

1. **Executive Summary**

Thank you to the Women and Equalities Select Committee for conducting this crucial inquiry into Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 election. There are currently 140% more men than women in the Commons. This historic and persistent problem is not only a democratic deficit, it is a democratic disgrace. We need women on the front benches, back benches and on both sides of the chamber in similar numbers to men.

The principle of gender equality of representation transcends party politics. All political parties and Parliament need to work together to right this wrong. Fifty six countries achieve better gender balance in their parliaments than the UK. This shows that solutions can be found and that it is possible for women to participate in politics. The UK should be a world leader.

50:50 Parliament is a voluntary, grassroots, non-partisan campaign for better gender balance at Westminster. Over 50,000 people from across the UK have signed the [50:50 Parliament Petition](#) which states:

"All Party Leaders and Parliament, we need a more gender balanced House of Commons, around 50:50 men and women. Please collaborate and do something: debate and take action to make Parliament more gender balanced, like life."

50:50 Parliament also run an [Ambassador Programme](#) to inspire interest and encourage engagement with politics.

Although the current Prime Minister is a woman, the fact remains that of our 650 MPs, 458 (70%) are men and only 192 are women. There are still more men in the Commons than there have ever been women MPs. When women have only 30% of seats in the Commons, they are outnumbered by men by more than 2:1. Just 133 more women MPs are required to achieve gender balance. 50:50 Parliament is asking Parliament to sort this out, one way or another, sooner rather than later.

50:50 Parliament welcome the publication of [The Good Parliament Report](#) and the setting up of the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion. We urge that the report's recommendations be implemented. The 50:50 Parliament campaign is not specifying solutions but we list below, and elaborate in the body of our submission, some actions that could be considered and debated:

- Retain existing women MPs in the light of boundary changes **(4.1)**
- Keep improving Parliament - culture and working conditions **(4.2)**
- More respect, publicity and championing of women MPs at Westminster **(4.3)**
- Funding & financial support for women candidates **(4.4)**
- Create a more parent friendly Parliament **(4.5)**

- Review technology that might allow for remote voting **(4.6)**
- Develop returner-ship programmes **(4.7)**
- Support inspirational educational programmes **(4.8)**
- Targeted recruitment of women to Parliament eg. #AskHerToStand **(4.9)**
- More action within the parties **(4.10)**
- Initiate a debate in the Commons to discuss this democratic issue **(4.11)**
- Sex gender quotas for 'vacant held' and 'target seats' **(4.12)**
- Allow MPs to job-share **(4.13)**
- Review incumbency **(4.14)**
- Consider proportional voting systems **(4.15)**
- Consider constitutional change **(4.16)**

In **section 5** of our submission we elaborate why a gender balanced Parliament is desirable, the reasons can be summarised as follows:

Firstly, we want Parliament to draw upon the widest possible pool of talent and experience; we want the best of both, men and women, running the country together. Prof Ngaire Woods has said "We know that when women are in parliament...it builds more resilient, responsive, better informed institutions." Just as the latest research from the [Credit Suisse Research Institute](#) reconfirms the clear link between diversity and improved business performance. Women make a massive contribution to society with their paid and unpaid work, they merit fair inclusion, their experience is relevant.

Secondly, Parliament is meant to be a representative body and representation shapes policy. It should be properly representative of the 32 million UK women, the diverse majority of the population. A diverse Parliament would ensure more informed policy-making on **all** issues and particularly those concerning reproductive rights, VAWG, domestic violence, equal pay, pensions, sexism, discrimination, inclusion, maternity care, family life, caring and parenting.

Thirdly, Parliament should be leading the way in demonstrating respect for women, their opinions, talents and skills. Parliament should be acting as role model for society.

Fourthly, tackling the issues that make participation difficult for women will make Parliament more inclusive generally. In the name of justice it is only right that women and other under-represented groups are able to play an equal part in Parliament, forging the future of society.

One comment on the petition sums it up:

"Apart from the obvious injustice we are in no position to under-utilise so much talent"
Helen, Canterbury

“Mother of Parliaments” needs modernising.

3. What is 50:50 Parliament?

[50:50 Parliament](#) is a voluntary, cross-party, inclusive, grassroots campaign aspiring to better gender balance at Westminster. We have wide support of people from all over the UK. Over 50,000 people have signed our [50:50 Parliament Petition](#) asking Parliament and party leaders to take action for better gender balance in Parliament. The thousands of comments on the petition show why so many think that this matters (see Appendix Comments on 50:50 Parliament Petition). The campaign has had cross-party support of many MPs on [film](#) and in [photographs](#). We have set up an [Ambassador](#) programme and ultimately we want to encourage women to stand, providing contact information of all the main political parties on our [website](#).

The world is changing, women need to be seen and heard. 50:50 Parliament want men and women to work at Westminster together, in similar numbers, forging legislation for the future that affects us all.

4. What Steps Should be Taken to Increase the Percentage of Women MPs in the House of Commons and beyond?

The 50:50 Parliament campaign supports the recommendations of the [Improving Parliament Report](#), the [Good Parliament Report](#) and the setting up of Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion. We thank the Women and Equalities Select Committee for the attention that they are bringing to this issue.

The 50:50 Parliament campaign is not specifying solutions but below we outline some actions that could be taken by Parliament and the political parties to ensure better gender balance in the House of Commons in 2020 and beyond:

4.1 Retain existing women MPs - especially in the light of boundary changes

Given that there are currently so few women in Parliament it is essential that our existing women MPs be given priority during the 2018 boundary changes and that steps should be taken by the parties to retain them otherwise their numbers could reduce.

[The Fawcett Society](#) has suggested that the boundary changes could intensify party competition for safe seats.

[Other studies](#) also suggest that parties may place precedence on incumbents or senior MPs, who are predominantly male, given there will be fewer seats available. These factors could have a deleterious effect on women’s representation, particularly for new women MPs who have not yet established themselves.

4.2 Keep improving Parliament - culture and working conditions

Continue improving Parliament, the culture and conditions, by implementing the many

recommendations of the [Improving Parliament Report July 2014](#) and the [Good Parliament Report July 2016](#) under the leadership of the newly created Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion.

4.3 More respect, publicity and championing of women MPs at Westminster

Initiatives such as [“Reclaim the Internet”](#) campaign, launched by Yvette Cooper MP and Maria Miller MP are crucial. As Yvette Cooper states “We can't let public debates be dominated by those who are most aggressive.”

To encourage women, and indeed anyone, to become engaged with politics, it is essential that politicians treat each other with respect, even if they have differing political opinions. This is one of the many comments on our petition which addresses this issue:

“One of the reasons given for a lack of women in Parliament is that the culture does not encourage female participation. I think that just having half of MPs being women will change this culture and allow women to feel more comfortable with getting involved in politics at a young age.” – Erin, Lincoln

4.4 Funding & financial support for women candidates

Women not only earn less than men but are also more likely to adopt caring roles and undertake unpaid work that makes them more financially dependent. Standing as a political candidate is costly and women have less access to funds. If Parliament wants to encourage more women to stand then providing some financial assistance to meet their expenses would help those women that are interested. It would also enable them to garner more support from others in their lives when they embark upon a political campaign. As recommended in point 43 of [The Good Parliament Report](#), political parties should, in general, look at limiting the amount that those seeking selection as a party candidate can spend on their campaign to get selected.

4.5 Parent friendly Parliament

Around 80% of men and women become parents but the statistics indicate that Parliament is currently generally unattractive or inaccessible to parents. As [The Good Parliament Report](#) States:

“There is as previously noted a sizeable ‘motherhood gap’ in Parliament, with fewer women MPs having children relative to both male MPs, to women in comparable professions and to women more widely in society. Some 45% of women MPs do not have children compared to only 28% of male MPs.”

Being a parent or making parenting a priority for a few years should not undermine representation of mothers or fathers. As Jess Phillips MP said at the debate she brought about a [family friendly Parliament](#).

“The wider effects of Parliament not being family friendly are hugely troubling, it puts off the best people from applying and we want the best people shaping the laws...that’s what’s best

for the country.”

Parliament needs to examine how it can become a more family friendly institution for the benefit of both women and men with children. Women in parliament should be supported during pregnancy and early motherhood. [The Good Parliament Report](#) recommendations 11, 12 and 13 go some way to addressing these points.

4.6 Review technology that might allow for remote voting

We are living in the digital internet era. The opportunities that new technology might present in allowing more remote working, voting and participation should be investigated and trialled. For example, MPs with young children could be permitted to vote remotely after 6pm in the evening. Parliament should look at how other parliaments manage this aspect of the job to ensure that it is compatible with family life. Remote working and voting could enable MPs to spend more time in their constituencies, improving local communication, enhancing democracy and enabling them to balance their family commitments more easily.

4.7 Create returner-ship programmes

Parliament and the parties should consider implementing returner-ship programmes aimed at including parents later in life when family commitments change. Politics can make a great second career and caring experience is as useful as corporate experience when it comes to being an MP.

Corporates have created “returner-ship” programmes to encourage women back into the paid employment. Parliament and the parties could run similar programmes and internships. For examples see:

[Goldman Sachs, see video & information](#)

[RBS information](#)

[Price Waterhouse \(PWC\) - Back to Business Programme](#)

[Women Returners - Professional Network](#)

4.8 Support inspirational educational programmes

Supply side interventions aimed at inspiring interest in politics are essential. Youth Parliament has been successful at this but more needs to be done to encourage older women to become engaged the politics. For example 50:50 Parliament hope to work with the Women’s Institute to raise awareness. We would urge Parliament to support all programmes that aim to inspire political interest, particularly those directed at women, such as [50:50 Parliament Campaign](#).

4.9 Targeted recruitment of women to Parliament eg. #AskHerToStand

Studies have shown that women are 50% less likely than men to consider themselves potential candidates for elected office. Parliament could support or create a targeted recruitment campaign called “Ask Her to Stand” which could be run along similar lines to the [“Ask Her to Run”](#) in the US or the [“Invite Her to Run”](#) campaign championed by the Liberal

Party in Canada. This is something that 50:50 Parliament would like to implement.

4.10 More action within the political parties

More publicized stated commitments by all the parties and Parliament inviting women to become more involved in politics would be inspirational. The parties need to continue employing better recruitment methods reaching out beyond their normal membership. They need to bolster their training, support and mentoring programmes. Consideration should be given to extra funding and bursaries for women candidates and always having 50:50 shortlists along with proven solutions such as A lists and all-women shortlists.

4.11 Bring a debate to the Commons concerning women at Westminster

As recommended by [Improving Parliament Report](#) initiate a Parliamentary debate to discuss the full range of solutions as to how and when Parliament might achieve a better gender balance ie. a similar number of men and women MPs.

4.12 Sex gender quotas for 'vacant held' and 'target seats'

Political parties are the gatekeepers to parliamentary office (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Norris, 1996). [The LSE Commission on Gender, Inequality and Power](#) states that "quotas backed by legislation are one of the most significant ways of effecting change" and that they are more effective than soft initiatives. The evidence also is that increasing the demand for more women candidates, via quotas, has a positive impact on the supply pool.

We would urge support for the implementation of recommendation 8 and 9 of the [Good Parliament Report](#) which seeks legislative quotas for women to take effect for 2025 general election if, three months prior to 2020 general election political parties have failed to select at least 50 percent women in their 'vacant held' target seats.

4.13 Allow MPs to job-share

Both the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party have suggested that the MPs should be allowed to job share. This might make it easier for women to be involved and could also achieve gender balanced representation, if the job-sharing was between a man and a woman, as in the case of the current leadership of the [Green Party](#). It is great to see a man and women working together in leadership, where both have been elected!

4.14 Review incumbency

The [Electoral Reform's Society Women in Parliament Report](#) identifies the 'incumbency effect' as being "One of the biggest barriers to change when it comes to women's representation". It also highlights that 'Seat Blockers' prevent women from gaining access to Westminster. In 2004 Leslie [Schwindt-Bayer](#) reported that " term limits, although not designed to promote the election of women, have a positive side effect for women's representation." Maybe term limits could counteract incumbency bias against women.

4.15 Proportional voting systems

Countries with proportional representation tend to achieve better gender balance in their Parliaments e.g. Sweden where parties automatically appoint every other seat to a woman,

a method is known as 'zipping'.

4.16 Constitutional change

Ruth Fox, Director and Head of Research has suggested that a more proactive approach needs to be taken to ensure gender equality of representation in her piece [“Too Important to Leave to Parties: The Case for Constitutionalising Equal Representation”](#). In particular she recommended a “twinning” constituencies.

Several from 50:50 Parliament argue that it is time to really push the boundaries concerning this issue. They suggest that number of constituencies could be halved and each have 2 seats, one for a man and one for a woman, giving the electorate 2 votes, to vote for the best man and woman to represent them. This would lead to an enduring gender balance and men and women would not be competing for representation. Bernard Jenkin MP has suggested this as a solution and Prof David Runciman, commenting on such a system, said “it would not fundamentally change the way we do politics”.

5. Why we want more women at Westminster and better gender balance in Parliament

5.1 Comments from 50:50 Parliament Petition

The arguments for taking action to achieve a more gender balanced Parliament are compelling. Supporters of the 50:50 Parliament campaign have voiced a multitude of reasons as to why Parliament should strive for an increase in female representatives. Their comments are attached as an Appendix to this submission and the infographic summarizes some of the key words.

5.2 Merit and experience

Women make a massive contribution to society with their paid and unpaid work. The [ONS](#) valued the unpaid household economy at £1 trillion in 2014. Unpaid childcare alone, provided by households and not included in measures of the paid economy, was valued at £321 billion in 2014, emphasising the scale of some of these unpaid activities, many of which are provided by women. Unpaid work is not worthless and caring experience is as relevant as corporate experience when it comes to working as an MP and helping plan the future of society.

5.3 Resources

“Women are the world’s most under-used resource” to quote Hillary Clinton. Around 50% of UK university graduates and 60% of Law graduates are women. It is important that society taps into this potential. Many comments on the 50:50 Parliament Petition reflected this:

“We need the best politicians making decisions on our behalf. If we waste the talent of half of society, we won't have all the best people doing the job. The decisions made will suffer, not least because women's perspectives will be overlooked.” – Rainbow, Buckhurst Hill.

5.4 Diversity leads to better decision making

For several years government ministers have been actively pushing business to include more women on boards and in senior executive positions because of the benefits it brings.

Research indicates that better gender balance on boards improves corporate decision making and performance. The latest [Credit Suisse 3000 Report Sept 2016](#) states: "With regards to business performance, we find clear evidence that companies with a higher participation of women in decision-making roles continue to generate higher returns on equity". When he was Business Secretary [Vince Cable MP](#) sought to ensure better inclusion of women on boards. [Maria Miller](#), then Minister for Women and Equalities pointed out "This is not about political correctness it's about good business sense. Businesses must act now to harness women's full potential and to help maximise Britain's economic growth." Similarly [Nicky Morgan MP](#), as Minister for Women and Equalities, made it clear that "Achieving gender equality isn't just the right thing to do - it makes good business sense."

The arguments that ministers have been making for including women at a senior level in business are equally applicable for their inclusion in Parliament. The reasons that senior women gave for including women in business at the evidence session to Women and Equality Select Committee "[Women in Executive Management](#)" are just as valid for their inclusion in Parliament. It is important to focus attention on this matter and have a clear aspiration because as Helena Morrissey, Founder of the 30% Club stated "What gets measured gets managed"

Petitioners share this opinion:

"I'm signing because evidence shows that better decisions are made by organisations if the gender balance is more equal." – Gwyn, Southampton.

5.5 Parliament is meant to be a representative body

As David Cameron comments in the [Improving Parliament Report](#) July 2014: "Parliament needs to be more representative of our country - so we need more women in Parliament." Many comments on our petition support this view:

"Democratic institutions should reflect the makeup of society, and that means leadership bodies should be composed of about an equal number of women and men." – Tamara, London.

"If we are to be a truly democratic society, we need to ensure that women have more access to positions in parliament. Women have a right to participate in all decisions that affect our lives, and for parliament to be truly representative of British society today, our governance should reflect its values of democracy by providing women with a voice that is equal to 50% of the representation in parliament. We live in the 21st century." – Jo, London.

5.6 Representation shapes policies

Representation shapes policies. "Increasing the number of women in Parliament has played a role in ensuring that important issues such as domestic violence, discrimination and

childcare have risen to the top of the political agenda, greatly improving the lives of millions of women across the country. However, achieving a more representative Parliament is a job that is still far from complete.” Ed Miliband MP [Improving Parliament Report](#) July 2014

Joni Lovenduski, Professor of Politics, Birkbeck, University of London observed in a paper she presented at the [Speakers Conference 2012](#) “Evidence from more balanced legislatures than ours shows that as membership of women increases so does the sensitivity of male MPs to the range of women’s concerns. So men can act for women, but they may be more likely to do so when there are more women around.”

One example is the so called “Tampon Tax”. Even President Obama has [said](#) “I have to tell you, I have no idea why states would tax these as luxury items. I suspect it’s because men were making the laws when those taxes were passed”.

This is the tip of the iceberg. It took a woman MP [Sarah Champion](#) to campaign hard for section 78 of the Equal Pay act to be enforced, ensuring that companies with over 250 employees be forced to publish details of any gender pay gaps. She was given huge support and encouragement by other women in the House when she brought this bill to the Commons.

Recent discussions concerning pregnancy discrimination are another example. Joeli Brearley on [Womans Hour](#) drew some international comparisons of women's discrimination when pregnant. Britain was better than the US and worse than Sweden. There is a correlation between this issue and women's representation in parliament, only [19% of parliamentarians are women in the USA, versus 44% in Sweden](#). It shows how representation shapes attitudes and policy.

Rachael Graham a 50:50 Ambassador has conducted some research for her Masters in politics. She chose to study the link between a greater presence of women in Parliament since the 1950s and the consideration of women's interests in budget debates. She found that there was a statistically significant relationship between the percentage of women MPs in the House of Commons and the frequency that women’s interests were represented in the debates. “This effect held even when a number of factors were controlled for (political party in government, female prime minister, time until an election etc.). This research provides robust statistical evidence that the increase in number of female MPs in Parliament and cabinet does make a difference for how much our representatives talk about women’s interests and issues. It is therefore important to continue to increase the number of women in parliament if female constituents’ voices across the country are to be heard.”

This was a common theme in comments on the 50:50 Parliament petition:

“I want my views to be understood and represented.” – Zoe, London.

“The views of the country can't be represented and suitable policies developed, if we don't have a diverse parliament. We need more women to lead and participate in decision making”

– Kate, London.

5.7 Responsibility

Women are part of the future they should be able to play a part in determining it. They should be equally involved in decision making on all subjects from the economy, defense, education, transport, environment, energy, health, welfare and in every area of government.

5.8 Respect

Parliament should be leading the way in respect for women, their opinions and experience. Women have been knocking on the door at Westminster forever. 50:50 knows of women of all political persuasions who have repeatedly applied to be candidates and been turned down, one more than 15 times in spite of her years of political campaigning experience. She is not alone in her persistent quest for political participation.

A change of hearts and minds is required at all levels and this is why all “leaders should do more to promote women’s leadership in politics” [Justin Trudeau at the UN](#)

5.9 General Democratic Inclusion

If Parliament is inaccessible to the majority that are women it must be inaccessible to many others. The measures that need to be taken to ensure that women are included at Westminster will make Parliament more accessible generally. As one petitioner put it:

“Gender equality is the first step towards total parliamentary equality where everyone’s views from all races, genders and sexual orientations are taken into account. Where more views can be expressed from a more diverse range of people with more experiences being heard.” – Claire, Belfast.

5.10 Parliament should act as a role model

Many supporters shared the view that Parliament should be leading the way on including women and providing role models, to encourage other women to participate.

“I’m signing because I believe that women need to be involved in all levels of government. Young women should be encouraged to participate.” – Sarah, Ballywater.

“It seems only right that the balance of the population is reflected in parliament. Where women are outnumbered, there is a tendency for fewer women to come forward to participate and having more male colleagues than female can put women off.” – Victoria, Carlisle.

5.11 Justice

In ‘The Politics of Presence’ (1995) Anne Phillips states her argument of justice. The justice argument contends that it is simply unjust for men to descriptively dominate political institutions. This especially includes institutions located in countries that consider themselves to be democratic and liberal – such as the UK. Many of the 50:50 supporters

echoed this view in their comments on the online petition:

“Social Justice demands that there should be equal representation from and for women in Parliament.” – Penny, Marlow.

“Natural justice demands more even representation.” – Peter, Liverpool.

“In the name of equality and justice parliament should reflect the whole electorate. By definition that means 50/ 50.” – Germaine, Stroud.

“If the institution of Parliament discourages women to participate, it is the institution that needs to change.” – Malcolm.

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APPENDICES

1. Biographies:

Frances Scott is a passionate advocate for better gender balance in Parliament wanting Westminster to draw upon the widest possible pool of talent and experience. In November 2013, out of sense of frustration, she started the 50:50 Parliament Campaign by putting up the 50:50 Parliament Petition asking Parliament and all party leaders to "collaborate and do something: debate and take action to make Parliament more gender balanced, like life." She was an international business executive, an analyst and a negotiator, travelling widely throughout Europe and the Far East. Now she supports parents during pregnancy and at the start of family life.

Anna Sanders is a PhD Student at the University of Manchester. Her research focuses on gender and public policy

Rachael Graham has an academic background in law and policy having just recently finished a Masters in Politics and Public Policy at Trinity College Dublin. Her research focus has been on the representation of women in politics, with a particular interest in the British House of Commons. She enjoys feminist activism and now works for a charity seeking to improve the lives of girls and young women around the world.

Sources

Carroll, S. (2001), *The Impact of Women in Public Office* (Indiana: Indiana University Press).

Phillips, A. (1995), *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).