ensure that Parliament is a welcoming and attractive option for women of all backgrounds entering politics. In addition to the focus on women entering Parliament, **retention of women MSPs across multiple terms is essential to building sustainable gender-equal representation.**

The Audit contains evidence of practices and cultural norms which are likely to negatively impact on women MSPs’ experience, including:

- sitting patterns and hours of business which are not compatible with family life.¹¹
- evidence of “everyday sexism”, i.e., use of gendered language and sexist comments in the chamber and committees; women being talked over; women being less likely to have interventions accepted during debates.
- evidence of exclusion of women from committees dealing with perceived “hard/ masculine” subjects, i.e., finance, and over-association of women with “softer/ feminine” subjects such as equalities and health.

Practices such as these may serve as “push factors” for those considering whether to remain in the role. Parliament has responsibility to ensure that it is doing everything it can to retain women MSPs and those from minoritised groups.

THE ROLE OF OTHER ACTORS

Clearly, the Scottish Parliament has a pivotal role to play. However, it will not solve the issue of women’s underrepresentation (and the resultant democratic

⁹ Engender (2016) Equal Voice, Equal Power: The case for gender quotas in Scotland. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Equal-Voice-Equal-Power---the-case-for-gender-quotas-in-Scotland.pdf>.

¹⁰ WEN Wales (2023) Diverse5050. Available at: <https://wenwales.org.uk/campaign/diverse5050/>.

¹¹ Merson, A (2023) ‘A family-friendly parliament?’. The Press and Journal. Available at: <https://pressandjournal.shorthandstories.com/family-parliament-ruth-davidson/>.

deficit) alone. Other institutions must also act if we are to see sustainable progress.

Political Parties

Political parties are often considered the “gatekeepers” to political office. Crucially, they have control over candidate recruitment and selection, meaning they have a unique power to shape who ends up in Parliament. As the Audit points out – candidate selection processes that parties adopt from one election to the next can have a significant impact on the eventual gender balance in the chamber. We call on parties to make binding commitments to select candidates in a way that promotes gender balance – and, crucially, that women selected are placed in “winnable” seats.

In addition to candidate selection, parties have a responsibility to foster an internal culture that promotes inclusion and equality and which does not tolerate discrimination or abuse. We recommend that parties commit to undertaking an audit process of their own, using the Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit¹² to review current practice and culture and to action any necessary changes.

Local Government

Women’s representation in Scotland’s local councils is woefully low at 35%.¹³ Local politics is a key pipeline for national politics; women are missing out on opportunities for experience and progression, making sustainable gender balance in Parliament more difficult to maintain. There are multiple barriers facing women accessing local politics - especially women facing multiple intersecting discriminations. Among other issues, this includes a salary which does not fairly compensate councillors for average hours worked,¹⁴ a lack of guaranteed access to parental and family leave,¹⁵ and “archaic” cultures and practices within council chambers¹⁶.

¹² Equal Representation Coalition (2023) Our Vision & Background. Available at: <https://www.equalrepresentation.scot/our-vision--background/>.

¹³ Engender (2022) Making It Happen for 2027: Transforming Local Democracy for Women. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/making-it-happen-for-2027-transforming-local-democracy-for-women/>.

¹⁴ Improvement Service (2022) Scotland’s Councillors 2017-2022. Available at: https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/8287/scotlands-councillors-2017-22.pdf.

¹⁵ COSLA (2020) Family Leave Guidance for Councils. Available at: https://www.cosla.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/17838/Family-Leave-Guidance-May-2020.pdf.

¹⁶ Engender (2022) Making Local Politics Work for Women: The experiences of women councillors and their reasons for not seeking re-election. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/files/3.-making-local-politics-work-for-women.pdf>

Engender, together with partners Elect Her and Women 50:50, have launched the Making it Happen for 2027: Transforming Local Democracy for Women campaign,¹⁷ calling for action from all key stakeholders, including political parties, councils, government, parliament and news media, to take action now that will lead to a significant increase in women's representation in local councils by 2027.

Scottish Government

Work to increase diversity of MSPs is at present hampered by a lack of robust, intersectional data on the protected characteristics of our representatives. This is despite Section 106 of the Equality Act requiring political parties to publish diversity data. The UK Government has never enacted this. Positively, the Scottish Government launched a Candidate Diversity Survey at the 2022 local elections.¹⁸ However, the survey was not mandatory, and the overall return rate was low.

An improved and mandatory survey carried out at future Holyrood elections would allow understanding of the selection-to-election journey, with results enabling better identification of where in the process barriers of any kind might emerge.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women's social, political and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international level to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

¹⁷ Engender (2022) Making It Happen For 2027: Transforming local democracy for women. A Call to Action from Engender, Elect Her and Women 50:50. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/files/1.-making-it-happen-for-2027.pdf>.

¹⁸ Scottish Government (2022) Local Government Candidates Survey 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/local-government-candidates-survey-2022/documents/>.