



# Standing Down, Speaking Out

## Why Women MSPs Are Leaving Holyrood And How We Fix It

### Introduction

In recent years, the Scottish Parliament has seen an unprecedented increase in Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), many of them women, choosing not to seek re-election. The scale of this trend raises questions about the conditions, pressures and barriers shaping women’s political participation, representation and retention in Scotland. Understanding why women decide to stand down from elected office is essential in addressing persistent gender inequalities within democratic institutions and to ensuring that women’s perspectives continue to inform the decision-making that impacts their lives.

This briefing forms part of Engender’s Equal Representation in Politics Project, which aims to help create a Scotland where women, in all their diversity, are sustainably represented in politics. We work to ensure women’s perspectives shape decision-making, reduce gender inequality, and create better outcomes for women and society. Building on our previous work examining women’s experiences of candidate selection, campaigning, and electoral processes,<sup>1</sup> this briefing focuses on the gendered dynamics that influence decisions to leave parliamentary roles. This paper sought to gain deeper insight

into the challenges women face in political office and to identify opportunities for positive systemic change.

In February 2022, Presiding Officer Alison Johnstone MSP launched the Gender Sensitive Audit, an audit of how women are represented and participate in the Scottish Parliament;<sup>2</sup> Engender was a member of its steering group. Our remarks here also echo the audit’s recommendations, specifically on sexual harassment, discrimination, social media abuse, balancing work and caring responsibilities, and members’ conduct.

The findings in this briefing are reflected in evidence-based recommendations aimed at improving conditions for current and future women MSPs. These can be found at the end of this paper. The report outlines the factors that women MSPs reported had influenced their decision to stand down. It also analyses the gendered, hostile environment that many women politicians report experiencing whilst in post. By capturing these experiences, especially at a pivotal moment around the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections, this research aims to support ongoing efforts to



1 Engender (2025) Women’s Political Journey: Exploring the election process and women’s experiences of abuse, exclusion and bias, with vital recommendations for improvement. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/10072025-Womens-political-journey-report---RGB-no-bleed.pdf>; Engender (2025) Beyond Promises: What works in getting more women elected. Available at: [engender.org.uk/content/publications/Beyond-Promises-What-works-in-getting-more-women-elected.pdf](https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Beyond-Promises-What-works-in-getting-more-women-elected.pdf).

2 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>.



create a more inclusive and equitable political landscape in Scotland.

*“The whole working culture needs to be overhauled. As much as I love politics and know our roles are extremely important I could not at the present time encourage women - particularly young women - into politics... You need to be resilient and tough and have a very good support network at home to lean on - if not, people will really struggle.” - Survey Respondent*



## What Do The Numbers Tell Us?

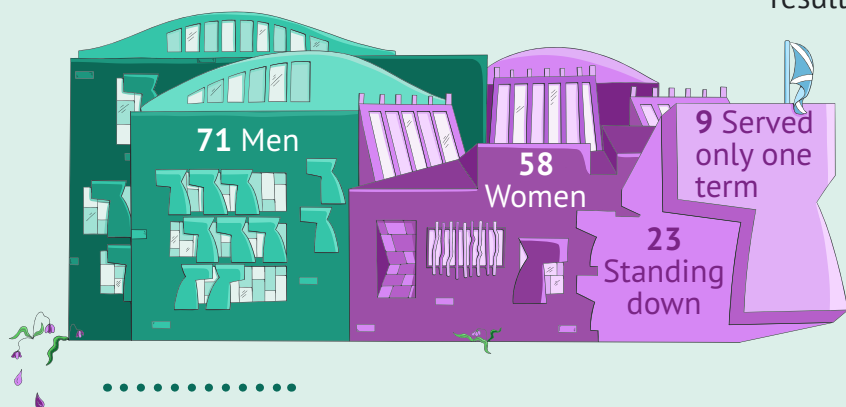
Out of 129 MSPs serving in the Scottish Parliament until March 2026, over a third announced that they would not stand for re-election in May 2026. Of the 40 MSPs who stood down, 23 were women (58%).

This trend was reflected to varying degrees across parties: 15 out of 32 SNP women stood down (47%); four out of 10 Labour women (40%); two out of nine Conservative women (22%) and the only Liberal Democrat woman MSP also stood down. The Presiding Officer, who was elected for the Green Party, but whose role is politically neutral, also stood down, totalling one out of four Green Party women (25%) elected in 2021.



Women made up 45% of the Scottish Parliament in March 2026 (58 women compared to 71 men). With 23 out of a total of 58 women MSPs standing down, this meant that 40% of women MSPs decided not to run again. Nine out of the 23 women who stood down (40%) were elected for the first time in 2021 meaning they served only one term in Parliament.

Engender wanted to better understand the reasons that women MSPs have for standing down and what recommendations they have for changes that could improve the situation in future. We sent a short survey to all women MSPs who, by mid-November 2025, had publicly declared that they would not stand for re-election in May 2026.<sup>3</sup> Six MSPs from four political parties chose to share their reflections with us. In addition to the survey results, information was gathered from MSPs public statements when announcing or discussing their decision to stand down. We also drew from the findings of our recent research on women’s political journeys and their specific experiences of the election and candidate journey.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Engender sent the survey to 22 women MSPs in mid-November 2025. One further MSP subsequently decided not to stand for re-election after the survey was completed.

<sup>4</sup> Engender (2025) Women’s Political Journey: Exploring the election process and women’s experiences of abuse, exclusion and bias, with vital recommendations for improvement. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/10072025-Womens-political-journey-report---RGB-no-bleed.pdf>.

## What Factors Are Affecting MSPs' Decisions To Stand Down?

Six out of 23 women MSPs publicly emphasised wanting to spend more time with their families, or the challenges of balancing work as an MSP with family responsibilities, including highlighting a lack of childcare in Parliament, as a factor in their decision. Five did not give any reasons publicly for their decision, and another five spoke more generally about it being time for new opportunities. Several have been MSPs for many years (some since 1999 and others for over 10 years).

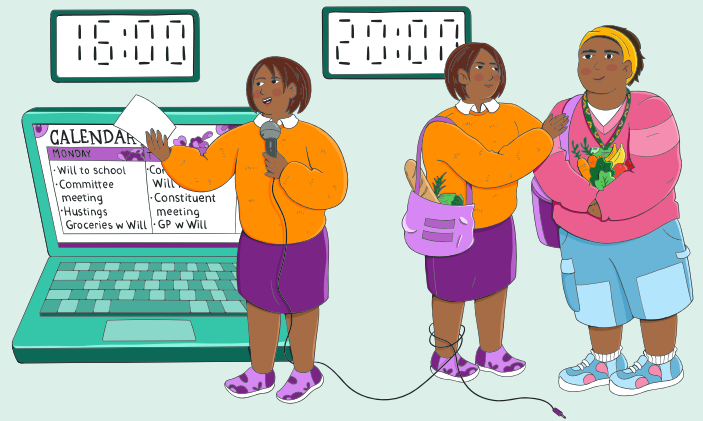
Our extensive research on women's political journey and their experience of abuse, bias and exclusion mirrors those statements by MSPs.<sup>5</sup> Key findings of our report included lack of support, insufficient understanding of intersectional barriers faced and the favouring of the "ideal candidate". The latter shows in many aspects of the culture, structure and process surrounding candidacy as they continue to be tailored to the circumstances of an imagined "ideal candidate" who is by default white, middle-class, male and not disabled. In common with earlier Fawcett Society findings, we found that those outwith this model are likely to face a range of additional barriers at each stage of their candidate journey.



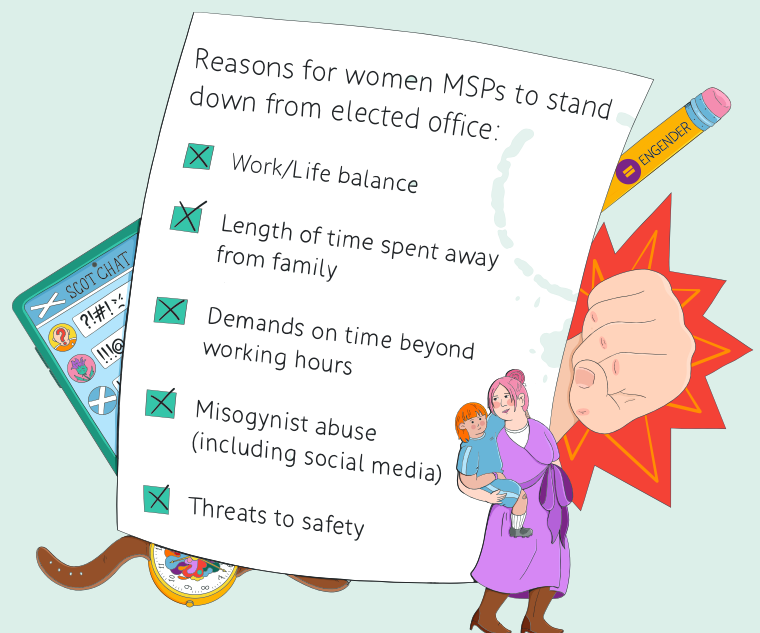
We also found that there is a lack of formal support, guidance and training available for women to navigate candidacy processes at all stages. Gaps in support provision are also particularly evident for Black and minority ethnic and disabled people.

Additionally, caring responsibilities and the lack of support thereof is a major barrier for women in politics: when selecting candidates, parties can place disproportionate importance on "presenteeism", disproportionately focusing on hours spent on party activities, rather than

other candidate skills. This can disadvantage people with less free time due to caring responsibilities. This persists once candidates are selected and elected, negatively impacting women's overall experience and likelihood of running again in future.

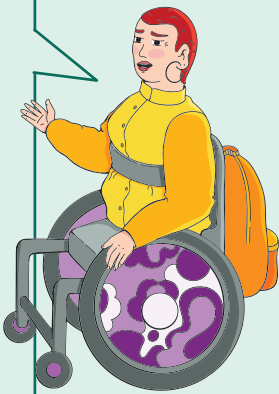


Engender's survey on women standing down at the 2026 Scottish Holyrood Election asked MSPs to select factors that affected their decision to stand down from a list of options. MSPs could choose as many options as applied to them. The factors which received the highest number of responses were: **"Work/life balance"**, **"Length of time spent away from family"**, and **"Demands on time beyond working hours"**. Three out of the six MSPs who responded also said that **"Misogynist abuse (including on social media)"** was a factor in their decision, with two also citing **"threats to safety"**.



5 Ibid.

“We are adopting a long hours culture and there is much more work pressure on MSPs. There is little recognition of caring responsibilities, this is especially the case for those with young families but it is tough for those with elderly relatives too. The work is rewarding and fascinating but it is relentless.”  
- Survey Respondent



Our survey asked MSPs to explain in more detail about their decision to stand down. Responding MSPs said that the length of time that it takes to travel to Parliament and the amount of time they need to spend away from home is a problem. This is especially the case for women MSPs with caring responsibilities for children or elderly parents. One MSP noted that working in Parliament is still best for male MSPs who can work at any time because someone else is taking care of all the household duties.

The gendered impact is clear as one survey respondent summarises:

“Parliament still seems to work best for male members who can dedicate themselves to the role full-time while someone else takes care of the household, family, budget etc.”  
- Survey Respondent



Responding MSPs also mentioned requirements for them to continue working when they are ill, or when family members are ill. One MSP described there being no distinction between working and non-working hours and another

spoke of an expectation from constituents that MSPs will be available to respond at any time, including weekends, even if the issue is not urgent. Another MSP noted that constant changing of decision times in Parliament meant that it is impossible for MSPs plan for their evenings, and that this is especially difficult for parents with young children.

Multiple MSPs also shared reflections on the difficulty navigating family and work life and the lack of support from the parliament:

“The parliament has become less family friendly with late sittings and changing business and times.” - Survey Respondent

“There’s a lack of childcare in parliament and that needs to be resolved if we are to encourage younger women to stand.”  
- Survey Respondent

Some responding MSPs described having or needing to have “thick skin” to deal with abuse on social media. Others spoke of threats to their safety. The relentless nature of the abuse women MSPs increasingly experience carries risks for MSPs’ mental health. One also described it having a negative impact on their family members, highlighting that this is unfair because family members of MSPs have not chosen to be in the public eye.

Abuse can also follow MSPs into the workplace as the misogyny can be directed from colleagues within parliament:

“The Chamber has become a toxic bear pit with shouty men silencing women.”  
- Survey Respondent





Several responding MSPs mentioned there being a lack of support in their role. One described how political parties are keen to have more women becoming MSPs but when they start the role, there is little support in the way of induction, training or mentoring. Another MSP described a lack of support from the party or from the Parliament when something goes wrong.

In our research on women's experiences, we have identified additional key barriers for women in politics.<sup>6</sup> Across parties we observed relatively casual attitudes towards sexist language and gendered stereotypes that feed bias and negative assumptions about women's suitability as candidates. In some areas, sexist bullying is a problem and disabled and minoritised women may be more at risk of experiencing this in some parties and branches.

Very concerning as well is the number of former candidates who would not recommend candidacy to others. Parties need to do more to support successful and unsuccessful candidates following the election.

Overall, urgent action is needed from parties to diversify their active memberships and grow the pool of potential candidates to represent a wider range of experience. However, this must happen in tandem with reforms such as implementing positive action measures (i.e. quotas or all women shortlists) to reduce cultural and process-based barriers to candidacy which currently persist.

## What Can Be Done?

We know that we are dealing with a record number of MSPs of all genders standing down, but the gendered reasons cannot be ignored. Women have consistently told us about their difficulty balancing work with caring responsibilities and the parliament's lack of offering support to the barriers and misogyny women face on top of the busy lifestyle of a politician. This leaves women vulnerable, and ultimately contributes to their decision to quit politics altogether.

With the 2026 Holyrood elections, we have a critical opportunity to ensure the next intake of MSPs feels supported. In our survey we asked MSPs for their recommendations on what needs to change to improve the context for future intakes.

Suggestions included **more support**, particularly for those with young children. **Better scheduling** was emphasised, so that MSPs know what their time commitments for the week will be in order to plan their time and caring responsibilities accordingly. Another suggestion was that there should be more **help for MSPs in managing their social media** accounts to mitigate the psychological impact of dealing with abuse every day. Two MSPs suggested **increasing the number of MSPs** because the workload is now higher.



6 Ibid.

## Recommendations

Drawing on the input women MSPs gave us and Engender's expertise through research in the field of women's representation, this leads us to the following recommendations for political parties, Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body:

### Increase Women's Participation and Retention

- All governmental bodies should show leadership to increase participation of women and other underrepresented groups in politics, and to increase retention rates of women once elected. This should involve:
  - Addressing sexism and other forms of discrimination, bullying, harassment and abuse through robust institutional policies and reporting processes within elected institutions.
  - Ensuring comprehensive parental and carers' leave policies are in place.
  - Where measures are not in place, guaranteeing rights to flexible working, remote participation and proxy voting in all parliamentary business, and communicating these effectively.

### Tackle Violence Against Women, Misogyny and Abuse

- At all levels, foster a culture that takes proactive steps against sexism, racism, classism, ableism, transphobia and other intersecting discrimination.
- Have clear policies in place to address internal bullying and harassment. Ensure all members know how to access these.
- Introduce a zero-tolerance approach on sexist language, with clear disciplinary consequences to support enforcement.
- Ensure there is a comprehensive Code of Conduct and bespoke policies for all members that prohibit bullying, gender-based violence and discrimination, and set out clear and transparent reporting processes.
- Provide training for party staff responsible for addressing complaints of gender-based violence.
- Together with Police Scotland, continue to raise awareness about Operation Ford and roll out capacity for MSPs, so that they are adequately supported in monitoring their social media for abuse and violence.
- Provide access to mental health and wellbeing support for members who have experienced gender-based violence or discrimination.





## Balance Family Life and Work

- Adapt ways of working in parliament, and in party structures, to better accommodate women’s and caregivers’ needs, respecting family and caregiving responsibilities.
- Make it clear if events or activities are child-friendly and whether childcare will be provided.
- Explore ways to support childcare responsibilities of MSPs including offering financial support or facilities to mitigate any barriers

## Build Long-Term Culture Change

- Agree long-term goals for diverse representation across Holyrood elections. Create accompanying strategies to guide work to achieve them.
- Show leadership on policy issues impacting women and marginalised groups, championing reforms that will increase participation, safety and equality in politics.
- Support the findings and recommendations made by the Gender Sensitive Audit of the Scottish Parliament as an important first step towards more gender-equal representation, participation and policy creation in Scotland, in line with international best practice.
- Implement progress of the recommendations with an intersectional framework embedded from the outset, which considers intersecting and other forms of marginalisation alongside and in addition to gender.

### Project team:

Noomi Anyanwu, Equal Representation Development Officer, Engender  
Kathryn Ramsay, Independent Researcher


Report design: Madeleine Leisk

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:  
Contact: Catherine Murphy,  
Executive Director, Engender  
info@engender.org.uk

Engender  
Suite 540-541  
Baltic Chambers  
50 Wellington Street  
Glasgow  
G2 6HJ