Written submission from Chwarae Teg (WHC0029)

Women in the Commons

Introduction

Chwarae Teg is a Welsh charity working to build a Wales where women achieve and prosper. We do this by working with women to broaden horizons and build confidence and skills; working with employers to create modern workplaces that are successful by harnessing everyone’s contribution; and working with influencers, educators and decision makers to build a society that values, supports and benefits women and men equally.

We are pleased to be able to respond to the above inquiry. The case for greater diversity among our elected representatives has been made yet the pace of change, particularly at the Westminster level, has been painfully slow. At present, there remain more male MPs in the current Parliament than there have ever been female MPs. In Wales, just nine of our 40 representatives are women.

Forthcoming boundary changes run the risk of rolling back what progress has already been made. We believe that all political parties should be putting in place action plans to ensure that the proportion of their own MPs that are women does not drop when the changes come into effect.

Below we set out our response to the questions posed in the Inquiry Terms of Reference.

Key messages

1. The case for improving the proportion of women in Westminster has been made and the barriers are well-documented. It’s time that focus was placed on action.
2. We support the recommendation in the Good Parliament report to introduce prior to dissolution in 2020 statutory sex/gender quotas to take effect for the 2025 general election if 3 months prior to the 2020 election parties currently represented in Parliament have failed to select at least 50% women in party’s “vacant held” and “target seats”
3. Quotas in isolation will not bring about sustainable change, but should be part of a wider plan of action which includes activity to increase the female talent pipeline, address structural barriers in Parliament and party selection processes and challenge stereotypical ideas about women’s suitability to politics.

Detailed Response
1. What should the Government, political parties, the House of Commons and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority be doing now to ensure better female representation in the House of Commons in 2020 and beyond? What steps are and should be being taken to increase the percentage of women MPs in the House of Commons in 2020 and beyond? Is there a need to reach out to certain groups of women and how can this be done most effectively? What targets and what methods should parties be using for selection? What are the key timings?

1.1. Evidence shows that the most effective and quickest way of increasing the proportion of women among elected representatives is through the use of some form of positive action, most notably All-Women Shortlists (AWS)

1.1.1. Women now account for 29% of MPs, however looking more closely at the proportion of female MPs by party demonstrates the significant impact the use of all women shortlists has had. Women account for 21% of Conservative MPs compared with 43% of Labour MPs.

1.1.2. The same can be seen from the Welsh perspective. There have only been 17 female MPs from Wales since 1536 and the majority of these have been selected by all-women shortlists. If we look at the parties currently represented in the National Assembly we see that 52% of Labour AMs are women compared with 33% of Plaid Cymru, 27% of Conservative and 33% of UKIP.¹

1.1.3. The impact of special measures, particularly quotas, can also be seen internationally. A report from the Inter-Parliamentary Union concluded that progress on women’s representation was not inevitable and required “constant effort, action and political will.”² The report notes while quotas “do not guarantee a commensurate rise in women's representation”, countries that haven’t applied them had generally seen fewer changes in the numbers of women elected.³

1.1.4. The Good Parliament report also highlights the impact that quotas have had, stating that 80% of countries with more than 30% women Members of Parliament use some kind of quota.⁴

1.2. Based on this evidence we support the recommendation in the Good Parliament report to introduce prior to dissolution in 2020 statutory sex/gender quotas to take effect for the 2025 general election if 3 months prior to the 2020 election parties currently represented in Parliament have failed to select at least 50% women in party’s “vacant held” and “target seats”.⁵

1.2.1. It is our view that quotas provide the legislative “nudge” required by some to take action. A quota would ensure that all parties are required to take more

¹ The Liberal Democrats have not been included as they only have 1 AM in the current Assembly.
² Inter-Parliamentary Union Women in Parliament: 20 years in review 2015
³ Ibid
⁴ Professor Sarah Childs The Good Parliament 2016
⁵ Professor Sarah Childs The Good Parliament 2016
effective action, such as using AWS or twinning seats, to deliver gender balance in the Commons at a quicker pace. As with all things, implementation is key to success.

1.2.2. We are fortunate in being able to learn from the experience of other nations and the success factors they have identified from their use of quotas. The IPU notes that quotas are most effective when they specify that women must be placed in winnable positions; impose strong sanctions on parties that do not comply; have substantial political support behind them and are subject to detailed oversight and scrutiny.6

1.2.3. Crucially increases in women candidates must translate into more female elected representatives. It is therefore key that all-women shortlists and other such positive action is applied in winnable seats.

1.2.4. There are important lessons to be learnt from the Labour Party’s experience of implementing AWS and twinning of seats. On occasion this has seen women left fighting more marginal seats, which not only affects the chances of winning the current election but also affects the lasting impact of such measures, given the seat is more likely to change political hands at the next election. It is also clear that successful implementation is easier when there is strong leadership and commitment shown by existing elected representatives and other prominent people within the party.

1.2.5. It’s important that action to address the under-representation of women in Westminster remains sensitive to the need for wider diversity as well. Quotas are sometimes criticised for replacing “like-for-like” i.e. replacing white, middle class men with white middle class women. Lessons should be learnt from instances where this has been the case and steps taken to ensure that the female talent pipeline includes women from a variety of backgrounds with regards to all protected characteristics and socio-economic background.

1.3. Quotas in isolation will not deliver lasting change but as part of a range of measure, which include improving the supply-chain of female MPs, addressing the structural barriers presented by our political institutions and persistent gender stereotypes, sustainable change can be achieved.

1.3.1. We agree with the “quota plus” strategy outlined in The Good Parliament and believe that work to attract and retain female MPs must address 2 key areas:

1.3.1.1. Developing a diverse pipeline of potential candidates
1.3.1.2. Tackling the structural barriers created by Parliament as an institution, selection processes and persistent gender stereotypes.

1.3.2. Developing a diverse pipeline of potential candidates

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6 Inter-Parliamentary Union Women in Parliament: 20 years in review 2015
1.3.3. Initiatives that work directly with women, including training, mentoring and networking are effective interventions. We had great success in Wales with the Women in Public Life (WiPL) Development Scheme. Run on behalf of the then Presiding Officer Dame Rosemary Butler, the scheme delivered an intensive mentoring and training programme to a group of 13 women who were interested in taking up roles in public life. Of the 13 mentees, 11 went on to apply for a position in public life of which seven achieved a position. Four mentees sought political roles with two standing as candidates in the Assembly election, one standing for county council and another standing for town council. While this scheme was focused on public life more broadly the success factors are entirely applicable to a scheme more focused on political roles.

1.3.4. Parties should also ensure that there is effective infrastructure in place to bring talented women through the ranks. Women’s networks, conferences and action to engage younger party members in local activities are key. All parties should encourage local branches to set up women’s, youth and BME forums to help build this pipeline.

1.3.5. **Tackling structural barriers**

1.3.6. Gendered perceptions about which roles are better suited to men and women continue to shape the labour market more broadly, and play a part in keeping the proportion of female MPs low. Wider action to challenge stereotypical ideas through our education system will help but practical action can also be taken by political parties and institutions. Promotion of female role models is an effective tool to ensure that young women have the opportunity to see politics as a relevant and valid career path for themselves.

1.3.7. Evidence would also suggest that selection processes by political parties remain a barrier for women and other protected groups. The process remains expensive, time consuming and benefits those who have built up strong networks, who are predominantly white men. All parties should consider how selection processes could be less prohibitive.

1.3.8. One example of best practice currently applied by the Liberal Democrats, which could be adopted by all parties, would be to ensure those involved in shortlisting / selection panels are provided with unconscious bias training. It is widely accepted that in recruitment exercises, people have a tendency to appoint in their own image. Unconscious bias training can help to make people aware of their own bias and take steps to ensure it doesn’t affect their recruitment decisions.

1.3.9. Parliament as an institution can also create barriers to attracting to female MPs as well as retaining them. We consider some of these issues in more detail in answer to question 3 below.

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7 Chwarae Teg delivered this scheme in partnership with Cardiff Business School on behalf of the then Presiding Officer Dame Rosemary Butler. The scheme ran from Sept. 2014 to Jan. 2016. An evaluation report is available upon request.
1.4. We do not see measures such as quotas and all-women shortlists as being permanent requirements. The goal should be to reach a point where the necessary structural and cultural changes have been made to enable a gender balanced parliament to be more or less self-sustaining. However, it is impossible to predict a timescale. We therefore support the recommendation in *The Good Parliament* report that the sunset clause currently in place either be removed or revised to only be triggered when women and men constitute no less than 40% of MPs for two consecutive Parliaments.⁸

1.5. Previous resistance to all-women shortlists is already beginning to shift. The Liberal Democrats have passed motions in both England and Scotland in support of using them, with the party in Wales likely to vote on a similar motion in the near future. Prominent Conservative MPs have also suggested that no option is off the table if progress remains low.

1.6. With this shift in perception of all-women shortlists and boundary changes on the horizon, now is the perfect time to put measures in place to ensure that future general elections deliver a gender balanced House of Commons.

2. Are parties giving sufficient attention to female representation at other levels of political life, including Mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners?

2.1. Female representation remains below where it should be in most elected institutions and roles including Police and Crime Commissioners and Mayors. To date, just four out of the 16 directly elected mayors across the UK are women⁹ and seven of the 40 Police and Crime Commissioners.

2.2. Women remain notably under-represented at the local council level, accounting for just 27% of Welsh councillors.¹⁰ While the picture is generally better at the National Assembly level, a warning against complacency has still been made clear. Despite becoming the first institution in the world to achieve gender balance in 2003, the proportion of female AMs has slipped since and now stands at 43%.

2.3. It’s important that action to address the under-representation of women in politics considers all institutions and roles. Many of the barriers cited at the Westminster level are applicable to devolved parliaments, council and mayoral positions.

2.4. One example of activity from Wales seeking to address the lack of diversity among local councillors is the Welsh Government’s Diversity in Democracy project. The project is working with diversity champions from all 22 local authorities to provide mentoring to prospective candidates and raise the profile of the role of councillor. All political parties in Wales are signed up to the scheme.¹¹ We have also seen parties in Wales take steps to ensure that wards with multiple council seats are not represented solely by men.

3. What are the political parties doing to ensure that female representation will increase at the next general election given the impact that the 2018 Boundary Commission Review could have

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⁸ Professor Sarah Childs *The Good Parliament* 2016
⁹ Fawcett Society *The Northern Powerhouse; an analysis of women’s representation* 2016
¹⁰ EHRC *Who runs Wales? 2014 A lost decade – no change* 2014
3.1. Boundary changes are a risk to progress that has been made to date, yet there has been little discussion of this publicly.

3.2. It’s our view that all parties should put in place an action plan to ensure that the changes do not result in a reduction in the proportion of female MPs. Making these action plans public will foster transparency and further signal commitment to this important issue.

3.3. This could take a number of forms. Below are just a few suggestions:

3.3.1. Signing a public pledge could be a useful statement of intent. The recommendation in *The Good Parliament* around a cross-party concord whereby “all political parties should seek to increase the percentage of its women MPs – at the absolute minimum all parties currently represented the House should maintain existing percentages of women MPs” provides such a public statement.¹²

3.3.2. Where 3 seats become 2, should it be an area where a party is likely to have 2 winnable seats these should have a male and female representative to ensure balance.

3.3.3. Preparing for future vacancies is also important. Working to develop younger members should seek to foster greater diversity in future representation for the seat. This is particularly important in seats that are yet to be represented by a woman.

4. What further changes are needed to improve retention of women MPs?

4.1. Retention of women MPs is crucial to maintain a gender balanced parliament. Not only from the perspective of numbers in the chamber, but also in relation to helping to drive culture change and act as role models to potential future female MPs.

4.2. Key areas that need to be dealt with to improve retention are clearly how compatible being an MP is with being a parent and the culture within Westminster.

4.3. *The Good Parliament* makes a number of strong recommendations for various actors. Some of the “quick wins” that we believe should be prioritised are:

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¹² Professor Sarah Childs *The Good Parliament* 2016
4.3.1. Allowing members to be counted at the “door” of division lobbies when accompanied by their children
4.3.2. Producing a House Statement on maternity, paternity, parental, adoption and caring leave
4.3.3. Undertaking a review for the provision of a crèche on the Parliamentary estate (in addition to the nursery)
4.3.4. Making the necessary rule change so that any select committee witness panel of three or more must be sex/gender diverse. This could be accompanied by training for potential witnesses, similar to that carried out by Chwarae Teg and the National Assembly for Wales\textsuperscript{13}
4.3.5. Prohibit single sex/gender select committees
4.3.6. Commence section 106 of the Equality Act 210 as data is essential to benchmark and measure progress

4.4. Political parties can also take steps to ensure that female MPs are supported and promoted within Westminster. Ensuring that leadership teams are gender balanced, that sexist behaviour among elected representatives and party members is challenged and putting in place infrastructure such as networks and conferences will not only support current female MPs but will also help to promote the role of MP to aspiring women and demonstrate that women should have as prominent a role in Westminster as their male peers.

Conclusion

The case for a diverse, gender balanced Parliament is clear. While progress has been made, the pace of change remains slow and proposed boundary changes run the risk of falling back.

It is our view that parties should put in place an action plan to ensure that as a minimum, the boundary changes do not result in a reduction in the number of women in Parliament. We also believe that positive action, such as all-women shortlists, have been proven to be the most effective and quickest means of improving women’s representation in politics. We therefore support \textit{The Good Parliament} report recommendation to put in place a quota should parties fail to select at least 50% women in vacant held and target seats ahead of the 2020 general election.

As part of wider action to address structural barriers in political institutions and party processes, build a diverse pipeline of talent and challenge gender stereotypes, quotas can

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\textsuperscript{13} In partnership with the National Assembly for Wales’ Enterprise and Business Committee (in the Fourth Assembly) Chwarae Teg delivered expert witness training to a group of women. There was an application process to participate and those that were successful were able to experience a mock inquiry, submitting written evidence followed by an oral evidence session on the Assembly estate. More information on this training can be provided upon request.
help to deliver a self-sustaining, gender balanced Parliament and ensure that women’s voices are as prominent as their male peers in British politics.

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