My doctorate arose from personal interest in ensuring equal representation of women in all walks of life. I looked particularly at the history of women’s representation as local councillors. I have also initiated awareness raising work aimed at increasing women’s elected participation in Local Government. I believe many of the factors involved in that form of elected representation also apply to Parliament.

- Women still face an uphill struggle in being accepted as candidates by both selectors and electors. The increasing number of positive role models helps, but will not bring about equality quickly unaided.
- Women are more likely to be selected in hard to win seats. The impact of current planned boundary changes on them is therefore likely to be disproportionate and the need for equality will need to be addressed positively by all political parties.
- Positive action such as All-Women-Shortlists are controversial but have had a good success rate. They should be encouraged as a mechanism.
- The financial and emotional costs in just gaining a seat are significant. Women often need practical support to be able to put their name forward.

Equal representation is important in all walks of life, but for me, ensuring equal representation amongst decision makers is essential if democracy is to be trusted by all our communities. Women need to feel confident that their collective voices are heard. The image of Parliament suffers when it continues to be primarily male and white. It may be that special measures are needed to bring about equal representation, but we should not shy away from the changes needed. Although the prime responsibility may be seen to rest with political parties, there are supportive mechanisms Parliament could take. Those signing to register a political party could be obliged to sign a commitment to enacting equal opportunities in selection when they do so. Candidates could be obliged to state their gender when registering candidacy, with formal comparative publication of results. Above all Parliament could take a lead in funding training, confidence building and offering practical support for potential women candidates.

September 2016