



BRITISH ISLANDS &  
MEDITERRANEAN REGION

# Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians' Conference

*Women in Parliament  
Past, Present & Future*

***Conference Report***

London, UK | 26 - 28 April 2018



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# About BIMR CWP

The British Islands & Mediterranean Region (BIMR) Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) is a regional chapter of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians. As an integral part of the BIMR CPA, it works for the better representation of women in legislatures and for the furtherance of gender equality and justice across the Commonwealth.

BIMR CWP held its first conference in 2014 in Scotland followed by Gibraltar in 2015, Guernsey in 2016 and Wales in 2017. In addition, Steering Committee meetings are held as required throughout the year.

The objectives of BIMR CWP are as follows:

CPA:

To ensure that matters of specific concern to women are on CPA agendas within the Region and beyond;

To enhance the participation and representation of women in the CPA, raising awareness at Branch, regional and Commonwealth-wide levels

To work towards mainstreaming gender considerations in all CPA activities and programmes

Multilateral:

To encourage women to stand for election to representative bodies and advocate for the removal of barriers to their participation, aiming 50% representation in legislative assemblies across the region;

To help parliaments to become gender-sensitive institutions - challenging negative perceptions of women as parliamentarians to facilitate their professional contribution as members;

To build the capacity of women parliamentarians to be more effective in their roles;

To raise awareness amongst parliamentarians, male and female, of gender perspective and encourage them to reference it in all aspects of their role - legislation, oversight and representation;

To create links with women's branches of international organisations and other relevant groups

# Conference Overview

The 4th British Islands and Mediterranean Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians' Conference took place in Westminster from 26-28 April 2018. 25 delegates attended from all branches in the region.

The theme of the Conference was Women in Parliament: past, present and future, celebrating the centenary of the Representation of the People's Act - reflecting on what progress has been made since, and what more needs to be done. Delegates heard from the UK Women and Equalities Committee about parliamentary scrutiny of the Government Equalities Office and took part in interactive sessions on social media, gender sensitive parliaments and building platforms for social change.

CPA UK gathered both informal and formal feedback throughout the Conference. Specific highlights for delegates included the interactive youth session, hearing from the Public Accounts Committee Chair Meg Hillier MP and the opportunity to hear updates from branches to learn more about progress being made in other jurisdictions. Social media abuse and childcare provision were highlighted as themes delegates wished to explore further.



# Attendees

Alderney	Norma Paris SM*
Cyprus	Eleni Mavrou* Christiana Solomonidou (Delegation Secretary)
Falkland Islands	Hon. Teslyn Barkman MLA*
Gibraltar	Hon. Marlene Hassan Nahon MP Hon. Samantha Sacramento MP*
Guernsey	Deputy Andrea Dudley -Owen Deputy Mary Lowe Deputy Victoira Oliver Deputy Dawn Tindall*
Isle of Man	Ann Corlett MHK* Julie Edge MHK
Jersey	Deputy Carolyn Labey* Deputy Anne Pryke
Malta	Hon. Therese Comodini Cachia Hon. Rosianne Cutajar
Scotland	Gilllian Martin MSP Margaret Mitchell MSP*
St Helena	Christine Scipio - O'Dean MLC*
United Kingdom	Rt Hon. Maria Miller MP* Baroness Thornton
Wales	Ann Jones AM Joyce Watson AM (BIMR CWP Chair)*

\* BIMR CWP Steering Committee Member

**“The Commonwealth can be such a powerful catalyst for action on behalf of women.”**

**Rt Hon. Patricia Scotland QC,  
Secretary-General of the Commonwealth**

**“Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture.”**

**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

**“I raise up my voice-not so I can shout but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.”**

**Malala Yousafzai**

**“We must ensure that we can be bold enough to be the driving force that will change how the world views women in politics.”**

**Hon. Dato’ Noraini Ahmad MP, Malaysia, CWP Chairperson**

**“You must make women count as much as men; you must have an equal standard of morals; and the only way to enforce that is through giving women political power so that you can get that equal moral standard registered in the laws of the country. It is the only way.”**

**Emmeline Pankhurst**

**“We are in a time when we need more unity. Community and respect for others runs through all youth work - and the Commonwealth seems to have that at its heart.”**

**Robin Lockhart, Commonwealth Youth Worker of the Year 2016**



# Programme

DAY 1

**Thursday 26 April**

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Panel discussion:

**Women in Parliament: Past, Present and Future**

Speakers:

**Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne**

**Jo Stevens MP**

**Jordhi Nullatamby**, *Member of the UK Youth Parliament*

Chair: **Rt Hon. Baroness D'Souza**

**Vote 100 Themed Tour of Parliament**

DAY 2

**Friday 27 April**

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**BIMR CWP Steering Committee Meeting**

**Tour of the Education Centre**

**Welcome Session**

Report back from BIMR CWP Steering Committee  
Branch reports

Speakers:

**Joyce Watson AM**, *Chair, BIMR CWP*

**Rt Hon. Maria Miller MP**, *UK Representative, BIMR CWP  
Steering Committee*

## The UK Women & Equalities Select Committee

Establishing the Committee; its enquiries and government responses; its role in scrutiny of UK government policy and its implementation of international commitments

Speakers:

**Rt Hon. Maria Miller MP**, *Chair, UK Women & Equalities Select Committee*

**Judith Boyce**, *Clerk, UK Women & Equalities Select Committee*

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## Workshop Sessions (organised as inquiries with witnesses):

### A: Social Media

What are the experiences of women parliamentarians using social media and what should be done to address online harassment and abuse?

Witnesses: **Rupa Huq MP**  
**Karim Palant**, *UK Public Policy Manager, Facebook*

Clerk: **Lauren Boyer**, *Second Clerk, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee*  
Chair: **Hon. Samantha Sacramento MP** (Gibraltar)

### B: How well are parliaments supporting women?

Have parliaments changed to support women parliamentarians? What should be their priorities, and what more should/can they do?

Witnesses: **Sarah Childs**, *Professor of Politics and Gender, Birkbeck, University of London*  
**Aneela McKenna**, *Equalities Manager, Scottish Parliament*  
Clerk: **Lydia Menzies**, *Clerk, International Trade Committee*  
Chair: **Councillor Christine Scipio O'Dean** (St Helena)

## **Report back from workshops**

Facilitated by **Anna Burt**, *Project & Programme Manager, CPA UK*

## **Keynote address**

**Meg Hillier MP**

## **Building platforms for social change**

Interactive session with young women discussing how different platforms can encourage positive change on issues of gender equality, women's empowerment and women's representation

Participants from **The Girls Network & UK Youth Parliament**

## **Summary & Closing Remarks**

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# Session Summaries

## DAY 1

### Women in Parliament: Past, Present and Future

The Conference began with an opening panel discussion on the progress that has been made within the UK Parliament in terms of gender equality, and what more can be done to tackle current barriers for women parliamentarians. The discussion was chaired by Baroness D'Souza with Jo Stevens MP, former MP & Member of the House of Lords Baroness Nicholson and UK Youth Parliamentarian Jordhi Nullatamby. Baroness D'Souza noted the importance of female representation and the progress that has been made to date.

Jo Stevens MP noted that since being elected she has experienced a tumultuous period in British politics; however there have also been improvements for women parliamentarians including the Me Too campaign, gender pay gap legislation and the beginnings of regulation of social media. Jo also spoke of some Select Committees having no female members and addressing the issue of abuse of women parliamentarians. She noted it is often misogynistic, sexually violent or body shaming, and has led to women parliamentarians holding back on expressing opinions. Jo ended by highlighting that Parliament could create a more suitable environment for women and work life balance for example introducing electronic voting.



Baroness Nicholson spoke of her journey into Parliament at a time when there were few female MPs and very notable discrimination. She supports an appointed chamber to foster diversity in Parliament.

Jordhi Nullatamby a member of the UK Youth Parliament reflected on how far the UK Parliament has come since the Representation of the People's Act in 1918. However, she stressed the importance of the continued efforts to address inequality given that only one third of seats in Parliaments are held by women and only 7% of those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. The impact of this is a feeling of disenfranchisement among young women from BAME backgrounds. Jordhi highlighted the work of the UK Youth Parliament and how crucial her involvement in it has been, giving her an



insight into Parliament and policy issues.

## DAY 2

### Welcome Session

Maria Miller MP (UK representative on the BIMR CWP Steering Committee) welcomed delegates to the UK Parliament. BIMR CWP Chair Joyce Watson AM (Wales) invited delegates to give updates from each branch. Delegates noted improvements in many legislatures in terms of gender equality, however barriers that remain included a lack of flexible working initiatives, inadequate salaries and little support for women candidates in non-party political systems. CWP was highlighted as an important network for women parliamentarians to share experiences and support each other.

### Women & Equalities Select Committee

Maria Miller MP, Chair of the UK Women and Equalities Committee and Judith Boyce, Committee Clerk, gave an overview of the Committee. Maria noted that the Committee was formed as a result of the Equalities Act 2010 to scrutinise the effectiveness of the actions taken by the Government Equalities Office. The Committee does not just focus on women but on broader issues that affect women and equality across a range of differences: marriage, sexual orientation, race, religion & gender. Although the focus of the Committee is domestic law, individual Committee members are interested in raising the profile of the Committee internationally. Maria emphasised the enormous potential of CWP - to share best practices with colleagues and other women parliamentarians, to discuss the actions we are taking and to better evaluate their effectiveness.

Maria gave examples of recent inquiries, most notably on sexual harassment. This piece of work developed from an inquiry into sexual harassment in schools and expanded into sexual harassment in the workplace and social spaces.

Judith Boyce followed with an overview of how the Committee ensures impact and engagement. Twitter was highlighted as a helpful tool as a self-managing and immediate way of engaging with the public and stakeholders. The Committee uses Twitter to



share videos and infographics and currently has 15,000 followers. Judith noted that the Committee has highlighted issues previously not on the Government agenda and has had real impact. For example, the Committee's work on sexual harassment in schools led to the Government publishing guidance on a previously overlooked issue.

## Committee Workshop Sessions

Delegates formed two groups to take part in a committee exercise based on the Westminster committee system. One session focussed on social media and online abuse and the other on how effective parliaments are at supporting women parliamentarians.

### Inquiry 1: Social Media

This Committee Workshop was chaired by Samantha Sacramento (Gibraltar), and the witnesses were Dr Rupa Huq MP (UK) and Karim Palant, UK Public Policy Manager, Facebook UK.

The Committee began by asking Rupa Huq MP how she has responded to online abuse. Rupa shared that she had reported incidents to the police but not the social media platforms directly. She added that in her experience the incident was investigated at too late a stage for action to be taken by police. Commenting on Facebook's response to incidents of online abuse Karim Palant stressed that Facebook has a 24 hour target for responding to reported incidents. Karim noted that Facebook had taken steps to better equip MPs and parliamentary candidates and that further training is important to allow parliamentarians to use social media positively. Karim assured delegates that Facebook UK would be receptive to other legislatures outside of the UK should they need support or advice during election periods.



The Committee then moved on to the impact of social media abuse. Rupa Huq commented that online abuse has made her less inclined to speak out in certain issues, and that she never gives out details online about surgeries or public appearances especially since the murder of her colleague Jo Cox. Rupa noted that women from ethnic minority backgrounds are most vulnerable to online abuse. Karim Palant commented that Facebook has protected categories which include gender, sexuality, race and religion.



However he noted that Facebook is not always able to draw the line between criticism and abuse and that Facebook must not be seen to be disrupting the democratic process. In terms of legislation he highlighted a lack of clarity on what is and isn't acceptable under freedom of speech legislation.

## Inquiry 2: Parliaments supporting women



A parallel evidence session aimed to explore key issues and questions regarding the support parliaments provide to women parliamentarians. The session was chaired by Christine Scipio-O'Dean (St Helena) and the witnesses were Professor Sarah Childs, Professor of Politics and Gender at Birkbeck, University of London and Aneela McKenna, Equalities Manager at the Scottish Parliament.

The Committee began by asking Aneela McKenna to describe how the Scottish Parliament supports women parliamentarians. Aneela noted that there has been a significant change in culture in recent years. Although the Scottish Parliament was designed at the outset as a family friendly workplace, this has in some respects led to complacency over how effective it is in promoting equality. Aneela commented on a spike in women's participation in the past year, largely as a result of social media and policies such as mandatory gender balance on Committees and changes in maternity rules.



Sarah Childs responded to questions about the UK Parliament, commenting specifically on the design of Parliament which has made it a historically difficult workplace for women – both physically and the way the parliamentary day is structured. Committee members noted similar challenges in their parliaments and it was agreed that moving towards core working hours would be an important step.

Both witnesses stressed that change cannot happen without policy changes, and agreed that these policies need to be imposed by parliament, not individual parties, for the institution as a whole to change.

## Building platforms for social change



The final session of the Conference was an interactive session with secondary school pupils currently taking part in **The Girls' Network** mentoring scheme which matches students with inspiring female professionals, who support them over the course of an academic year. Small mixed groups discussed which platforms can be used to promote positive change on issues of gender equality, women's empowerment and women's representation.

### Participants made the following recommendations:

#### School

- There should be more spaces for girls to talk openly without judgement. This could then be extended beyond school to the community
- There is often a lack of understanding about what being a parliamentarian entails. Girls would benefit from visible role models, for example politicians visiting local schools

#### Parliament

- Pathways into Parliament are not clear. Parliament could do more to show the diverse skills and knowledge needed across Parliament which would not limit girls to studying certain subjects
- More should be taught in schools on the history of women in politics

#### Civil Society & Social Media

Participants noted the importance of having positive role models in mainstream and social media, as this is where young people go for news and information

# Acknowledgements

BIMR CWP would like to thank all speakers who gave up their time to participate in the Conference and offered their expertise and experience. Special thanks to The Girls' Network and the UK Youth Parliament for bringing an important youth aspect to the Conference.

## Funding

Conference costs were covered by CPA UK with an £8,000 contribution from CWP Regional Strengthening Funds (allocated by CPA International).



# Contributors

## **Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne LRAM ARCM**

Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne is a member of the House of Lords where she sits as a Conservative on the government benches. She was elected to the House of Commons in 1987.



## **Rt Hon. Baroness D'Souza CMG**

Baroness D'Souza has been a Member of the House of Lords since 2004, holding the position of Lord Speaker from 2011 - 2016.



## **Judith Boyce**

Judith Boyce is Clerk of the Women & Equalities Committee in the House of Commons, which involves managing its staff team and advising the Chair and Members of the Committee.



## **Sarah Childs**

Director, Centre for the Study of British Politics and Public Life; Professor of Politics and Gender

Sarah has published widely on gender, political representation, party politics and Parliament. Sarah works widely with the UK Parliament in a number of different areas. She was appointed the gender Special Adviser to the UK Parliament's Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation (2008-10), and later she advised the All Party Parliamentary Group's Women in Parliament (2014).



## **Aneela McKenna**

Equalities Manager, Scottish Parliament

Aneela advises senior management on Diversity and Inclusion strategy and programmes and leads on culture change projects.



## **Dr Rupa Huq MP**

Member for Ealing Central and Acton

Since being elected, Rupa has served as Shadow Minister for Home Affairs and on select committees which include Justice, Regulatory Reform and The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.



## **Meg Hillier MP**

Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch

Meg Hillier is the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. The Public Accounts Committee is a cross-party committee scrutinising value for money of public spending and holds the government to account for the delivery of public services. Meg has been a junior Home Office Minister and Shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change.





# Partners

## UK YOUTH PARLIAMENT

The UK Youth Parliament provides opportunities for 11-18 year olds to use their elected voice to bring about social change through meaningful representation and campaigning.

## THE GIRLS NETWORK



The Girls' Network was established by Charly Young and Becca Dean, who as secondary school teachers in North West London when they witnessed the multiple barriers facing girls in their classrooms:

- The pressure to conform to ideals
- A lack of confidence or self-belief
- A lack of professional female role models in their networks

They established a one-to-one mentoring scheme for 30 girls in 2013, based on research showing that conversations and personal relationships could have a big impact on challenging stereotypes and expectations.

They believed that girls needed a greater access to opportunities, but also the confidence to seize those opportunities and the skills to thrive in them. The Girls' Network mentoring was soon in high demand, and now operates across London and the South Coast, working with more than 1,000 girls each year. 100% of girls on the programme last year reported feeling more confident in themselves and in how to get to where they want to go.



COMMONWEALTH  
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## ABOUT CPA UK

CPA UK is one of the largest and most active branches in the CPA community, and delivers a full programme of international parliamentary activities in Westminster and overseas. Governed by an Executive Committee of parliamentarians from all main parties, CPA UK's work includes parliamentary diplomacy and parliamentary strengthening on behalf of the UK Parliament and the wider CPA.

Its activities include conferences, seminars, workshops and interparliamentary exchanges on parliamentary practice and procedure, policy and issues of international interest and concern.

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