Written submission from Mary Golder-Hayes (WHC0068)

Despite decades of legislation it is clear that sexism is alive and well and women are still a long way from parity with men. Various aspects of gender inequality have their own unique characteristics, so it's unlikely that a single answer can be found for all the problems. However, starting at the top with the people who govern the country, the issue of equal representation for women in Parliament is capable of a simple solution.

A popular argument against any change to the present system is that you should just choose the best person for the job, regardless of that person's gender. This appears, at first glance, unarguable. However the argument is based on a fallacy as it assumes that this is how the current system works. There are several factors that discourage and disadvantage women, so the contest to be selected as a candidate is by no means a fair fight.

Selection committees, faced with a number of candidates, may do their utmost to make an impartial and unbiased choice of the best one. However hard they try, they are unlikely to succeed. People generally tend to make conservative (small c) choices, and human beings regularly demonstrate that they are incapable of making unbiased decisions. Women who overcome the selection hurdle and subsequently also manage to get elected must then join an organisation frequently described as a “Gentlemen’s Club”, and certainly a bastion of male culture and traditions. In these circumstances women start at a disadvantage: they are in a minority, which has been “allowed in” to the boys' club.

Women who are comfortable dealing with the male environment, and are happy to adopt the cultural norms in Parliament, stand some chance of competing with the men. However many women prefer to work in a less combative and more cooperative way, and are likely to be put off applying to become an MP in the first place. Successful female entrepreneurs often cite dissatisfaction with a company’s male culture as part of the motivation for setting up their own businesses. Equal representation would ensure that there is a critical mass of female MPs, which would have a much better chance of changing the prevailing male culture.

A system which discourages women from applying, makes it more difficult for them to be selected, and then demands that they fit in to an alien male culture, totally fails to provide equality of representation for the female population.

While our parliamentary “democracy” retains the mould of a Victorian family, men hold the power and the purse strings, women have to consider themselves lucky to be heard at all. There is no justification for this. Men and women tend to have different priorities, tend to approach problems in different ways, tend to have different family responsibilities, tend to have a range of different skills. Women are entitled to be heard in government on their own terms.

If men and women shared the responsibility of government equally this would also send a powerful message about women’s status in the UK into all the other murky corners where sexism thrives. Equal representation for men and women in government could be achieved very simply: The 650 (currently) constituencies are divided into 325 pairs, M and F. In the F constituencies only female candidates are allowed to stand. Likewise in the M constituencies only male candidates are allowed. This would apply to all candidates in each constituency, and guarantees that, so far as gender is concerned, the composition of parliament reflects that of the population. It’s simple, it’s fair, it solves the problem.

September 2016