

Women's Equal Representation in Scotland

TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE THEORY OF CHANGE
(PHASE 1 INTERIM REPORT)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is vital that our democratic bodies represent the full breadth of Scottish society, and that decision-making reflects the diverse needs and experiences of Scotland's communities. Women are 51% of Scotland's population. However, they remain chronically underrepresented at all levels of our democracy, with women from marginalised and minoritised communities even less likely to be represented. In recognition of the scale of the challenge that this presents and the wide range of actors with a role to play in addressing it, Engender and Elect Her carried out a workshop to map the equal representation landscape and to develop a collective theory of change to support individual and collective efforts. This document summarises the background to this process, the learning from the workshop, and indicates the next steps in creating a framework for achieving our shared vision of women's equal representation in Scotland.

BACKGROUND

While women's representation in the Scottish Parliament improved in the 2021 election to a record high of 45%,¹ there is no guarantee that this progress will be sustained and built upon at future elections. Past experience of progress followed by regress tells us there is no room

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

for complacency.² Outside of Holyrood, the situation is even more concerning, with women comprising just 35% of local councillors and 35% of Scottish MPs.³ Unfortunately, we lack access to robust data on other protected characteristics of our elected representatives, but what we do know indicates that underrepresentation is most acute for specific groups of women, including disabled women, Black and minority ethnic (BME) women, trans women, women who are carers and women on low incomes.

These democratic deficits mean that, too often, the voices of those most impacted by decision-making processes are not being heard. We are missing out on the richness of women's lived experience and expertise in all kinds of areas despite overwhelming evidence which demonstrates the positive impacts that women's political leadership has on society.⁴

We know that there are many reasons the current status quo persists. Women are contending with a vast historical backdrop of exclusion from public life meaning that structures, processes and culture across parliaments, councils and political parties have often not been designed to accommodate women's realities. Many of the barriers that women in politics face is mirrored by sexist norms and culture across wider society. For those working to increase women's equality in politics, knowing where to start can seem like a daunting task.

We are fortunate in Scotland that women's equal representation in politics is a goal which unites various organisations and institutions, each playing a unique and critical role in achieving change. While reflecting on our own respective roles, Engender and Elect Her identified a need to comprehensively map challenges, solutions and the extensive work already ongoing in the field. Our aim is to create a framework to enhance individual and collective efforts to increase women's representation. This document summarises the output of the first stage of this process.

WHAT WE DID

On October 26th 2023, we held a workshop in Glasgow, which brought together 29 participants from 17 organisations spanning political parties, the equalities sector, government bodies, and academic institutions. The workshop had three primary objectives:

- to articulate a shared vision for equal representation of women
- to identify the key levers of change and the barriers impeding progress
- to map the contributions of various stakeholders towards this common goal.

Participants developed a collective theory of change narrative to outline a common goal and identified the key steps needed to make change a reality.

² The Guardian (2016), Holyrood 2016: Where are the Women? Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/scotland-blog/2016/may/12/holyrood-2016-scottish-parliament-gender-gap>.

³ House of Commons Library. General Election 2024 Results. MPs Elected Excel Sheet. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10009/>.

⁴ Dr Minna Cowper-Coles (2021) Women political leaders: the impact of gender on democracy. For Global Institute for Women's Leadership and Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/research/women-political-leaders-the-impact-of-gender-on-democracy>.

ABOUT THIS THEORY OF CHANGE

This document contains a wealth of information that we hope is useful for all stakeholders interested in achieving women's equal representation. It should be read as an interim report on this project rather than a final product.

This document summarises the vision articulated at the workshop by the organisations in attendance. This includes:

- A **narrative theory of change** which describes our collective goal; the conditions that are required to make it a reality; and the risks and barriers that currently stand in the way.
- The **specific change mechanisms** that were identified; who is responsible for delivering them; and what area of the equal representation landscape they relate to.
- The **specific barriers** that the change mechanisms must address (Annex I).
- The **organisations that attended the workshop** and links to their work (Annex II).

One of the objectives of the workshop was to map the contributions of each organisation that attended against specific change mechanisms. Work is currently underway to produce a map that will present this information as a visual resource that will be freely available online. Our aim is that this will include the contributions of organisations that were unable to attend the workshop.

We hope that this document, in this interim form, will be useful for all organisations and stakeholders working on women's equal representation and for those with a role to play in achieving it. We hope it is useful for strategic planning around this topic, individually and collectively, and can be a useful basis for measuring impact.

NEXT STEPS

This document and the work that it summarises is not the end of our work to map the equal representation landscape. There is scope to develop our collective vision further and to explore the creation of shared indicators of success. As outlined above, we aim to create a visual representation of the change mechanisms and organisations delivering on them over the coming months. We will also begin considering the development of high-level key performance indicators to monitor progress.

In addition to this work in Scotland, Elect Her are replicating this process in England and Wales.

THEORY OF CHANGE

GOAL:

To achieve equal representation of women in elected office in Scotland, nurturing a culture where all women can thrive in political spaces.

THEORY OF CHANGE NARRATIVE:

IF political parties in Scotland are more inclusive, transparent, and equitable.

IF political institutional processes and laws in Scotland are characterised by fairness, inclusivity, respect, and support for all elected representatives, and diversity is not just accepted but celebrated.

IF society and culture in Scotland is fundamentally inclusive, equitable, and supportive, enabling all individuals, especially women, to participate fully and fairly in political processes and leadership roles.

THEN cultural and structural barriers are broken down so that women in all their diversity are represented in all spheres of politics and can fully contribute to public life, strengthening decision-making and revitalising confidence in democratic institutions by ensuring they serve and represent the interests of all.

BECAUSE

- 1. Party processes are transparent and accessible.** Political parties advance towards more transparent, accessible, and inclusive practices in candidate selection, election and member involvement, ensuring underrepresented groups and individuals with caregiving responsibilities are accommodated. Measures such as flexible selection timelines, the publication of diversity data, and strategic placement of women in winnable seats underscore a commitment to equity and representation. Enhanced support structures, including clear codes of conduct, confidential complaint mechanisms, and policies against bullying and harassment, foster a safer, more respectful, and supportive working environment.
- 2. Party culture is supportive and inclusive.** Political discourse evolves, enabling constructive discussions, emphasising the collective responsibility towards equality, diversity, and inclusion, and making leadership roles equally accessible to all genders.

Flexible engagement opportunities, inclusive political events and meetings, and well-resourced women's networks support diverse schedules and contributions, facilitating meaningful participation and advancement within a party. Transparency in power structures and merit-based progression promote accountability, encourage culture change, and foster innovation and diversity in leadership.

- 3. Reforming Institutions and Structures.** Policies and structures within political institutions are reformed to ensure fair compensation, work-life balance, and inclusivity for all elected representatives, including those with caring responsibilities and disabilities. Comprehensive codes of conduct, independent complaint mechanisms, and supportive HR policies create a professional, respectful, and safe working environment, while remote working options and clear role expectations accommodate diverse lifestyles and reduce uncertainty. The implementation of quotas and transparent data sharing on diversity further promote equitable representation and gender balance in leadership roles, marking a significant stride towards equality and diversity in political institutions.
- 4. Challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusion.** The political landscape evolves to ensure equitable standards for evaluating public figures, focusing on competence and performance rather than appearance or personal life. This shift in political culture promotes diverse skills, inclusive debates, and diverse portfolio opportunities, breaking down gender stereotypes and encouraging respectful, constructive interactions. Enhanced visibility and retention of women in politics, alongside safe and respectful environments, inspire future generations and challenge traditional power dynamics, promoting diversity and positive media representation.
- 5. A more equal society = a more equal politics.** Society progresses towards embracing flexible gender roles and diverse political representation, breaking free from traditional expectations and stereotypes to support individuals of all backgrounds in pursuing their interest in political participation and leadership. A commitment to shared caregiving responsibilities and the creation of safe, inclusive environments enables all, especially women, to participate more fully in public and political life without fear or disproportionate burden. Efforts to ensure accessible political education, combat discrimination, and promote diversity in decision-making foster a more equitable, just society, enhancing confidence in democracy and challenging the status quo for the better.
- 6. Tackling practical and financial obstacles.** Efforts to improve financial security for women tackle the gender pay gap and provide equal economic opportunities, enabling equitable participation in political life. Support mechanisms for women in political campaigning address financial and logistical challenges, focusing on inclusivity for BME women, disabled women, and parents, facilitating their active engagement. Societal and systemic reforms balance the distribution of caregiving responsibilities, allowing women to engage in public and political activities without the constraints of disproportionate caring and domestic duties.

RISKS AND BARRIERS

The risks and lived experiences of women present significant barriers that are unique to them. These barriers must be approached holistically to enable women's full and equal political participation:

- **Gender-Based Norms in Society:**
Social norms and expectations about gender roles often discourage women from pursuing careers in politics. These norms can dictate what is considered "appropriate" behaviour or ambitions for women, limiting perceived suitability for political roles and discouraging their participation.
- **Gender-Based Norms in Political Institutions and Parties:**
Gender-based norms within political institutions and parties often create environments that are unwelcoming or hostile to women, reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating a male-dominated culture. These norms can manifest in various ways, including the expectation that women conform to masculine styles of leadership or communication to be taken seriously, the marginalisation of issues traditionally associated with women, and the informal networks and practices that exclude women from key decision-making processes. Such an institutional culture not only discourages women from entering politics but can also hinder their progress and effectiveness once in office, limiting their visibility and influence.
- **Gender Pay Gap:**
The disparity in earnings between men and women means that women often have fewer financial resources to fund political campaigns or take time off work to engage in political activities. This economic inequality can limit their ability to compete effectively in the political arena.
- **Gender-Based Caring and Domestic Duties:**
Women disproportionately bear the burden of caregiving and domestic responsibilities, reducing their available time and energy for political engagement. This imbalance can make it challenging for women to commit to the demanding schedules required for political participation.
- **Political Figure Stereotypes:**
The traditional image of a political leader often aligns with masculine traits and qualities, making it harder for women to be seen as viable candidates. These stereotypes can also affect the public's perception of women's leadership abilities, influencing voter behaviour and party selection processes.
- **Violence Against Women and Girls:**
Women in the public eye, including those in politics, are more susceptible to violence, harassment, and abuse. This threat can deter women from seeking political office or participating in political activities due to concerns for their safety and well-being.

- **Unequal Access to Knowledge and Information:**
Exclusive, informal “Old Boys Club” networks in parties and institutions hinder women’s equal access to information on key processes such as candidate selection or other progression opportunities. This can disadvantage women during campaigning, debating or navigating the political landscape.
- **Discrimination, including Racism, Ableism and Homophobia:**
Intersectional discrimination compounds the barriers to political participation for women, specifically for those from marginalised communities. Racism, ableism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination can exacerbate the challenges women face, limiting opportunities and support for their political ambitions.

These barriers collectively contribute to the underrepresentation of women in political positions and the challenges they face in achieving political equality. Addressing these issues requires systemic changes to promote gender equality, dismantle discriminatory practices, and create supportive environments for women’s political participation.

CHANGE MECHANISMS

OUTCOME AREAS	Political Parties	Institutional Processes and Laws	Society and Culture
Data & Research	Political parties openly publish diversity data on candidates during nomination, selection, and election phases to promote transparency and inclusivity.	Institutions maintain and share data on the diversity of elected representatives, promoting transparency and accountability.	Ongoing research into the barriers and lived experience of women to support data and evidence-based solutions.
Community & Network	<p>Party events and meetings are inclusive and strategically planned to facilitate networking and progression for all members.</p> <p>Party women’s networks and other membership networks are well-supported and resourced, enhancing their influence and effectiveness.</p>	There is equal access to networking spaces which are inclusive , breaking down “Old Boys Club” barriers and promoting diversity.	Role models and mentors for women in politics are prominent and accessible, inspiring and guiding future generations.
Education & Training	Parties regularly reflect on how their processes and culture enable greater access and diversity , utilising resources like the Equal Representation Toolkit.	Institutions regularly reflect on how their processes and culture enable greater access and diversity , through processes like the Scottish Parliament Gender Sensitive Audit.	Political education and training are funded and accessible to all , empowering informed and active participation in political processes.

<p>Financial Support & Compensation</p>	<p>Financial support is available to go through selection and election, to recoup loss of earnings and cover costs.</p>	<p>Fair remuneration for councillors reflects the actual hours worked, ensuring equitable compensation.</p> <p>Policies ensure that remuneration for disabled elected representatives does not adversely affect their disability benefits, promoting inclusivity and equity.</p>	<p>Strategies to enhance financial security for women, addressing the gender pay gap and ensuring women have equal opportunities and resources to achieve economic independence.</p> <p>Financial and logistical support mechanisms are established for women candidates covering costs related to travel, childcare, and campaign resources, with special attention to the needs of BME women, disabled women, and lone parents.</p>
<p>Transparent & Accountable Processes & Practice</p>	<p>Political parties implement transparent and accessible processes for getting involved involvement and for candidate selection, that welcome diverse members, with transparent lines of accountability.</p> <p>Clear pathways are established to support and protect elected representatives from abuse and harassment, ensuring a safe working environment.</p>	<p>Elected representatives have access to supportive Human Resources structures, policies, processes, and professional development fostering a safe and supportive work environment.</p> <p>Clear role expectations and work hours are established, providing transparency and reducing uncertainty.</p>	

	<p>Women are strategically placed in winnable seats, reflecting their capabilities and leadership potential.</p> <p>Selection timelines are flexible, accommodating individuals with caring responsibilities and promoting work-life balance.</p> <p>Power structures within parties are transparent, promoting accountability and enabling culture change.</p> <p>Political discourse is characterised by respectful and constructive discussions, valuing diverse perspectives.</p> <p>Leadership opportunities are equally accessible, with women and men holding executive positions in local party structures.</p> <p>Presenteeism is replaced with flexible engagement opportunities, valuing</p>	<p>Working hours accommodate quality of life for all elected representatives, particularly those with caring responsibilities.</p> <p>Access to remote/hybrid working options for elected representatives accommodate diverse needs and lifestyles.</p> <p>Independent reporting mechanisms allow for the confidential handling of complaints, ensuring a safe and effective process and redress.</p> <p>Multi-term retention of women is improved, fostering the development and retention of institutional knowledge and networks among women.</p>	
--	---	--	--

	<p>quality contributions over quantity to accommodate diverse schedules.</p>		
<p>Policies, Legislation & Quotas</p>	<p>Consistent commitment in parties to gender balancing mechanisms ensures diverse and equitable candidate selection Processes are designed to be inclusive and accessible to underrepresented groups.</p> <p>Women elected representatives engage and are appointed to a range of portfolio areas, dismantling gender biases in portfolio assignments.</p> <p>Equality, diversity, and inclusion policies are recognised as a collective responsibility shared among all members. Training is provided to support this.</p> <p>Policies that combat bullying, harassment, and abuse within the party membership are clear, well-communicated and enforced, creating a supportive community.</p>	<p>Implementation of quotas for elections across all institutions ensures diverse representation.</p> <p>Comprehensive Codes of conduct for elected representatives clearly define expectations and unacceptable behaviours, promoting professionalism and respect.</p> <p>Standards for evaluating public figures are equitable, with no undue focus on appearance or personal life.</p> <p>Competence and performance standards are applied equally, recognising the abilities and contributions of all, regardless of gender.</p> <p>Family-friendly parental leave and childcare policy across all institutions supports elected representatives in balancing work and family life.</p>	

	<p>Codes of conduct and policies are in place to foster respectful and constructive debate among members.</p> <p>Impartial and confidential complaints reporting pathways within parties handle complaints effectively, promoting trust and safety.</p>		
<p>Media & Advocacy</p>		<p>Women politicians are visible and active in debates and media, ensuring their voices and perspectives are heard and respected.</p>	<p>Media coverage of women in politics is fair and respectful, challenging misogyny, intersectional discrimination, and stereotypes, promoting positive representation.</p>
<p>Normative Standards & Culture</p>		<p>Representation of political figures evolves to reflect all demographics, challenging stereotypes and enhancing diversity.</p> <p>The political environment is safe and respectful for all, with effective measures to prevent and address abuse, particularly for women with intersecting marginalised identities.</p>	<p>Society moves towards flexibility in gender roles, encouraging everyone to pursue their interests regardless of traditional norms.</p> <p>Support systems reduce the burden of caring and domestic duties on women, granting them equal opportunities to participate in political and public life without being "time-poor" compared to men.</p>

		<p>Political culture values a balance of experiences and skills, allowing a wider variety of competencies to be recognised and valued, breaking down traditional gender and intersecting stereotypes.</p>	<p>A culture prioritising respect and safety reduces violence against women, facilitating their involvement in public roles.</p> <p>Discrimination, including racism and homophobia, is actively fought, ensuring all women can succeed without barriers.</p> <p>Diversity is valued by the public as key to a true meritocracy, and a primary indicator of good governance and leadership.</p>
--	--	--	--

ANNEX I: BARRIERS

1. ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS

Wider Culture & Society

- Patriarchal gendered role expectations continue to underpin the roles that women and men are socialised towards: public sphere = for men, private sphere = for women.
- The “Default” politician in the public subconscious is a white, older, wealthier man - women are competing against stereotypes.
- Women continue to carry out disproportionate childcare and other caring responsibilities - less free time to spend on political activism.
- Widespread violence against women and girls (VAWG) in culture generally increases the risk for women in the public eye. Women avoid politics as an act of self-preservation.
- Racism and all of the ways that it shapes society and impacts women of colour within/in addition to gendered barriers.
- Ableism and all of the ways that it shapes society and impacts disabled women within/in addition to gendered barriers.
- Homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and all of the ways that these factors shape society and impact women lesbian, bisexual and trans women within/in addition to gendered barriers.
- Lack of access to political knowledge/education/information across much of society.
- Backlash towards interventions/redress of any kind (“wokeness gone too far”).
- Public belief that we live in a meritocracy and the current status quo reflects “natural” order in politics.
- Crisis of confidence in democracy. Lack of diversity in decision-making means institutions often fail communities, which, in turn, favours the perpetuation of the status quo.

Economic & Financial realities

- Women are more likely to experience financial insecurity than men and are likely to have lower disposable income than their male counterparts, with the cost-of-living crisis compounding this situation.
- Women have less financial freedom to devote to campaigning, which often involves significant unavoidable costs for candidates and activists relating to travel, childcare, time off work, and provision of campaign resources and materials. This likely has the greatest impact on certain groups of women

who already experience higher rates of exclusion, including BME women, disabled women and lone parents.

- Women are “time-poor” in comparison to men due to volume of competing responsibilities including caring and domestic duties.

2. INSTITUTIONS, PROCESS AND LAWS (STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES INSIDE PARLIAMENT, GOVERNMENT, COUNCILS)

Terms and Conditions & Working Practice

- Councillors' remuneration is not fair based on hours worked.
- Inconsistent parental leave/childcare policy for elected representatives across all institutions - not family-friendly working environments.
- Hours of business are not compatible with quality of life for elected representatives - in particular, those with caring responsibilities who continue to disproportionately be women.
- Inadequate codes of conduct for elected representatives with frequent examples of unacceptable behaviour.
- There is a lack of independent reporting mechanisms within institutions to handle complaints confidentially.
- Elected representatives don't have access to the same level of workplace protections and support as other employees: Human Resources structures, policies and processes in place to support elected representatives as employees, to feel supported in their work and to work within a safe environment.
- Lack of guaranteed access to maternity/parental leave
- There is a lack of clarity regarding role expectations and expected hours.
- Lack of consistent access to remote/hybrid working for elected representatives.
- For disabled elected representatives, there is a lack of clarity around the impacts of remuneration on disability benefits.
- Lack of quotas in place for elections to all institutions.
- Lack of robust data available from institutions on the diversity of elected representatives.
- Lack of gender balance within leadership roles.

Political Culture (primarily in relation to democratic institutions but some also applicable in parties/elsewhere)

- Different standards – more scrutiny over women's appearance and personal life by public/party/colleagues.

- Different standards – women face a higher competence bar in terms of work performance than men to be taken seriously.
- Double-bind for women politicians based on cultural expectations – can be seen as either competent (leaning into masculine traits, i.e. strength, assertiveness) or likeable (leaning into feminised traits, i.e. nurturing, emotional) – rarely both.
- Women are more likely to be funnelled into softer/ "feminised" portfolio areas, i.e. health, social care, and education, which may not be taken as seriously as harder/ "masculinised" areas, i.e. finance, economy, and defence, which are often prioritised.
- Political debate in and out of institutions is highly masculinised and esteems and rewards aggressive, confrontational interactions.
- Women politicians are less visible and less likely to speak in debates or be quoted in media.
- Low multi-term retention of women – lack of women's informal institutional knowledge, networks etc. being built up and retained.
- Lack of role models for women.
- Abuse of women in politics - online and offline - women with intersecting marginalised identities are at greatest risk.
- "Old Boys Club" Networks shaping decisions – excluding women.
- Media coverage of women in politics is often rooted in misogyny and perpetuates it.

3. POLITICAL PARTIES

Processes & policies & structures

- Lack of transparent processes for getting involved in political parties.
- Lack of transparent, easily accessible processes for candidate selection.
- Lack of consistent commitment to gender balancing mechanisms for candidate selection.
- Candidate selection processes which do not work for/are not accessible to already underrepresented groups.
- Women are more likely to be selected for marginal seats when running for office.
- Selection processes typically do not operate within timeframes that work for people with caring responsibilities.
- Political parties do not publish diversity data on successful/unsuccessful candidates during nomination, selection and election.
- Parties and institutions do not often have clear pathways to support and protection for elected representatives who receive abuse and harassment.

- Lack of clear codes of conduct/policies to lessen hostility in debate among members.
- Lack of clear, impartial reporting pathways within parties to handle complaints confidentially.
- Lack of clear policies to tackle bullying, harassment and abuse among wider membership.

Party culture

- Aggressive, overly confrontational style of discussion and debate.
- Equality, diversity and inclusion work usually falls on women (and other groups experiencing exclusion) as an additional workload.
- Women are more likely to be in junior/supportive roles in local party structures with men in executive positions.
- Presenteeism - Rewarding hours spent canvassing with opportunities for progression (including candidate selection) – disadvantages those with less free time. Women are typically time-poor compared with men.
- Social events are often not inclusive (time, location, etc.) but can be essential for progression.
- Women's networks/other membership networks are not well-resourced.
- Power structures in parties can be opaque, which is a barrier to accountability.
- Importance of hierarchy in political parties – a barrier to culture change.

ANNEX II: ORGANISATIONS THAT ATTENDED THE WORKSHOP

A total of 39 organisations (including representatives of all major political parties) were invited. Below is a list of the organisations that attended on the day and links to their websites.

Many who were not able to attend have indicated their interest in becoming involved in the next phase of this project. Please see the above sections **About this Theory of Change** and **Next Steps** for more information.

[BEMIS](#)

[COSLA](#)

[Elect Her](#)

[Engender](#)

[Equality Network](#)

[Global Institute for Women's Leadership, Kings College London](#)

[Inclusion Scotland](#)

[John Smith Centre](#)

[Scottish Government – Gender Equality Unit](#)

[Scottish Parliament \(Gender Sensitive Audit Team\)](#)

[Scottish Women's Convention](#)

[Scottish Youth Parliament](#)

[Scottish Greens Women's Network](#)

[Stonewall Scotland](#)

[University of Edinburgh](#)

[Young Women's Movement](#)

[SNP BAME Network](#)

Development of this report and this work is supported by funding from the Scottish Government.