

Engender Parliamentary Briefing International Women's Day 2024 - #InspireInclusion

March 2024

BACKGROUND

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation. We work to realise a Scotland where women and men have equal access to power, resources, rights and safety. We work across Scottish, UK and International policymaking to ensure that systematic inequality between women and men is made visible and addressed.

Ahead of this year's Scottish Government International Women's Day debate, we ask all MSPs to #InspireInclusion by highlighting the action still required to achieve equal representation for women and all marginalised people in public, cultural and political life. In the majority of spaces where decisions are made, men remain dominant while women are excluded, and as a result, sexism is perpetuated across public life.

This International Women's Day, we call on all MSPs to support equal representation for women and marginalised groups across our political, public, cultural and media institutions. This must involve raising awareness of the current low levels of representation across crucial positions of power. MSPs must ensure action is taken to #InspireInclusion so that the voices of women and marginalised communities can shape Scotland's future.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

1. WOMEN ARE 'MISSING' FROM ALMOST 500 POSITIONS OF POWER IN SCOTLAND

We urgently need more women in positions of power and increased diversity among those leaders. Engender's ['Sex and Power' 2023 report](#)¹ depicts the extent of men's over-representation in positions of authority and influence in Scotland. The report, which examines a range of areas across public life – including politics, health, sport and media – paints a concerning picture in Scotland:

- **There are at least 472 women 'missing' from key positions of power in 2023.**
- **Of 3383 positions of power, only 1222 (just over a third) are held by women.**
- **Men continue to hold two-thirds of positions of power and were significantly over-represented in 33 of the 38 areas of public life examined.**
- **Only five areas demonstrated at least 50% of women in leadership positions.**

¹ Engender (2023) Sex and Power 2023. Available at:
<https://www.engender.org.uk/resources/SP2023finalNEW-1.pdf>

These concerning figures exist despite women making up 51% of Scotland's population and 49% of the labour market, and with girls routinely leaving school with higher levels of educational attainment on average.

Engender's previous Sex & Power reports in [2017](#) and [2020](#) track progress towards gender equality over time. The latest research from 2023 found some improvement in areas including political institutions, the health sector, and various roles across the media and culture sectors. However, the rate of change remains disappointingly slow.

Women account for 27% of council leaders, 22% of sheriffs, 26% of university principals, 18% of major newspaper editors, and just 7% of CEOs of Scotland's top businesses.

These figures clearly show that decisions on how resources are distributed, services are designed, and priorities are identified are still disproportionately made by men. The fact that so many women are 'missing' from these positions of power means significant decision-making is happening without women's leadership and input.

The diversity, quality and depth of women's representation is also critical. The exclusion of women from positions of power is even more pronounced for women from minority groups. We need to see redoubled efforts in all sectors to improve intersectional representation for women of colour, disabled women, LGBTI+ women, older and younger women, women from minority faith communities, women from deprived areas, refugee women and other minoritised groups. This must involve systematic work to address intersecting structural barriers to participation in public life.

Engender is calling for all MSPs to:

- **Raise awareness of Engender's 2023 Sex and Power report to show the progress still needed to reach women's equality in positions of power across Scotland.**
- **Call for feminist leadership across our political and public institutions that go beyond tokenism and are focused on improving outcomes for women and girls in all their diversity.**

2. DIVERSITY AT THE TOP – LEADERSHIP IN SCOTTISH MEDIA AND CULTURE

Having more women and diverse voices as leaders in Scotland's arts, media, and cultural sectors is not just a matter of representation. These sectors play a vital role in shaping Scottish attitudes and behaviours, forming a cornerstone of [primary prevention](#) of violence against women and girls.² They must reflect the needs of the society they serve.

Our ['Diversity at the Top' 2023 report](#)³ from our [Equal Media and Culture Centre \(EMCC\)](#) shows we have a long way to go to achieve this. The report reviews positions of power, specifically in Scotland's arts, media, cultural and sports industries. Like Engender's Sex and Power report, a data-driven approach has been used to analyse the number of women and people of colour in decision-making roles in Scottish media and culture.

² Engender's work on primary prevention of VAWG is available here: <https://www.engender.org.uk/primary-prevention/>

³ Equal Media and Culture Centre for Scotland (2023) Diversity at the Top. Available at: <https://emcc.engender.org.uk/publications/mediandiversity.pdf>

The statistical findings in the report highlight the need for more diverse voices in decision-making spaces across these vital sectors:

- **Overall, white men occupy the majority of leadership positions across the sectors reviewed. For example, 76% of newspaper editors are white men, and 78% of traditional/folk music organisations have white male CEOs.**
- **While some creative and cultural boards approach gender parity, 71% have no women of colour members. Only 7% of all board positions across the sectors are held by people of colour.**
- **Some sectors lag far behind, including 100% white male conductors of national music organisations and only 6% of gaming companies led by women.**

Diversifying power at the top brings distinct advantages. The Scottish Creative Industries contribute more than £5 billion to the Scottish economy every year, and news media contribute a further £1 billion.⁴ Research shows that diverse teams drive innovation and outperform their peers in profitability and value creation.⁵ Beyond the business case, strong ethical and human rights considerations exist for achieving gender balance in leadership. Scotland's media, creative, and cultural sectors are responsible for ensuring that all individuals have equal opportunities to participate in and lead activity.

In 2021, the [National Advisory Council for Women and Girls](#) revealed that around two-thirds of senior managerial positions in the Creative Industries sector are held by men.⁶ The continual underrepresentation of women, Black and minoritised people in leadership positions has significant consequences,⁷ making it harder for organisations to embrace diversity of thought, assert more inclusive values or combat harmful stereotypes.

These findings from the EMCC show urgent action is needed to diversify leadership and ensure Scotland's culture and media sectors drive innovation and reflect society's needs. Addressing inequalities in representation simultaneously across leadership, workforces and creative output is vital in transforming Scotland's culture.

Engender is calling for all MSPs to:

- **Advocate for Scotland's arts, media, and cultural sectors to support and implement the recommendations outlined in the 'Diversity at the Top' report. These include introducing diversity targets, data collection, and policies to support the inclusion of women and marginalised groups in workplaces.**

⁴ News Media Association (2016). Scottish Newspaper Industry Worth £1bn to Scottish Economy. Available at: <https://newsmediauk.org/blog/2016/06/01/scottish-newspaper-industry-worth-1bn-to-scottish-economy/>.

⁵ McKinsey & Co. (2019) Delivering through diversity. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/delivering-through-diversity>

⁶ National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (2021) Gender Inequality in the Creative Arts. Available at: <https://www.generationequal.scot/app/uploads/2022/03/NACWG-paper-Gender-inequality-in-creativeindustries-FINAL-PAPER-5-August-21.pdf>

⁷ The McGregor-Smith Review (2021) The Time for Talking is Over. Now is the Time to Act. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/594336/race-inworkplace-mcgregor-smith-review.pdf

3. EQUAL REPRESENTATION IN POLITICS

We still require urgent action to see equal representation for women and marginalised groups in politics. Progress in diversifying the people who represent us continues to be slow. Men are currently overrepresented in all of Scotland's democratic bodies, and our work continues to show there are multiple barriers to women accessing politics, with such barriers often more pronounced for marginalised women, including women of colour, disabled women and LGBTI+ women.

We have developed⁸ evidence-based solutions to the overall low representation that women and other marginalised groups have in our political and public institutions. Scotland must have democratic bodies that reflect the general population to ensure decisions are made that consider our communities' diverse needs and experiences.

We ask MSPs to continue supporting our campaigning for equal political representation to #InspireInclusion.⁹ This includes our 'Making It Happen for 2027'¹⁰ campaign, which focuses on transforming local democracy for women. At present, women make up only 35% of local councillors in Scotland. With the next local elections only three years away, this issue cannot wait.

Political parties, the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and Local Authorities must act swiftly to reduce structural and cultural barriers women face in local politics if we are to have a realistic hope of achieving equal representation for women in all their diversity in 2027.

For women to participate in politics and challenge structural inequality, we also know it is vital to combat the toxicity which exists for women and marginalised people. Women politicians are at an increased risk of receiving sexist abuse - a risk which is heightened further for Black and minoritised politicians¹¹ - and are currently facing unprecedented threats to their personal safety.¹²

Experiences of toxic levels of abuse and harassment tied to sexist behaviours – both online and offline – are increasingly being cited by women as a reason for leaving public life.¹³ Together, this contributes to a 'chilling effect' on diversity, sending a strong signal that electoral politics is not safe for women, particularly for women of colour and other marginalised groups. Action must be taken on all forms of harassment, abuse and intimidation if we wish to see greater diversity in our elected representatives.

⁸ Engender's work on equal representation is available here: <https://www.engender.org.uk/research-representation/>

⁹ <https://www.equalrepresentation.scot/our-vision--background/>

¹⁰ 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>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Badshah, N (2024) Three female MPs given bodyguards after concerns over safety. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/feb/24/three-female-mps-given-bodyguards-after-concerns-over-safety>

¹³ Oppenheim M (2019) General election: Women MPs standing down over 'horrific abuse', campaigners warn. The Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/general-election-womanmps-step-down-abuse-harassment-a9179906.htm>

MSPs can lead the way in achieving equal representation in politics by working together across the political spectrum to ensure women and marginalised groups are represented in positions of influence and that the way policy is created embeds gendered and equality approaches from the beginning.

Engender is calling for all MSPs to:

- **Take action to reduce abuse and harassment in politics. Encourage political parties to foster a positive internal culture using the [Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit](#).¹⁴ Parliamentarians should lead from the front on this issue, modelling good behaviour and promoting civility in debate.**
- **Support the recommendations of our '[Making it Happen for 2027: Transforming Local Democracy for Women](#)' campaign, in partnership with Elect Her and Women 50:50, to ensure we see a step change in women's local representation in 2027.**

We ask all MSPs to mark this year's International Women's Day by raising awareness of the statistics in this briefing, which show some of the progress still required to advance intersectional gender equality in Scotland, and by publicly supporting our asks to ensure this work remains a political priority.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation. We work to realise a Scotland where women and men have equal access to power, resources, rights and safety. We work across Scottish, UK and International policymaking to ensure that systematic inequality between women and men is made visible and addressed.

¹⁴ The Equal Representation in Politics Toolkit is available online here: <https://www.equalrepresentation.scot/>