

Edinburgh, 17-18 March 2025

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# 11th British Islands and Mediterranean Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians' Conference

Report



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# Summary

The Scottish Parliament hosted the 11th CWP BIMR Conference on 17-18 March 2025, welcoming more than 25 parliamentarians from 10 jurisdictions in the CPA British Islands and Mediterranean Region (BIMR).

The theme chosen for the two-day programme was “A parliament for all: the importance of women in politics”, which sought to recognise the barriers present for women parliamentarians and the inclusive practices available to overcome them. Conference sessions included gender sensitive scrutiny and institutional change, hybrid working, equality networks and caucuses, and retention policies for women parliamentarians, with emphasis on a more in-depth education on the duties of representatives.

The conference was opened by the Presiding Officer of Scottish Parliament, Alison Johnstone MSP, and parliamentarians were welcomed by BIMR Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Acting Chair Sarah Boyack MSP (Scotland) and the CWP Scotland Branch Representative Roz McCall MSP.



*Credit: Scottish Parliament*

“International research has shown that when parliaments better represent the community they serve, they are seen as more legitimate.”



## Plenary 1: How to promote inclusiveness in parliaments

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The first plenary was chaired by Alison Johnstone MSP, Presiding Officer of Scottish Parliament. It focused on the importance of representative parliaments and the role of gender sensitive audits and equality networks in this process. The panel discussed the implementation of a gendered lens on legislative scrutiny and budgetary processes. The Chair highlighted the 34 recommendations from the Scottish Parliament's recent Gender Sensitive Audit, including the establishment of a Women's Caucus. An advisory committee had been set up to ensure that these recommendations were delivered, underlining the importance of institutional change.

Following the Chair's introduction, Professor Meryl Kenny outlined the process of gender sensitising parliaments and the importance of producing "technically appropriate, but also politically viable" reports. She advocated for publication of the recommendations, as done by the Scottish Parliament, and the set-up of an advisory group to monitor and evaluate the delivery of recommendations. She noted that a successful gender sensitising process also factored in a parliaments' changing circumstances and actors. It was concluded that formal rule change was a crucial aspect of making parliaments inclusive.

In her address, Michelle Thomson MSP focused on gender budgeting and drew upon the value of data disaggregated by sex. She highlighted the importance of a "gender responsive" budget, focusing on outcomes on women's lives, as well as the inputs. There was discussion on the benefits of gender budgeting, including increased transparency in the use of financial resources, and improved policy design and resource allocation.

Sioned Williams MS (Wales) spoke on the topic of gender sensitive scrutiny, drawing from her experience as a member of the Equality and Social Justice Committee in the Senedd. She explained that those on the Committee, including Clerks, received training on equality-sensitive scrutiny. Committee reports tended to attract media attention and had directly impacted policy in Wales, with recommendations leading to a crisis-fund for those experiencing domestic abuse, among other initiatives. She acknowledged the many cross-party groups that scrutinised women-facing legislation, such as the one on Children and Families.

Sioned Williams MS also discussed the Senedd's Women's Caucus, noting its member-led programmes and cross-party support. She explained that the Caucus provided an opportunity to voice political positions through a gendered lens; for example, giving evidence to the Senedd on statutory gender quotas. She outlined other opportunities it provided, including stakeholder engagement and informal scrutiny of relevant parliamentary business.



Kenneth Forslund, First Deputy Speaker of the Riksdag (Sweden's Parliament), joined virtually to discuss his role as the Co-Chair of the Swedish Parliament's Gender Equality Working Group. He noted that the Group was a recognised political priority, reporting to the Riksdag board who decided the programme for each election period. One male and female were nominated from each political party and their selection was dictated by lottery process. He highlighted the Riksdag's commitment to the 40/60 gender measure for Committees, although he acknowledged that biases remained, including a recent "backslide" in the number of female Chairs and Deputy Chairs of Committees. He noted however that many younger female and male MPs were united in their juggling of work and family, indicative of a cultural shift in the Riksdag and further afield.

## **Q&A**

Hon. Savia Orphanidou highlighted the ongoing conflict between freedom of speech versus the level of abuse received by women on social media. This issue was covered extensively in the Conference's third plenary session.

There were questions on the success of statutory quotas in smaller jurisdictions. The panel emphasised the benefits of quotas but recognised that the most effective were those that were conducive with the electoral system. Professor Kenny highlighted the importance of post-legislative scrutiny in achieving inclusivity in parliaments. She reiterated the importance of formal measures, framing it as an institutional responsibility of parliaments. Panellists also pointed to research which contradicted an argument against gender quotas, that women elected may not be the most qualified. There was evidence to show that more women in politics increases competence overall.



*Photo credit: Scottish Parliament*



Over the last 25 years, we have seen this effect of parties committing [to gender sensitive mechanisms] and then taking their foot off the gas, resulting in the fluctuation of women's participation.



## Plenary 2:

### Overcoming the barriers to women standing for election from the lens of ensuring a work-life balance

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This session looked at how legislatures could overcome the barriers to women standing for election, with a particular emphasis on ensuring work-life balance. Delegates discussed how to make it more attractive for young women to go into politics, with contributions from young women from across the CPA British Islands and Mediterranean Region (BIMR).

Roz McCall MSP shared her experience of being elected to the Scottish Parliament while caring for her husband who was recovering from a stroke. She praised the family-friendly culture that had enabled her to support his recovery, such as remote working. Despite this, she acknowledged that events held after the business day were inaccessible to those with caring responsibilities, an issue exacerbated by the fact that women make up the majority of primary caregivers.

Discussing the value of equal representation in parliaments, Talat Yaqoob FRSE reframed the lack of women in politics as the “overrepresentation of men”. She stressed recognition of a democratic deficit wherein the diversity of women parliamentarians themselves was also considered, with emphasis on those furthest from wealth and power. She advocated for parliaments to lead the conversation, rather than working to fit current society. This issue was underlined by reference to the retention problem affecting women in Scottish politics, noting that Parliament’s culture and toxicity continued to impact the welfare of women parliamentarians.

Delegates heard contributions from young women from across the BIMR on how to encourage young women to go into politics. They noted the value in redefining politics to include traits of compassion and care and in removing a linear understanding of political engagement. Mentorship and political education were cited as key to young women’s engagement, as well as financial support. Natasha Asghar MS (Wales) noted that many young women did not have access to a political education and called for better collaboration with third party organisations to address this.

Hon. Savia Orphanidou (Cyprus) explored the opportunities and challenges of hybrid working, addressing the issue of politics as “fundamentally interactive”. Her speech drew on her experience as the only female single parent in the House of Representatives. She noted that Parliament had recently extended maternity leave to 22 weeks for the first child and explained that in the context of the conservative Cypriot society this represented a huge achievement. A bill on expanding breast-feeding spaces in both the public and private spheres was also in motion, providing another example of gender sensitive policy in Cyprus.

The paradox of hybrid working in politics was also discussed by Hon. Davina Sammut Hili and Hon. Graziella Attard Previ (Malta). Hon. Sammut Hili noted that women's unpaid care work created cycles of exclusion that thwarted successful participation in political life. She called for the need to reframe hybrid working as enhancing productivity rather than hindering it. Hon. Attard Previ echoed the "democratic deficit" that Talat Yaqoob referred to, noting that women made up only 26% of the Maltese Parliament. She detailed the challenges of politics as a part-time role, including the absence of remote working and/or voting in Parliament. She concluded that research showed that women parliamentarians work more across party lines and on gender-sensitive policies, and that this must be emphasised to younger generations.

### **Q&A**

Discussion with the young representatives focused on the importance of education for both young men and women, from defining and identifying misogyny to outlining the barriers faced by women parliamentarians. The issue of imposter syndrome was raised, with the panel concurring that the system should be changed rather than individuals having to change to fit within it. Alison Johnstone MSP concluded the session and noted that politics must be a place for introverted people as well as extroverted ones.



*All photo credit: Scottish Parliament*



## Plenary 3:

### How to retain women working in politics

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#### Workshop

This session was chaired by Sarah Boyack MSP and discussed how to retain women working in politics, particularly considering the role of social media in increasing levels of abuse. Topics explored by the panel included support for parliamentarians experiencing violence and abuse, childcare policies and parental leave.

For the first half of the plenary, delegates split into groups and discussed initiatives to retain women working in politics. This workshop served to highlight the gaps in support for women parliamentarians, whether newly elected or experienced politicians. The need to educate both parliamentarians and the wider public on the demands of the role was at the centre of discussions, as was recognition of the continued learning and professional development demanded by the role.

Delegates suggested the introduction of ongoing learning and development programmes (on AI for example), as well as the development of existing schemes like CPA Parliamentary Academy courses and internships in industry, available to Members of the UK Parliament through the Industry and Parliament Trust. The need to showcase such opportunities was highlighted.

Sarah Boyack MSP suggested a future workshop on continuous professional development opportunities, to be discussed after the Conference.

#### Panel Discussion

The panel's contributions further considered the challenges that impact the retention of women parliamentarians, such as abuse, from both the media and online, and a lack of family-friendly policies.



*Photo credit: Scottish Parliament*

Deputy Mary Le Hegarat (Jersey) opened the discussion by outlining the complexities of abuse in smaller jurisdictions. She noted that navigating any career in a small community could bring challenges but that these did not compare to the negativity she had received as a States Member. Despite her work on landmark legislation for Violence Against Women and Girls and Modern Slavery, she had received bad media attention for travelling overseas. She spoke of her disappointment that international cooperation continued to attract negative feedback but highlighted that participation in the CWP Conference had inspired her to take a different approach to media attention.

The new Social Media Monitoring Programme in the Scottish Parliament was outlined by Bob Mason, Information Security Analyst at the Scottish Parliament. The programme collected data through a key word tracker and produced a feedback report, which was then contextualised by the social media monitoring team. 600 items had been reported to the police, but Mr Mason acknowledged that follow up was sometimes restricted by Members' lack of time and unwillingness to be in the media, with the team instead reporting potential criminality and attending court as witnesses. He also noted that research showed many Members were leaving politics due to social media abuse, and many of those leaving were women. To address this, the team were creating a Member induction package to show what support was on offer and how security services could help.

Addressing another challenge faced by women parliamentarians, Hon. Joelle Ladislaus outlined attitudes towards parental leave and childcare in the Gibraltar Parliament. She explained that the Parliament was not set up to accommodate working parents; for example, notice of parliamentary sessions was only given a week ahead. She emphasised that supporting both parents benefitted women too. Despite female representation in Gibraltar Parliament doubling in 2023 and the first female speaker being appointed, women parliamentarians remained in the minority. Hon. Ladislaus hoped that having a female speaker who understood parental needs would bring about much needed reforms, demonstrating the value of representative parliaments. As a result of the conference, she was inspired to negotiate with third party childcare providers to make childcare during working hours more accessible.

In her address, Natalie Don-Innes MSP shared her experience of maternity leave and support while in Parliament, having been elected when she was 7 ½ months pregnant and already mother to a daughter. She explained that MSPs lacked statutory maternity rights and relied on an informal agreement with their party. Having been elected in 2021 during the pandemic, the creche had not yet reopened and challenges for breast-feeding parliamentarians remained. Ms Don-Innes reiterated the need to remove the stigma from remote working and encourage a family-friendly environment for both the public and Members.

## **Q&A**

Following this contribution, Louise Doublet (Jersey) asked whether Conference childcare could be considered going forward, as it may have a considerable effect on participation. Sarah Boyack MSP noted this as a topic for future discussion.

Delegates from the Senedd drew upon the Social Media Monitoring programme and asked Bob Mason to give a presentation to the Women's Caucus. He flagged the difficulty in identifying online actors, which had led to a disparity between reports and police action.

Sioned Williams MS highlighted the double-edged sword of women's political engagement: entering politics early and becoming disillusioned versus standing later and missing opportunities. Delegates discussed voluntary agreements on working hours and the power of setting boundaries by saying no. The impact of children's perceptions of their parents being in political life was also raised. Sarah Boyack MSP closed the session by reminding delegates that encouraging retention did not mean that those standing down should feel guilty, as they would continue to use their expertise and contribute to other sectors.



*All photo credit: Scottish Parliament*



## Conclusion

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Roz McCall MSP summarised the key themes of the Conference, noting the underlying consideration of how men are engaging in these conversations. She highlighted the dominant themes of childcare and work-life balance, including the importance of setting clear boundaries for parliamentary work.

Sarah Boyack MSP noted that all delegates should have action points from the Conference and that these should be shared with male counterparts at the BIMR Conference in June. She thanked colleagues and staff for their contributions to a successful CWP Conference.

## Key Themes Explored

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### Gender Sensitive Measures

To ensure equal representation, parliaments need formalised gender sensitive mechanisms in place. These can include party-wide gender quotas and gender-sensitive scrutiny processes as well as party-specific all-women shortlists.

### Equality networks and support

Women's Caucuses can provide integral support to women parliamentarians, including opportunities for stakeholder engagement and informal legislative scrutiny. Ensuring equality networks are prioritised and integrated into parliamentary business can help contribute to wider gender sensitive efforts.

### Representation of Women in Parliament

It was noted that quota mechanisms should be adapted to fit each electoral system and reflect jurisdictions' contexts. Research was cited that found that an increase in women parliamentarians led to more gender sensitive policies and, in many cases, a higher calibre of political candidates overall.

### Hybrid Working

Delegates recognised the stigma surrounding hybrid working in politics and the cycles of exclusion that this created. It was noted that the provision of family-friendly facilities and adjustments, such as standardised working hours, could help tackle this issue.

### Education for the public and parliamentarians

Public understanding of the duties of women parliamentarians was seen as integral to female political representation and security. Further education for parliamentarians was also discussed, recognising the ongoing learning and development opportunities in this role.

### Youth engagement in politics

The impact of a linear understanding of political participation was discussed alongside the inequities in political education and resources. Engagement with young women was seen as fundamental to promoting the next generation of women parliamentarians.

## Delegates



### Cyprus

Hon. Savia Orphanidou MP  
Marianna Kaisis (Delegation Secretary)



### Gibraltar

Hon. Joelle Ladislaus MP



### Guernsey

Deputy Yvonne Burford  
Eliot Gallienne (Delegation Secretary)



### Isle of Man

Daphne Caine MHK  
Ann Corlett MHK  
Tanya August-Phillips MLC  
Hayley Tasker (Delegation Secretary)



### Jersey

Deputy Hilary Jeune  
Deputy Mary Le Hegarat  
Casey Tucker (Delegation Secretary)



### Malta

Hon. Davina Sammut Hlli MP  
Hon. Graziella Attard-Previ MP



### Northern Ireland

Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Claire Sugden MLA  
Caroline Moore  
Nicola Crawford (Delegation Secretary)



### Scotland

Sarah Boyack MSP  
Roz McCall MSP  
Charlotta Craig  
Amy Hall  
\*Numerous MSPs participated



### UK

Sharon Hodgson MP  
Helen Haywood (Acting BIM Regional Secretary)  
Daisy Nash (Delegation Secretary)



### Wales

Natasha Asghar MS  
Rhianon Passmore MS  
Sioned Williams MS  
Elin Sutton (Delegation Secretary)

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