I write with regard to the potential changes to Parliament to be proposed by the Boundary Commission and, more broadly, to urge your inquiry to do everything it can to increase the number of women in the House of Commons.

As you say yourself in announcing the above inquiry: “If the number of seats in the House is reduced we need to ensure that it is not at the expense of a representative, modern Parliament”. I would submit that a modern, representative has to include better representation for women. As you are aware, of the 650 seats in the House of Commons, men hold 458 (70%) and women only 192 (30%). There have only ever been 451 women MPs to date. This means there are currently more men in the Commons than the total ever number of women MPs.

As an ambassador for 50:50 Parliament, I would like to share some of the views recently expressed by my fellow-ambassador Joanna Phaure, which I share completely:

“I believe that high profile support, direct from Parliament, via a commitment to equal representation would begin to help ‘normalise’ female MPs and reduce the extra scrutiny they face partly because they are currently so few. It would also help existing female MPs be retained in the house for longer and improve the recruitment of women to stand for selection. Much can be achieved simply by committing to equal representation and ensuring that this commitment is widely debated and that mechanisms are proposed across the political spectrum.

“I believe that the first step to increasing the representation of women in Parliament is to make a bold commitment to equal representation in the House. Simply by committing to this objective you are inviting women to see Parliament as a place that represents all of our interests and that legislates to defend our rights to safety and prosperity. I also believe there is work to be done in enabling women, from diverse backgrounds and with varied experiences to access politics as a career and play a greater role in shaping our futures.

“Women play many important roles in communities and would make good MPs: many women play important roles in their communities. They are community organisers, volunteers, charity fundraisers, run support groups and often work to improve their communities. Parliament needs to welcome this experience; politicians should be drawn from wider fields of experience.

“More women in Parliament would enhance our democracy: by guaranteeing better gender balance, something closer to a 50:50 gender split in Parliament would broaden debate and enhance our democracy. Without it, many voices and experiences are lost and women’s roles diminished and overlooked.

“A more gender balanced Parliament will enhance society and save lives: in order that the equality which has been enshrined in the UN Charter “equal rights of men and women” is delivered we need a 50:50 Parliament. Equal pay will not be achieved, women’s rights will continue to fall short of full human rights, women will be murdered, crimes against women will go unpunished. The status quo will continue without a radical shift. I believe change can be driven from the centre and in the case of women’s equality that change can save lives.”
To conclude, I would urge your committee to do everything in its power to improve the representation of women in Parliament, and to minimise the impact of the boundary changes on female representation.

September 2016