



## Engender Response to the Scottish Government Consultation on Electoral Reform

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2017, the Scottish Government launched its consultation on electoral reform. Among its many questions on the future of elections in Scotland, the Scottish Government has focused on possible reforms to anonymous voter registration as well as to improving gender balance in elected office.

Equal representation across politics and public life is a key issue within feminist agendas, and Engender has long advocated for women's increased representation in both political and public life. Parliaments and governance bodies provide critical oversight of the processes that challenge gender inequality and discrimination, including the development of laws, institutions, policies, and programmes. Given that women and men experience life differently as a result of gender inequality and cultural gender roles, it stands to reason that women have particular perspectives that must be heard in our parliament and local council chambers.

Women make up 52 percent of the Scottish population and should be equally represented in in our democratic bodies. Yet gender parity across our political institutions is far from becoming reality. Women hold 35 percent of seats in the Scottish Parliament and 25 percent of seats in local council chambers. While women's representation in politics in Scotland was once fourth internationally, it has dropped to 20<sup>th</sup> place in current global rankings.<sup>1</sup>

To temper the regression of women's representation in political life in Scotland, we warmly welcome the Scottish Government's decision to include in its electoral

---

<sup>1</sup> Engender. (2016). *Equal Voice, Equal Power*.

reform consultation a question dedicated to gender balance. Though the number of women in the Scottish Parliament has dipped over the last decade, there are steps which can be taken to ensure women are better represented in positions of leadership. As a first step, however, it is necessary to examine some of the existing barriers to women’s equal participation.

**2. BARRIERS TO WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION**

In 2008, the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) conducted research on equality and politics by surveying parliamentarians around the globe. Among its focus was to establish factors deterring women from politics. The findings of the study identified the following deterrents to women’s participation in politics:

Deterrent for Women <sup>2</sup>
Caring responsibilities
Cultural attitudes regarding the roles of women in society
Lack of support from political parties
Lack of finances
Lack of support from family
Politics seen as “dirty” and “corrupt”
Security concerns
Lack of support from men, other women and the electorate
Lack of experience in “representative functions”: public speaking, constituency relations

Caring responsibilities was the most cited deterrent to women’s participation in politics, and was considered a barrier in both seeking election as well as once elected. Women reported that it was difficult to travel to campaign for election while still meeting the needs of their dependants at home.<sup>3</sup> Further, once elected, women found it challenging to find formal childcare to match their parliamentary hours of work (e.g., evening votes in parliament).<sup>4</sup> As one parliamentarian remarked:

<sup>2</sup> International Parliamentary Union. (2008). *Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> International Parliamentary Union.

*Women are obliged to start their activities from a different point than men. They arrive at the starting point exhausted, because of other activities, such as family responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>*

In Scotland, women's position is that of primary caregivers, meaning they are generally more time-poor than men and often not in a position to engage in local party politics, such as attending meetings or offering the additional time needed to campaign. Further, party structures largely do not support women with children (e.g. child-friendly spaces/meeting times at the local level) or consider flexible ways to facilitate women's participation.

In addition to caring responsibilities, women parliamentarians also report challenges in finding the economic resources needed to campaign. The struggle to successfully raise adequate campaign funds is attributed to women's existing inequality. As found by the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO):

*Women have less money than men and less access to powerful and moneyed networks. Men are more likely to become money donors to campaigns, while women are more likely to donate their time—largely owing to women's generally lower levels of income. While public funding can promote women's candidacies, public funding alone may not be sufficient to promote women since they often have less power in their political parties, which control the allocation of funds.<sup>6</sup>*

Further, men make up the significant majority of large campaign donors, typically only contributing to women candidates' campaigns "once their chances of election approach certainty"<sup>7</sup>.

Whilst caring responsibilities and campaign finances act as barriers, so too do prevailing attitudes towards women's leadership. As women have never had equal representation in the UK, the "natural" image of a politician for many will be male (and white). Existing patriarchal and hierarchical norms permeate politics, leading to the view that women are not legitimate political players and/or capable leaders.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Women's Environment and Development Organization. (2007). *Report on Women Candidates and Campaign Finance*.

<sup>7</sup> International Parliamentary Union.

These types of attitudes reinforce the idea that politics is for men. In the Scottish Government's forthcoming efforts on electoral reform, it cannot be ignored that sexism is rife in politics in Scotland, as it is almost everywhere else in the world. To bring about women's equality in political life will mean acknowledging and breaking down the circle that is drawn around this boys' club. It will mean tackling attitudes that contribute to politics being a place where men make decisions and women are merely acted upon.

### **3. GENDER BALANCE IN ELECTED OFFICE**

In its consultation, the Scottish Government has asked: How can the Scottish Government best support gender balance in those elected as MSPs or local councillors?

#### **3.1. Equality Impact Assessment**

Our knowledge is based on women's lived experiences as well as research and evidence on women's unequal representation in political life. Whilst we are not experts on existing electoral laws or the minutia of campaign rules and political party functions, we know first-hand the benefits to women's equality that stem from policies developed by robust equality impact assessments. We would strongly recommend that electoral reforms considered by the Scottish Government put equality as a front-line consideration, which could be demonstrated by conducting an equality impact assessment to determine whether each policy and practice will advance or hinder women's representation in Scotland.

Taking an intersectional approach to this analysis is essential. Whilst we know women are underrepresented, we know that other groups protected by the Equality Act 2010 are underrepresented also. It is vital that the full diversity of women in Scotland be represented in public office. To achieve this, strategies for electoral reform – and the initiatives themselves – must be developed with a view to meeting the needs and realities of disabled women, women from minority ethnic, minority faith and refugee communities, women from different class backgrounds, younger and older women, lesbian and bisexual women, and trans women.

### **3.2. Gender balancing measures**

In our report *Equal Voice, Equal Power*, published in 2016, we call for the devolution of electoral and equalities law on the grounds that there is scope in Scotland for the adoption of gender quotas and, as such, for the significant increase in women's representation in political life.<sup>8</sup> Though we do not wish to replicate our research here, we strongly encourage the Scottish Government to consult our report, which highlights the success of gender quotas in foreign jurisdictions. As we did when we published our report in 2016, we continue to call on the Scottish Government to make the case for the devolution of electoral and equalities law to the Scottish Parliament.

### **3.3. Data collection**

Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 requires political parties to collect basic equality monitoring data. Despite this section of the Act, we know little about persons with protected characteristics running as candidates in elections. It is essential that as Scotland seeks to increase women's representation in politics that it ensures various actors track developments in order to assess progress or regress, as well as to assess what initiatives are successful or not in increasing women's representation. Political parties should be held accountable for meeting the legal responsibility to collect equality monitoring data. Further, as this section of the Act is only relevant to parliamentary elections in Scotland, we would want to see the requirement to collect and publish equalities monitoring data extended to include council elections as well.

### **3.4. Family-friendly parliament/local council**

Women are primary caregivers and our systems should be designed to better respond to this reality, including political structures in Scotland. Examples for reform range from reviewing the use of campaign finances to cover the cost of childcare as a legitimate expense to providing affordable, flexible and year round formal childcare in political spaces (e.g., Scottish Parliament, local councils). Existing political policies and structures disincentivise many women from

---

<sup>8</sup> Engender. (2016). *Equal Voice, Equal Power*. Available from: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Equal-Voice-Equal-Power---the-case-for-gender-quotas-in-Scotland.pdf>

participating in political life because their realities as mothers and/or carers are not considered or accommodated.

In other jurisdictions, however, the reality of caring responsibilities has been considered. In Australia, many territorial legislatures have amended their sitting hours to be more family friendly, including abolishing the practice of late sitting hours in the evening. Further, Australia's parliament runs its own childcare centre for all occupants of the building (i.e., not just for members of parliament). The childcare centre was instituted in 2009. Before the opening of the childcare centre, the Leader of House in Australia's parliament said:

*The work proposed will provide childcare facilities to all occupants of the Parliament House building. The campaign for childcare facilities located within Parliament House has been a long one. It reflects our growing appreciation as a nation of the need for affordable, easily accessible and quality child care for working families. Australian families cannot do without child care, and it would be hypocritical of this parliament to say to the families of those that work here that they should.<sup>9</sup>*

Central to increasing women's representation will be acknowledging their role as primary caregivers and implementing reforms which remove barriers and enable their participation in politics in Scotland.

### **3.5. Education and training**

Gender bias is a significant barrier to women's entry, involvement, and success in the political sphere. Overcoming it, however, will require a seismic shift in prevailing attitudes and behaviours within political parties. As a first step toward change, every political party in Scotland should commit to a minimum standard of equalities training for all candidates and staff members. Education and training to influence attitudes are needed to improve outcomes and address under-representation.

Other measures could also be instituted to tackle attitudes within political parties, including making use of recent tools developed to assist political parties in

---

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Albanese MP. (2008). *Childcare in Parliament House*. Available from: <http://anthonyalbanese.com.au/childcare-in-parliament-house>

examining internal policies and procedures that act as a barrier to equality and diversity in politics:

1. Equal Representation Tool<sup>10</sup>: This online self-assessment tool was developed for members of political parties in Scotland to find out how their local, regional or national party can benefit from increasing the diversity of its members. Focusing on the experiences of women, disabled people, ethnic minorities and the LGBTI community, the tool enables members to assess their current practice across a range of themes. The tool then provides tailored guidance and an action plan of the steps members can take to advance equality and diversity in their activities.
2. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is developing an online, interactive tool that will measure the “gender sensitivity” of a political institution. As explained by EIGE: “The tool looks at a range of key criteria, from electoral systems to parliamentary working conditions. Through examining the barriers women face as politicians at all stages of their career, this new tool will help institutions to identify discriminatory practices and develop measures to address them”<sup>11</sup>.

Third sector organisations have made a significant effort to develop tools, training and programs geared to shifting attitudes, behaviours and practices within political parties. It is now time for political parties to engage with them in return, and to demonstrate a concerted effort and commitment to preventing and eradicating all forms of discrimination within their party.

### **3.6. Accountability**

A survey was recently conducted on harassment and inappropriate behaviour in the Scottish Parliament. A total of 1,039 responses were completed.<sup>12</sup> The findings revealed that 20 percent of respondents had experience sexual harassment.<sup>13</sup> Of

---

<sup>10</sup> Developed by the Equal Representation Project, which is a coalition of partners including: Engender, Women 5050, Inclusion Scotland, the 1 in 5 campaign, CEMVO, CRER, BEMIS, the Scottish Refugee Council, Stonewall Scotland, the Equality Network, LGBT Youth Scotland, and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

<sup>11</sup> EIGE. (2017). *Gender Equality in Political Decision-Making*. Available from: <http://eige.europa.eu/rdc/eige-publications/gender-equality-political-decision-making>

<sup>12</sup> BBC News. (2018). *One in five Holyrood staff raise harassment concerns*. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-43243620>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

those who reported harassment or sexist behaviour, 45 percent identified the perpetrator as a Member of the Scottish Parliament.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst education and training are imperative, we must go further to ensure political parties and its member are held to account for attitudes and behaviours found to be discriminatory or inappropriate. Engender and Women 50:50 believe that independent oversight is needed. Whilst our work on developing a model for such an oversight body has yet to be completed, we believe that it will be vital for such a body to be independent and to be given the power to investigate allegations of discrimination, harassment and other inappropriate behaviour. This proposal was raised by Engender and Women 50:50 in a recent meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities and the Minister for Parliamentary Business, and we intend to submit a more fulsome proposal to the Cabinet Secretary and the Minister at a later date.

### **3.7. Engage young people**

Research from Girlguiding's Girls' Attitudes Survey 2018 found that 57 percent of girls aged 11-21 do not think politicians understand the issues facing them today, and 53 percent think political parties should ensure half of their politicians are women.<sup>15</sup>

Recently, Girlguiding Scotland launched its campaign "Citizen Girl" along with Women 50:50. The aim of the campaign is to empower girls to:

1. Discover why their voice matters and how they can make change;
2. Learn about the political process, representation and equality with fun, hands-on challenge like building their own edible parliament, creating their own superheroes and holding their own Citizen Girl Summits; and
3. Think about how they can be the leaders of tomorrow in politics, business, tech, the media and more.

Mentoring, training, and campaigns – like Citizen Girl – will play a vital role in supporting the next generation of leaders who are women in Scotland. However, to be successful, we are of the view that initiatives geared to engage young people

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Girlguiding Scotland. (2017). *Girls' Attitudes Survey*.



must have equality and gender social justice embedded within them to both support future women leaders in Scotland as well as to start breaking down patriarchal norms that stand in the way of women's equal representation in political and public life. Unless more young women are attracted to political life, the underrepresentation of women in elected office will continue.

#### **4. ANONYMOUS VOTER REGISTRATION**

**Do you think that we should make it easier for individuals who may be at risk from any form of abuse to register anonymously, whilst maintaining the integrity of the electoral register?**

We are of the view that it is feasible to maintain the integrity of the electoral register while also making it more accessible for at-risk individuals to register anonymously. Similarly to Scottish Women's Aid, we are of the view that anonymous voter registration should be expanded to the Scottish Government's suggested scenarios of stalking and human trafficking, threatening behaviour, those at risk of forced marriage and honour-based violence, and others who may wish to register to vote safely without their partner, spouse, family and/or parents knowing that they are registered and exercising their legal right to vote.

We further support proposed changes to allow lower ranked police officers to attest to applications for anonymous voter registration, as well as the proposal to add additional professionals to the list of those that can attest applications. However, we share the concern raised by Scottish Women's Aid, namely that there may be a fee charged by GP practices or other health professionals for this attesting service, which could create a financial barrier for women attempting to obtain anonymous voter registration attestation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The equal participation of women and men in politics in Scotland is an important condition for effective democracy and good governance. Whilst it strengthens our democracy, women's participation in politics has shown to improve the lives of both men and women, benefitting individuals and communities as a whole. As electoral reform discussions take place over the coming months and year, the realities of women must be central. Anything less than responsive policies and practices will fall short in the objective of women's equal representation in politics in Scotland.

### **FURTHER INFORMATION:**

Contact Emma Trottier, Policy and Parliamentary Manager, Engender

Email: [emma.trottier@engender.org.uk](mailto:emma.trottier@engender.org.uk)

Mobile: 07889 805787

### **ABOUT ENGENDER:**

Engender is a membership organisation working on feminist agendas in Scotland and Europe, to increase women's power and influence and to make visible the impact of sexism on women, men and society. We provide support to individuals, organisations and institutions who seek to achieve gender equality and justice.