Written submission from Mrs Rachel Brown (WHC0064)

Summary

- Raising awareness of the financial recompense and support available to MP’s will break down perceived barriers relating to caring responsibilities.
- Former MP’s have a role to play in breaking down the perceived impact of being an MP on substantive careers.
- Online abuse and threats targeting women MP’s are considered by many men and women to be and acceptable “part of the job”. In order to encourage more women in political office, online targeting of women needs to become socially unacceptable.
- Women are inspired by role models who share their political views; high profile women are needed in all parties to increase women's aspirations to become MP’s.
- Women were poorly represented in the recent PCC Elections.
- Women’s needs change over time and these must be met in order to retain women MP’s.

1 Introduction

1.1 I am submitting this evidence as an individual. I am a 43 year old woman of graduate-level education living on the Isle of Wight.

1.2 The first 15 years of my career was spent working in the public sector; NHS, civilian police and local government. For the last five years, I have been self employed and have contracts with local charities, not-for-profit organisations and small businesses.

1.3 This year, I became a member of the Conservative Party and have been selected as a candidate in the 2017 Local Council Elections. In June 2016, I stood as a candidate in a Parish Council by-election. Recently, I was selected by the Parliament Outreach and Engagement Team to become one of the first Women in Parliament Trainers in the UK.

1.4 I am a member of the Isle of Wight Inspiring Women's Group, set up to increase the profile of women's achievements in the community, and the Council of Women (Isle of Wight), which aims to increase the proportion of women elected to the Local Council. I have discussed the questions addressed in this evidence with members of those groups.

2 What steps should be taken to increase the % of women MP’s in the House of Commons?

2.1 The role of women as carers is perceived as a barrier to becoming an MP by women. Women are disproportionately represented in unpaid caring roles (58% of carers are female\(^1\)). During conversations about this with other women, it became clear that there is limited understanding of the renumeration available at all levels of political life, and that perception prevents women from considering putting themselves forward. In one instance, a women with two young children said that she would stand for local election as soon as she realised that Local Councillors received an allowance and expenses to support them in their role.

To overcome this perceived barrier, the public, and particularly women, need to be made aware of the support offered to carers through the MP’s Scheme of Business Costs and Expenses.

2.2 The impact of taking time out of a substantive career to be an MP is perceived to be a barrier to becoming an MP by some women.

To overcome this perceived barrier, women need to be made aware of the experiences of former MP’s and the way in which their substantive careers have been affected by their political position.

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\(^1\) Census 2011
2.3 One of the barriers to women becoming MP’s is the public online abuse that women MP’s are subjected to. I think that being a newly elected MP is a difficult enough job without having to face public criticism, abuse and threats because you have chosen to be one, or because of what you wear, how you speak, or what you believe in. Not enough is being done to condemn this behaviour, and it is widely accepted as to be expected. In conversations with other women, I have heard many say that being on the receiving end of abuse is “part of the job” and if women MP’s “can't stand the heat, they should get out of the kitchen”. Online abuse and threats need to become as socially unacceptable as drink-driving in order for women to consider public positions without fear of being targeted in that way.

3 Is there a need to reach out to certain groups of women? How?

3.1 At present, there are so few women MP’s that any increase in representation of women will be a positive step and encourage more women to get involved. The selection of Theresa May as Leader of the Conservative Party and becoming Prime Minister has motivated me personally to pursue a career, as I look to her as a role model. However, many of the women I have spoken to do not view Theresa May as a role model because they do not share her political views. Therefore, all parties should be seeking for high profile representation of women to encourage women of all political beliefs to get involved.

4 Are parties giving sufficient attention to female representation at other levels of political life?

4.1 In the recent PCC Elections in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, all the candidates were men. This was a source of frustration to me and other women I know, as the hustings and events the candidates attended were devoid of women role models.

5 What additional issues regarding retention of female MP’s need to be considered?

5.1 The needs of women change over time, so in order to retain women MP’s, those needs must be met. For instance, at a local level, a women councillor successfully held an Executive committee position after returning from maternity leave. She was able to bring her baby to the Chamber in order to maintain breastfeeding and care. As her child grew up and became a toddler, this was no longer appropriate and she was unable to find childcare for the hours she needed so stepped down from her Executive role.

Similarly, women experiencing the menopause may find long running, or late evening meetings more difficult to attend.

Changing the hours that MP’s are required to work would assist in the retention of female MP’s.

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