

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

**WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF SELECTION
AND ELECTION IN UK PARLIAMENT**



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FOREWORD

SAM SMETHERS, CEO FAWCETT SOCIETY



One hundred years after the first women secured the vote, and the first woman was elected to Parliament, we can see that women in politics make a real difference. They campaign on issues that directly impact women's lives. They fight for changes that often men don't identify as a priority. You have only to look at Westminster today to see the way that women across the political parties are driving and shaping an agenda which would simply not be heard if they were not there. From up-skirting to abortion rights, from domestic violence to the gender pay gap, from sexual harassment to women's representation, it is women in Parliament who are repeatedly leading the way. But there are still too few of them and diversity of lived experience and identities is still sorely lacking.

This important research confirms that asking women to stand, and doing so repeatedly, is vital if we are to change the face of our politics, speed up progress and get more women in. It confirms that political party initiatives to get more women in, offering mentoring and training are valued by the women themselves. But it also shows very clearly that supporting and encouraging women is only half the story. We have to do more than that if we want to transform our Parliament and our politics: our institutions have to change. We need the culture and practices in Parliament, in our town halls and in our political parties to welcome women in. We also need the harassment and abuse of women in politics and public life to end. It is undoubtedly driving some women out of politics and deterring others from coming forward.

Following the death of Emily Wilding Davison, Millicent Fawcett wrote; "Courage calls to courage everywhere, and its voice cannot be denied". The voices of women who have contributed to this research are loud and clear. They are motivated by public service, wanting to help people in their communities. Yet in many cases, their experience of seeking selection or standing as a candidate has been a bruising one. They do not fit the pre-conceived image of the "ideal candidate". They are told that they are not welcome. They struggle to make it fit with their childcare or caring commitments. In some cases, they face intimidation and harassment. BAME women and disabled women face additional barriers and discrimination. Women deserve so much better. Our democracy needs them. Courage calls to women everywhere to come forward and be part of the change that is still sorely needed. But courage also calls to our political parties, to Parliament and local government to confront reality and change themselves.

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Throughout this project we have received extensive support from individuals and organisations from across the political parties. Thank you to all those who have offered their support and insight including but not limited to Conservative Women's Organisation, Conservative Disability Group, Labour Women's Network, Women's Equality Party Liberal Democrat Women and Women2Win.

Any errors are the sole responsibility of the authors.

ABOUT THE FAWCETT SOCIETY

The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading campaign for equality between women and men. We trace our roots back to 1866, when Millicent Fawcett began her lifetime's work leading the peaceful campaign for women's votes. Today we remain the most authoritative, independent advocate for women's rights in the UK.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

It is 100 years since some women first won the vote and approaching 100 years since the first woman was elected to the House of Commons. Since then and particularly over the last 20 years women's representation in our politics has been transformed, with impacts on the nature and content of political discourse and policy. Yet women remain significantly underrepresented, making up only 32% of all MPs, with significant variation across political parties. While progress has been made, a significant amount of work is still needed to ensure that Parliament reflects a diverse range of voices.

This report considers what enables some people to get through the “eye of the needle” (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995) and succeed in getting elected. There are a number of stages that make up the journey to political office. An individual must first have political aspirations and be willing to be a candidate. Next, they must be selected by a political party. They must then be elected by the public and take up their role in political office. While a large section of the population is eligible to become an MP, only a very small number of people make it to this final point.

This report explores the experiences of women at each stage of the process of becoming an MP. It considers the reasons people do and do not proceed to the next stage, as well as differences between the perceptions and approaches of MPs, aspirants, and activists who have chosen not to stand (non-aspirants). In particular, it sets out to understand the role that careers play in women's experiences of selection and election, not least how they facilitate success. What resources do some careers bring that other careers do not? Does the relationship between certain careers and politics work differently for women and men? And what does this reveal about how the process of choosing our representatives can be made more equal?

Methodology

This report draws on a multi-pronged research design employing quantitative and qualitative research methods. It has four key components: (i) focus groups; (ii) semi-structured interviews; (iii) a survey of MPs; and (iv) analysis of publicly available data on MPs' career histories. Focus groups and short interviews were conducted with 47 female candidates, aspirants and non-aspirant party members to understand their experience of selection and the political process. A further twenty-six semi-structured interviews with women and men MPs were undertaken in order to understand their routes into Parliament and what facilitated or inhibited their success. Analysis of publicly available data on the careers of all sitting MPs was undertaken to identify whether there are trends in the types of careers pursued by MPs prior to entering Parliament. This included MPs' “About me” website page and *the Times Guide to the House of Commons 2017*, which includes short biographies and career histories of all sitting MPs. A survey of MPs, with 113 respondents (18% of sitting MPs) was also employed to understand MPs' career trajectories and their selection processes.

Findings

General

- We find that women and other traditionally marginalised groups face obstacles at each stage of the political process and that political parties and party gatekeepers play a pivotal role at every stage.
- The journey to political office, in its current form, is organised such that a number of resources are required at each stage such as money, time, personal credibility, flexibility and party support and networks. These are harder for women to acquire due to the gendered nature of both politics and society. While other identities, not least, ethnicity, class and disability, mediate access to these resources, men continue to have greater access due to factors such as the unequal division of domestic responsibilities, the gender pay gap and the barriers to party participation.

- Careers play a role in providing these resources. Many successful candidates and aspirants pointed to their careers as facilitating their ability to save money, gain credibility, stop working or manage their own time. These were important factors which allowed them to progress to the next stage on the journey to Parliament.
- In addition to gendered access to resources, we find ongoing and explicit resistance to the inclusion of women in politics. There are multiple sources of this resistance, both individual and institutional. Equipping typically marginalised groups with the necessary resources through careers or through party support will not in and of itself challenge some of the deeply embedded opposition to their recruitment, selection and election. In order to ensure that women can fulfil their democratic right to participate and be represented within the political sphere, this resistance must be addressed head-on.

From activist to candidate: the journey to the House of Commons

Deciding to stand: from eligible to aspirant

Political motivations: The majority of both women and men were politically motivated by a desire to enact change and the perception that national politics was the best way to do this. Representing women or specific groups of women also motivated a significant number of female aspirants to seek selection.

Political aspirations and families: This research finds that socialisation and exposure to politics, in addition to encouragement, shaped political interest and political aspirations and that families, careers and political parties played a central role in doing these things. For women and men, having a family member who was active within a party or community organisation or served as an elected representative was central to nurturing their interest in politics and encouraging them to run.

Careers: Careers which offer exposure to national politics can also fulfil this role by nurturing political interest, providing knowledge and introducing citizens to the political sphere and political mentors.

Party encouragement: Both women and men MPs and candidates had a long-standing interest in politics; however women were less likely to have perceived themselves as future MPs. A number of women described feeling that they did not ‘fit’ the traditional image of an MP while others described being actively discouraged by party members from going forward for selection. Being directly asked or ‘recruited’ by their political party or a political mentor was a key factor which influenced women’s decisions to seek selection.

Party organisation and culture: Active participation within a party is important in order to receive party encouragement. The organisation and culture of political parties were cited as a key barriers to women participating and progressing within party structures on the same terms as men at this initial stage.

Party demand: Party demand can create bigger supply pools – a number of women stated that equality rhetoric, equality promotion and equality guarantees were clear signs that they were wanted by the party and shaped their political aspirations.

Getting selected: from aspirant to candidate

RESOURCES

Skills: It was perceived that a range of skills including listening and communication skills, public speaking and media skills are a benefit to aspirants during the selection stage. These can also be acquired through previous careers.

Money: The costs of being selected and elected are high and personal financial resources are a necessity for those seeking political office. This can significantly hinder the selection of those from lower socioeconomic groups and can act as a barrier for women.

Time: Getting selected, and being a candidate, can be a full-time job, as parties require a significant time and personal commitment. This commitment was thought to be largely incompatible with respondents' caring responsibilities and the maintenance of full-time employment, and detrimental to their career, family life and personal relationships.

Flexibility: Given the time and financial costs involved in seeking selection, employment flexibility is crucial. It was perceived that the political process benefits those who have flexible jobs and supportive employers.

Personal networks and patronage: Research participants perceived that political parties continue to operate on systems of patronage, rather than merit, with selection based on who, rather than what you know. This was thought to advantage men, who are able to have greater opportunities to build informal connections. It was also perceived that men tend to support and promote other men.

Informal candidate criteria: local and party dedication: History of party activism, professional and voluntary experience and a "local connection" are key considerations for UK party selectorates. While these criteria are not explicitly in favour of men, it was perceived that they often advantage men indirectly during the selection process.

Informal candidate criteria: career history: It was perceived that certain career histories can aid or hinder the selection of candidates, making them 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' to local members. There was a perception, however, that valued career paths did not provide the same gravitas to women as men. Being a 'career politician,' that is, following the professionalised, rather than the local party route into politics, was perceived as unacceptable to local selectorates. A number of women spoke about how having this experience worked against them as they were thought to have disingenuous motivations.

RESISTANCE

Selectorate bias: Research participants perceived that party members' "ideal candidate" is not only male but white, middle-class and able-bodied. Female candidates spoke extensively of being asked questions at events and meetings about childcare and their marital status and about their religious status, ethnicity and disability.

Abuse and harassment: Many female candidates and MPs reported experiencing hostility, harassment and threats of violence from the media, the public and from members of their own party. This was viewed as gendered and was felt to be compounded by a lack of strong party will to address the problem.

Resistance to equality measures: Ongoing resistance to internal party rules around gender and political recruitment/selection was perceived as an obstacle to greater women's representation. Participants reported that these rules were often met with resentment and subversion from the local party.

Winnable and unwinnable seats: In order to increase the number of women ultimately elected, women must be elected and selected in winnable seats. A number of women spoke about being asked to seek selection in local organisations where they had no chance of being selected in order to meet the formal or informal requirement for gender balance or to ensure that the process appeared competitive.

Getting elected: from candidate to MP

RESOURCES

Party Support: Many of the resources needed for selection also apply to election, particularly money, time and flexibility. It was perceived that parties may give additional electoral resources to certain candidates, giving them a better chance of success.

Government support: The role of Government in ensuring the election of women was also perceived as significant. Women who identified as disabled referenced the benefit of campaign support under the Access to Elected Office fund for aiding those who need it during the campaign period.

RESISTANCE

Electorate bias: Respondents suggested that in some more socially conservative areas candidate ethnicity, religion and sexuality continue to shape voter choice, making it more difficult for a diverse range of women to get elected.

Taking office: being an MP

RESOURCES

Time: Elected MPs stated the difficulties of managing their role as a representative and their personal lives due to the long and unsociable working hours, the required time commitment and the expectation that MPs be available to constituents around the clock.

RESISTANCE

Westminster culture: The culture of Westminster, the traditions, informal rules and expectations were perceived as an ongoing issue for female participants. The need to live in two places was thought to be particularly reflective of this and is a difficulty for those with caring responsibilities. For female ethnic minority MPs, the feminist challenge to the culture of Westminster has not necessarily included a broader project for diversity.

Media Scrutiny: It was perceived that media scrutiny, and the proliferation of additional negative stereotypes around, for example, disabled people, is a preventive factor for a number of women from marginalised groups who decided not to run.

About the careers of MPs

Education: The MP survey finds that a university education is a common feature of MPs' backgrounds. While men and women had similar levels of educational attainment, this has implications for aspirants from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Careers: This research indicates that women and men who succeed in becoming MPs have taken broadly similar routes, although experience in the voluntary sector is more common for women; while business experience is less common for women MPs. It shows that political jobs were considered the most useful job by MPs in terms of accessing political office and that women were more likely to have had a greater number of political jobs.

Activism: Political activism is also a common feature of MPs' backgrounds, with women and men MPs having similar levels. However, the MP survey does show that men MPs were much more likely to have been active in student politics and to have spoken at party conferences than women MPs.

Implications

Significant challenges to increasing women's representation remain at every stage of the process to becoming an MP. While a common argument is that political progression is based on merit, in practice, getting selected depends on a number of other factors which may inhibit diversity amongst political candidates and discourage women from standing for election. However, we have found indicators of possible strategies for success. In some cases, the simple act of a political leader making a call for more women to participate played an important part in individuals embarking on the process of selection. There is support too for party programmes intended to support women in this process. Importantly asking women to stand, encouraging them to see themselves as "MP material" and demonstrating that they are seen this way by their party makes a real difference. These interventions are likely to increase the number of women candidates and help equip them for the process. But a change in representation is likely to require tackling the underlying resistance to women in power, the processes that disadvantage them and other underrepresented groups, and our political culture more widely.

1. INTRODUCTION

As we mark the centenary of the first women getting the vote it is clear that real progress has been made on women's representation. There are more women in Parliament than ever before; today nearly a third of MPs are women (Keen & Cracknell, 2018). However, there remains work to do to achieve the goal of a more gender-balanced Parliament. Women remain significantly underrepresented given that they make up just over half of the UK population (World Bank, 2017).

It also matters that, alongside increasing the number of women in Parliament, we increase the diversity of women (and men) in Parliament. We need more disabled women, more women from ethnic minorities, more diverse LGBTQI women.¹ To be genuinely successful, efforts to increase the gender balance of Parliament must reflect the importance of that wider diversity and recognise the nuanced ways in which the experiences of people with other protected characteristics differ and connect. In other words, whilst gender matters, we must be intersectional in our analysis and solutions.

Many of the most fundamental challenges faced by advocates for women's political participation a century ago remain in place; women continue to undertake the majority of unpaid care and domestic labour (ONS, 2016) and hence have less time for politics. They often face abuse and ridicule if they speak out and have a public voice (Amnesty International UK, 2017; Campbell, Hudson and Rüdiger, 2018; Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2017). Change in politics has not kept pace with the ambition for gender-balanced politics; the 2017 general election saw an increase in women's representation from 2015 of just 2.7 percentage points, from 29.4% to 32.1%, and men continue to dominate politics at all levels of governance in the UK (Jewell & Bazeley, 2018).

This report considers what has enabled some women to get through the "eye of the needle" (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995:1) and succeed in getting elected. Their experiences can offer valuable insights into the barriers women face and, importantly, how we can support greater numbers and more diverse women to participate in politics and become MPs. Their stories also reveal some of the things which need to change more broadly and fundamentally in our politics to ensure it facilitates women's representation. In particular, we set out to understand the role that careers play in women's experiences of selection and election, not least how they facilitate success. What resources do some careers bring that other careers do not? Does any relationship between certain careers and politics work differently for women and men? And what does this reveal about how the process of choosing our representatives can be made more equal?

Considering the experiences of those who succeed in isolation can lead to "survivor bias". This form of selection bias can lead to false beliefs about the reasons some people are successful rather than others because the evidence about those who did not succeed is ignored (Shermer, 2014). That's why for this work we have also explored the experiences of women earlier in the process. The report includes the findings of interviews and focus groups with aspirants (women who have made the decision to become an MP but have not yet been successful) and women who are party members or activists but who have decided they do not want to stand (referred to here as "Non-aspirants"). This enables us to better understand what facilitates success at the multiple stages in the process of becoming an MP, but also to acknowledge where factors that might have enabled one person to succeed do not have the same effects for others.

This research also considers the experiences of men MPs. This enables us to consider whether they have taken different paths to Parliament to women and how far their experiences of selection and election differ from those of women in the study. In this way, we can explore whether barriers faced are gendered.

¹ It is reported that 9 of the 45 publicly LGBTQ Parliamentarians are women (Reynolds, 2018), this represents 4% of women MPs. ONS has found that around 2% of the populations identified as Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual (ONS, 2017a) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualidentityuk/2016>. However, the 9 LGBTQ women in Parliament are not representative of the wider LGBTQ population – for instance they are all white.

We found recognition that those in leadership roles in our politics are committed to supporting women's representation. Research participants valued many of the interventions that have been introduced such as women's training courses and public statements about increasing gender balance. We found too that careers can provide important resources such as money, credibility and access to networks, for women seeking to become MPs. These can be highly valuable, enabling women to overcome some of the challenges they face as aspirants and candidates. For instance, women point to the impact of mentors they met through work that helped them navigate the selection process. This may explain why women MPs we surveyed tended to have had more political jobs prior to entering Parliament than the men MPs we surveyed.

However, there is still work to be done as we continue to strive for equal representation. This research also reveals ongoing challenges for women who seek to become MPs. Career-based resources are not evenly distributed amongst women who have the potential to become excellent representatives. Nor do they negate all of the challenges this research reveals that women face as they seek to participate in national politics.

High levels of resistance to women and other underrepresented groups in politics persist. This resistance manifests itself both in structures and processes, which often leave women at a disadvantage, but also in the culture of politics, through gendered hostility and abuse experienced by women candidates. The presence of this resistance indicates that progress is not guaranteed and that it is likely to be necessary to intervene, at various stages in the process in order to achieve a truly representative Parliament. Those committed to increase women's representation can take action to increase women's access to the resources that enable them to succeed in politics. A more fundamental response will focus on overcoming the deep-rooted resistance to women holding political power, removing barriers and pushing for cultural change.

The research is cross-party, with representatives from all seven parties who take their seats in the House of Commons included across the research. We have also included representatives from the Women's Equality Party (WEP) as an organisation explicitly established to address women's representation.

That said, we do not seek to offer a comprehensive overview of the state of play for each of the political parties, rather this mix is intended to ensure we reflect a range of perspectives and experiences. Neither does this report seek to make party-specific recommendations or offer detailed policy proposals; those will depend on the contexts and options available to different key actors and the choices they make. We do though draw out key themes which are relevant across the board and identify areas where interventions could significantly speed up the pace of change.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF MPS, WOMEN ASPIRANTS AND ACTIVISTS

This report draws on a multi-pronged research design with four components employing quantitative and qualitative research methods: (i) focus groups; (ii) semi-structured interviews; (iii) a survey (iv) analysis of publicly available data on MPs' career histories.

Of particular value in this research is the emphasis on the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of women who are not MPs. In this report we divide them into two groups. Firstly, aspirant women, those women who have decided to stand for Parliament but who have not yet been successful, either at the selection (who we describe as "aspirants" throughout the report) or election stage (who we describe as "candidates"). Secondly, non-aspirant women, women party members and activists who have decided not to seek selection as a Parliamentary candidate. When quoting these women we describe them as "activists". The perspectives and experiences of this group are under-researched and so our findings here offer valuable new insights. Including women from these groups overcomes the risk of 'survivor bias'; that is relying on the views only of those who have successfully negotiated party candidate recruitment processes and election. By researching aspirant women, we are able to explore how far the experiences and strategies of those who have not become an MP (either through choice or otherwise) share backgrounds and experiences with the women who have successfully become MPs. The experiences of non-aspirant women enable us to determine whether they are different to aspirant and elected women. In particular, they provide critical input into the discussion of how best to increase the numbers of women in Parliament as this group represents a significant additional pool of potential candidates for the future. Understanding their attitudes to standing for election – why they have not put themselves forward and what might need to change in order for them to become aspirant women - can indicate how parties might grow the number of women candidates, and how the process of selection might be reformed to make it more appealing to a wider group of women.

Each woman's experience of political engagement is different. It is particularly important to note though that women with other protected characteristics are likely to face additional and distinct challenges in participating in politics (Amnesty.org.uk; Shepherd-Robinson & Lovenduski, 2003; Speaker's Conference, 2010). This research has sought to actively recruit and include those perspectives wherever possible. It is vital that the experiences of women belonging to further underrepresented groups are reflected in our approach to achieve a gender equal Parliament.

Our analysis triangulates the findings from each of these strands to explore experiences of selection and election, from the moment of first engagement in party politics through to election to Parliament. This report includes illustrative quotes from interview and focus group participants. All participants have been anonymised and their party affiliation has been removed. This was to ensure that interviewees could speak with ease without fear of being identified.

The report includes quantitative findings from three sources. The analysis of publicly available data offers insights into the careers of all MPs elected in or after 2010. However, there are limits to this data as it is only possible to assess what has been made available and relies on what others consider relevant. To respond to this challenge we conducted a survey of MPs, developed to reflect the wider literature on MPs' career trajectories and the selection process. The survey offers more detailed career information about a smaller group of women and men MPs. Whilst these findings cannot be generalised to all MPs they offer a rich source of specific information about how MPs in the survey achieved their current position.

The qualitative research, whilst it cannot be generalised to the wider population, nevertheless provides rich, contextualized data. The focus groups permit in-depth and collective discussion of experiences at different stages of the process of becoming an MP. The discursive format of focus groups facilitates participants to develop and test ideas with each other. In so doing, it can reveal how far experiences are shared. The interviews provide a space where respondents can reflect on their experiences, guided by a schedule which echoes core issues raised in existing literature. Importantly, this is a confidential space where interviewees can open up about experiences and reflections they might not otherwise discuss. Throughout the report, emphasis has been added to quotations to highlight relevant points.

2.2 FOCUS GROUPS WITH ASPIRANTS AND NON-ASPIRANTS

Focus groups were conducted with 47 women aspirants (28) and non-aspirants (19). This included 22 women from the Labour Party, 13 Conservatives, 7 Liberal Democrats, 2 from the Women's Equality Party and one each from the Scottish National, Green and Democratic Unionist parties. Of our focus group participants, six identified as being from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Group (BAME,) five as disabled people and one woman was transgender. To broaden access fifteen telephone interviews were held with those unable to attend one of the groups or from the smaller parties. Their views have been added to this data.

The focus groups were held in London and Manchester between the 14th and 31st of May 2018 and were organised by party to encourage participants to discuss their experiences openly. Participants were recruited through a mix of social media, word of mouth and snowballing.² In addition, party organisations such as Women2Win, Labour Women's Networks and Liberal Democrat Women promoted the opportunity to participate to their networks. Groups were facilitated by a researcher using a discussion guide, designed with the project's academic partners. Non-aspirant women were paid an incentive of £30 for their participation. Whilst the groups were held in London and Manchester it is important to note that aspirants had stood as candidates nationwide.

2.3 MP INTERVIEWS

Twenty-six semi-structured interviews with women and men MPs were undertaken between the 23rd of April and the 24th of May 2018. Twenty-three were conducted face to face in Westminster, three were conducted by telephone. The interviews addressed participants' experiences of selection, election, and being an MP, with a particular focus on their perspectives on how their career backgrounds had aided or inhibited them. These data enable an examination of how MPs understand their routes into Parliament, and what facilitated or inhibited their success. By interviewing men and women we are importantly able to examine any sex differences in MPs' accounts. Fifteen of the interviewees were women and 11 were men. Three participants were BAME. Sixteen were from the Labour Party, six were Conservatives, two were Liberal Democrats, one was from the SNP and one from Plaid Cymru.

2.4 MP CAREERS

Analysis of publicly available data on the careers of all sitting MPs was undertaken to identify whether there were particular trends in the types of careers pursued by MPs prior to entering Parliament, and specifically, whether there were any sex differences. In the first stage, we used topic modelling to analyse data on MPs "About me" website page and *the Times Guide* to the House of Commons 2017, which includes short biographies and career histories of all sitting MPs.³ This approach involves a computer programme identifying topics within particular documents; in this case the MPs' own statements about

2 Where participants are asked to identify and invite others who meet recruitment criteria.

3 Topic modelling consists in a collection of statistical models aimed to discover abstract topics from a collection of documents. In particular, this project used Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA). LDA tries to find topics within documents and sets of words within those topics. This method is driven by the content of the text rather than researcher led categories or coding.

themselves and what *the Times Guide* included in their descriptions of each MP. This analysis did not, however, identify commonalities in career histories. However, it did offer insights into the types of information considered pertinent by Parliamentarians and others about their experience and background.

To supplement this at the second stage we then manually coded information about MPs' careers from *the Times Guide* for all MPs elected in or after 2010. This included 404 MPs. More recently elected members were prioritised here to increase the relevance of findings to contemporary candidates. Each Member's entry was coded according to whether it indicated they had held one or more of 23 different job types. These job categories were selected as they have been previously used for academic research projects focused on MPs (Campbell et al., 2015; vanHeerde-Hudson & Campbell, 2015). The benefits here are twofold. Firstly, this makes our findings comparable with similar relevant work. Secondly, researchers have developed these categories to capture the careers of politicians in particular. This method is admittedly reliant on the information that has been recorded by the Guide's editors and contributors. However, the Times' data has been used elsewhere in academic research (Childs & Webb, 2012) as offering valuable insight and enables us to collect data on all Members of Parliament.

2.5 SURVEY OF MPS

A detailed survey with a small sample of MPs was undertaken with MPs who take their seats in the House (that is, excluding Sinn Fein). All MPs were sent paper and electronic copies of the survey which included questions about their careers prior to entering Parliament and their experiences of becoming an MP. The survey was in the field between the 30th of March and the 11th of May 2018. Of the 113 respondents (constituting 18% of all MPs who take their seats), 53% (61) were women and 46% (52) were men. Labour Party respondents comprised 54% (61) of the sample, 30% (34) were Conservative and 16% (18) were from other parties.⁴ Barriers to participating are likely to have impacted the response rate for different parties. For instance, some MPs with ministerial roles cited that they were unable to participate due to the ministerial code.

The size of the sample and its lack of representativeness do not allow us to draw generalisable conclusions. The survey over-represents Labour and smaller parties, and underrepresents the Conservative party relative to the current make-up of the House. This is taken into account when analysing the data, for example, where possible we explore whether what appears to be gender differences are in fact associated with party differences.

The survey also over-represents women MPs relative to their presence in the House. With a large proportion of female MPs respondents (29% of women MPs participated), and crucially with a breakdown by party which is similar to the actual breakdown among all female MPs, we can be confident that the data offers valuable insights into the hurdles and characteristics of women's participation in elite politics.

⁴ Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole figure, therefore in some cases data may not sum to 100%.

3. CONTEXT

In almost all countries across the globe, men are politically over-represented and women politically under-represented, despite being half of the world's population (World Bank, 2017). The degree to which representation is skewed within Parliamentary politics in men's favour differs significantly by country and region. On average, men hold 77% of Parliamentary seats across the globe (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). There are only three countries in the world, Rwanda, Cuba and Bolivia, where there are fewer men than women holding Parliamentary seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

Table 1: Women in National Parliaments

Rank	Country	Lower or single House			
		Elections	Seats (currently filled in Parliament)	Women	% W
1	Rwanda	16.09.2013	80	49	61.3%
2	Cuba	11.03.2018	605	322	53.2%
3	Bolivia	12.10.2014	130	69	53.1%
4	Grenada	13.03.2018	15	7	46.7%
5	Namibia	29.11.2014	104	48	46.2%
6	Nicaragua	06.11.2016	92	42	45.7%
7	Costa Rica	04.02.2018	57	26	45.6%
8	Sweden	14.09.2014	349	152	43.6%
9	Mexico	07.06.2015	500	213	42.6%
10	South Africa	07.05.2014	394	167	42.4%

Abridged data from Inter Parliamentary Union, based on data provided from national parliaments by 1st June 2018

The lack of diversity in Parliament remains a significant problem in the UK, where still less than a third of the House of Commons are women. The 2017 election returned a record 208 female MPs, 32% of the overall number. While this is an increase from the 2015 election, where 29% of MPs were female (Keen & Cracknell, 2018), the pace of change remains slow. The UK currently ranks only 41st in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's global league table of Women in Parliaments, failing to reach the same levels as many of its European counterparts (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women face further obstacles. Following the 2017 election, BAME women make up 4% of Parliamentarians, compared to 6.5% of the overall population. It is believed that there are two women MPs who identify as disabled. This low number would mean a substantial gap of representation, as 16% of working age adults and 45% of adults over State Pension age report having a limiting long-term illness, impairment or disability (Jewell and Bazeley, 2018).

Some of the devolved assemblies and Parliaments perform better on women's representation than Westminster. Thirty-six per cent of Scottish Parliament members are women, the figure is 42% of the National Assembly for Wales and 30% for Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (House of Commons Library, 2018). We note however, that progress is not guaranteed, for example, women's representation in the Welsh Assembly has decreased having achieved the high water mark of equal representation of women and men in 2003.

Women are also significantly under-represented in local government which can serve as a key stepping stone into Parliament. As of 2017, women held 33 % of local authority council seats in England, 27% in Wales, 25% in Northern Ireland and 24% in Scotland (Fawcett, 2017).

The number of female MPs differs significantly by party. In February 2018, women were 45% of Labour MPs, 34% of SNP MPs, 33% of Liberal Democrats and 21% of Conservative MPs.

Table 2: The proportion of women MPs within political parties June 2018

Party	% of party's MPs who are women	Number of party's MPs who are women
Labour	45%	119
Conservative	21%	67
SNP	34%	12
Liberal Democrats	33%	4
Other	25%	7

Data from *Parliament.uk*(a)

The difference in the number of MPs is in part the result of the difference in the number of candidates fielded by the different parties. Women constituted 41% of The Labour Party's candidates, 29% of the Conservative Party, 29% of Liberal Democrat candidates and 34% of SNP candidates (House of Commons Library, 2018). The low number of women in Parliament has also contributed to gender imbalance in the Cabinet. Currently only 6 (26%) of the 23 cabinet members are women (Jewell and Bazeley, 2018).

Research has shown political parties must not only recruit and select women but also ensure that they are run in constituencies where they have a realistic chance of being elected. This requires fielding female candidates in 'safe' or 'winnable' seats. The greatest opportunity for increasing female MPs is to run female candidates in constituencies where the sitting MP retires (retirement seats), or in marginal (or target) seats, where the party expects to win a seat from another party (CFWD, 2014; 2015). Political parties differ with regards to where they have traditionally run their female candidates.

4. THE CHALLENGE

A great deal is known already about the barriers to achieving equal representation between women and men. It is clear that political parties have a pivotal role to play as gatekeepers to political office. In other words, political parties are the main organisations responsible for recruiting and selecting candidates presented to the electorate, (Lovenduski & Norris, 1993; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Caul, 1999; Kenny, 2013). Only five of Parliament's 650 MPs are Independents (Parliament.uk (b)). However, each of these was originally elected as a member of a political party. In the case of safe seats, where a party can predict an almost certain win, party selectors essentially choose the representative (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Accordingly, the preferences of the party selectors have a much greater effect on the composition of Parliament than the electorate (Rahat, 2007). Candidate recruitment and selection therefore operates as a filtering process where political parties whittle down the extremely large number of citizens who are eligible to run for political office in a population; to the smaller number of citizens who want to run; to the small number of people selected to run; to the minuscule band of citizens who are elected as representatives (Norris, 1997). This process is generally described in the stages as shown in figure below (Norris, 1997). It is this process that this research focuses on.

Figure 1: Process of becoming an officeholder (Norris, 1997)



In the UK, the selection processes of all the political parties normally involve broadly similar stages: approval, application, nomination, shortlisting, and selection.⁵ An individual must first be willing to go forward as a candidate and possess the motivation, resources and lifestyle which will allow her to stand for office. Next, they must be approved by the national political party as meeting the qualities they have agreed candidates must have, and then be selected for adoption by a local constituency party. Finally, they must be elected by the public.

Explanations for the under-representation of marginalised groups overwhelmingly rely on the “Supply and Demand” Model. This framework argues that under-representation is the result of the interaction between the supply of aspirants wanting to become political candidates and the demands of parties for certain types of candidates (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Supply-side barriers detail the factors that inhibit under-represented groups from being in the supply pool for politics. For example, due to the unequal distribution of childcare and domestic labour, and gendered segregation in paid employment, women are less likely to have the same resources considered necessary to pursue political office, such as time, finances or experience (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Women are, to illustrate, more likely to hold low paid, semi-skilled jobs or jobs in small family businesses with inflexible and long working hours and lower pay (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995: 111). Existing literature has also pointed to differences in confidence and political ambition amongst women which result from gendered patterns of socialisation in broader society and

⁵ We note that the processes were very different for the 2017 snap general election. The 2017 general election was announced on the 18 April, with just over seven weeks until polling day on 8 June. This short time frame meant parties had limited time to select candidates and campaign. Labour and the Conservatives made significant changes to their rules to accommodate this. More detail on the differences can be found in Campbell et. al (2018) pp.4.

the masculinised nature of politics (Lawless & Fox, 2005; 2010). Demand-side factors largely focus on the attitudes and preferences of party gatekeepers, who either implicitly or explicitly discriminate against female candidates.

It is absolutely critical to acknowledge the interconnected nature of supply and demand. More recent work has shown that supply factors are often shaped by the demand of political parties (Krook, 2010; Kenny, 2013; Verge, 2015), and hence by the historical over-representation of men. Women are not “less ambitious” than men, but rather their evaluation of whether or not they are what the party are looking for, as informed by previous candidate selection, and existing party cues may inhibit them from seeking selection (Krook, 2010; Kenny, 2013). It is also crucial to highlight the context that supply and demand operates within, the gendered nature of politics more broadly. Most political institutions and their associated rules, norms and values were established in the absence of women. While women continue to enter political spaces in greater numbers than before, these rules and norms continue to shape the experience of political actors (Lovenduski, 1993; Kenny, 2013). Furthermore, the impact of new rules such as targets and or gender quotas which reform gendered processes of recruitment reveal that political parties are able to select and elect female candidates when they are incentivised to do so (Krook, 2009; Franceschet et al., 2012). In particular, the recent example of the introduction of a legislative gender quota for the Irish 2016 election saw a historic high in terms of the numbers and proportion of women candidates. Parties had expressed concerns that they would not be able to recruit enough women to meet the 30% threshold required to access funding. Yet, all of the parties exceeded that threshold (Buckley, et al., 2016). In other words, the supply pool should not be thought of as a “fixed” number, but one that parties and other actors can enlarge as a direct result of their own acts and interventions to candidate recruitment and selection.

Progress has been made by the political parties on some of these barriers over the last 20 years, and parties are increasingly aware of the need to support women entering Parliament. However, there are new obstacles which threaten to roll back that progress. There is today increasing awareness of the impact of harassment and abuse, both on women already in public life and in preventing women and girls participating in public spaces (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2017). BAME women in particular face much higher levels of abuse and resistance than their white and male counterparts when they exercise their right to participate in public spaces (Dhrodia, 2017). This issue emerges clearly in this research, with women at all stages in the process of becoming an MP expressing concern about the levels of abuse and harassment they experience with many fearing for their safety. For non-aspirants, activists in this research who have decided not to stand, fear of this level of harassment was often described as a significant factor in that decision.

5. FROM ACTIVIST TO CANDIDATE: THE JOURNEY TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

The next section of this report draws primarily on the qualitative and survey evidence to explore the experiences of women at each stage of the “whittling down” process to becoming an MP. It considers the reasons people do not proceed to the next stage, as well as differences in perception and approach between MPs, aspirants, and activists who have chosen not to stand (non-aspirants). We also draw on interviews with men MPs in order to consider how far these challenges are gendered. The report is structured around each of the stages on the journey from political interest to election and working as an MP. Each of the stages presents different obstacles for typically marginalised groups which will be explored below.

5.1 DECIDING TO STAND: FROM ELIGIBLE TO ASPIRANT

A large amount of the population is eligible to stand for election, while only a limited number aspire to do so. In order to become an MP, women must first make an initial decision to seek political office. At this stage of the process, we are therefore concerned with what generates political interest and political aspirations amongst women and men, and what factors shape their decision to seek selection.

A common claim is that under-representation is a supply issue and that women do not put themselves forward for selection as they are less politically interested and have lower levels of confidence than men, although as highlighted above this perspective is challenged by the existing literature. The majority of participants in this research who sought selection, both women and men, expressed a long-standing interest in politics and were motivated by a desire to make a change and represent their community. Some women were further motivated by a desire to represent women and create change as and for women.

Socialisation and exposure to politics, in addition to encouragement, played a key role in shaping political interest and political aspirations for those who ran for selection. Families, political parties and jobs were common sites where this took place.

In developing political aspirations and making a decision to stand, encouragement from party members or recruitment by party gatekeepers was a key factor for women who decided to seek selection. Commitments from political parties to increasing women’s representation and programmes to train and support women candidates were raised as highly valuable. Whilst men MPs interviewed also described being encouraged to stand by others, they did not tend to consider this intervention pivotal to their decision to stand.

Families, jobs and political parties were key sites where participants were introduced to party gatekeepers who aided in demystifying politics and acted as key mentors. Political parties were particularly crucial in cultivating political aspirations and for some shaping the decision to seek selection. However, the section below outlines how women in this research (aspirants, non-aspirants and MPs), were less able to participate within local party structures than men. They were also less likely to perceive themselves and feel they were perceived as potential political candidates.

While party structures can hinder and discourage women from seeking selection, equality measures which create a political demand for women were key to encouraging women in the research, highlighting the possibility for future change where the political will is strong.

Political motivations: making a (gendered) change

The desire to enact change and the perception that national politics was the best way to do this was cited as a key reason for women and men who went forward for selection.

*It was partly the frustration of being a local councillor and having the limitations on what you can achieve. It's fantastic what you can achieve as a local councillor, but it's so local. **And for me it's about achieving some of that bigger change.***

Female aspirant

I think you could make a difference, you know, so of all the things that you could do, having a voice in any number of significant issues, having a real impact on your own constituency in your area, I think is very motivational.

Female candidate

I think it's the ability to be able to do things, isn't it? Take action and change your local area or represent the local people in a positive way.

Female candidate

This belief in the efficacy of MPs was in contrast to those who decided not to stand, who perceived the role of an MP and the current political system as an inefficient route for change. While a desire to enact change shaped their political interest and motivated them to get involved in politics, standing for election was not seen as the most effective way to achieve change.

I think you become an MP and you think you're going to have loads of power and be able to make change, but actually you're really constrained in what you do. We do have a system which means you have to generally vote in accordance with your party. And I think if you've got really strong values, that could be really difficult to do particularly if you want to progress.

Female activist

Similarly, both men and women MPs and aspirants were motivated by a sense that they had something to offer and expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and backgrounds of some of the MPs they had encountered. Their decisions to seek selection were influenced by a sense that they could improve the current system or do a better job; often that perception was driven by skills they had gained through careers.

Something that drove me absolutely around the bend was the sense that increasingly in Whitehall it was full of people who had never done a practical job. So that was a motivation for me. I felt I'd got a huge amount of experience, that I'd managed people and budgets. And I felt more MPs should have that experience.

Female candidate

The appeals were just to not let incompetent people be in charge of the country.

Female MP

While the desire to make a change motivated both women and men, women aspirants referenced their desire to make a gendered change. Representing women or specific groups of women motivated a significant number of female aspirants to seek selection. This group also stressed that they were able to contribute something unique as a woman. Whilst this may reflect the interests of those willing to participate in research on this topic it is notable that this was a much less important driver for the women who had succeeded in being elected. Only one woman MP articulated the desire to diversify Parliament as part of her decision-making process with others focusing more broadly on the previously mentioned motives.

I said no a number of times first of all [...] In the end I thought, even though there's nobody in politics like me, in terms of my background there was only one other black woman at that time, but we had very different backgrounds, so I thought, well I could always be the MP that I want to be, and I thought I'd give it a go.

Female MP

For me, it was about representation. For me, it was very much about seeing people like me involved in politics and feeling like we had voices.

Female candidate

I think to empower women, you can become like role models in some respects.

Female candidate

I feel it's very important that I stand, also as a disabled woman. Because women and particularly disabled people are so underrepresented and I think it's so important.

Female candidate

I have been a representative of a major business going to meet all men MPs, nearly all men and I'd come back and be like, "Oh, they're so dreadful, they're so awful and I could do better."

Female candidate

It's about being a champion. And actually, I think I'm going to say something slightly outrageous in that I think women are often much stronger than men.

Female candidate

Across the board, people were motivated by a belief that participating in Westminster politics would enable them to make a difference and that they could make a positive contribution. For aspirants, being a woman often formed part of that contribution. However, non-aspirants were much more likely to express cynicism about the potential for politics to impact on the causes they cared about which is likely to explain in part their lack of desire to become an MP.

Political aspirations: socialisation and encouragement

Political interest is key to harbouring political aspirations. This research suggests that socialisation and exposure to politics plays a large role in shaping political interest and political aspirations. While a long-standing interest in politics was the norm, women MPs and aspirants described not putting themselves forward due to a belief that they were not "MP material." This sentiment was expressed by women across the board, but was much less of a concern for male MPs. This is often considered a "supply factor" given that wider gender norms socialise men into seeing themselves in leadership positions. However, women's perceptions were overtly shaped by party demand and parties' long-standing tradition of selecting and running candidates with specific backgrounds and of a specific sex – what we consider should be regarded as the masculinised or gendered nature of politics. This lack of diversity led to a clear picture of the "ideal candidate," which discouraged women from seeing themselves as politicians. Women also reported feeling they were less likely to be seen by the party as potential candidates. Prior to the selection stage, women reported being actively discouraged from going forward for selection due to their own childcare responsibilities or because they were thought to be too young, which will be detailed further in the selection stage of the report.

A very great family friend who is also an MP put my name forward. I should have done it before but what stopped me was I didn't think people like me became MPs because I hadn't gone to a private school, I hadn't gone to Oxford or Cambridge, I wasn't a lawyer and I wasn't a man. I hadn't really thought people like me became MPs.

Female MP

You don't see people like you as MPs. I do see people like me as local councillors and that made it much easier. I mean, we know 10% of local councillors have got a disability and there are lot more women and there are a lot more people from the comprehensive school background that I come from. So it doesn't look like something that people like you don't do. That I think is the biggest barrier in a way.

Female unsuccessful aspirant

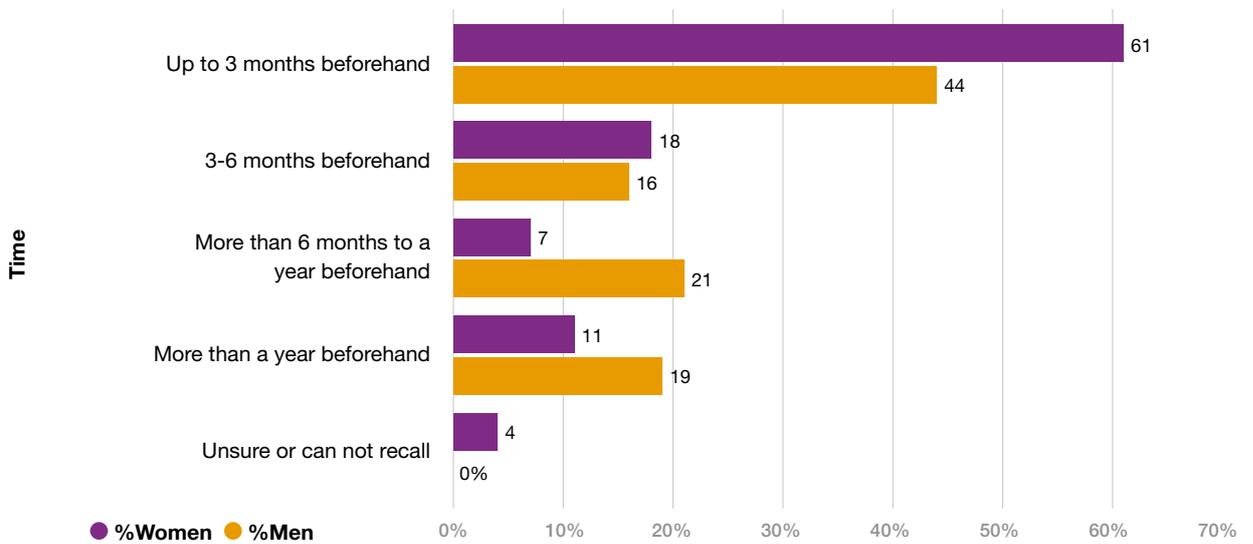


I was actually encouraged, and... without that act of encouragement, I would not be here today. Female MP

This perception was reflected in the results of the MP survey which show that male MPs have more long-term plans for election. A large majority of female MPs in our survey said that they made the decision to stand for Parliament shortly before the election, up to 6 months. Conversely, male responses were more evenly split across response options, suggesting that a larger proportion of them were planning to enter Parliament before their female colleagues.

Chart 1: How long before the selection of the first seat they won MPs decided to put themselves forward for the seat? (n=99)

Data from the survey of sitting MPs



Despite this commonly held belief, many of the women in the research had ultimately put themselves forward. That change in perception was often triggered by being asked to stand; the role of encouragement by their political party was cited as a key factor which influenced women’s decision to take the next step to become a candidate. Without this “recruitment” they may not have considered putting themselves forward, at least not at that time.

*I was actually encouraged and, for me, **without that act of encouragement, I would not be here today** without a shadow of a doubt.*

Female MP

*I was encouraged to stand for the council, but also **really quite forcefully encouraged to seek Parliamentary approval.** I’m sure that I would’ve done it at some stage, but I think the fact that I did it sooner rather than later was **because I was really strongly encouraged to by people in my local party.***

Female candidate

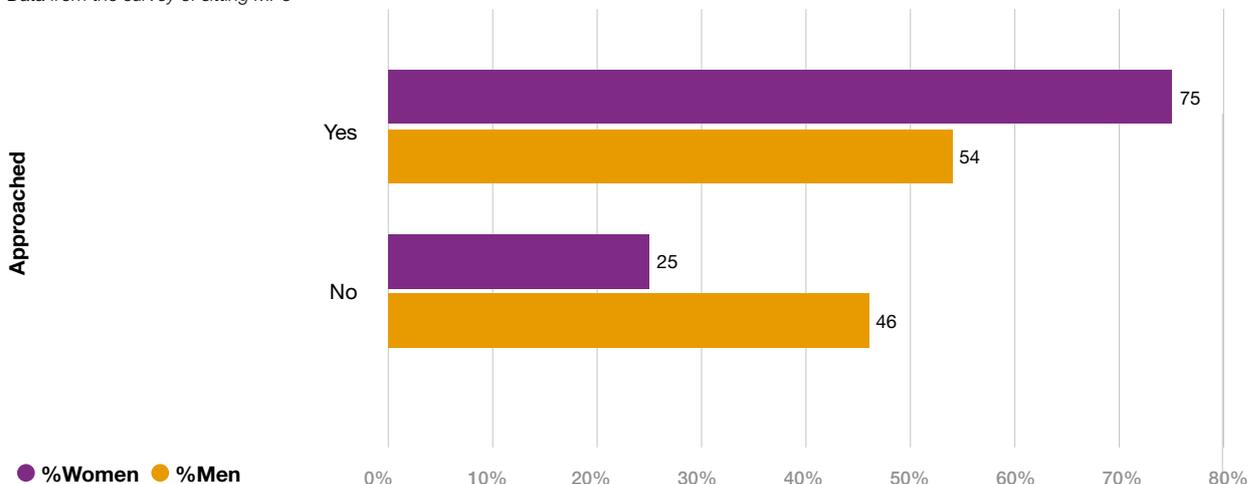
*I think it’s got to be encouragement. **Everything I stood for, I’ve been asked to stand for, there’s never really been anything I thought, and ‘I’m going to go for that.’***

Female activist

Given the importance of encouragement, it is perhaps then unsurprising that our MP survey found a difference between women and men MPs in terms of being approached by someone else to ask them to run for office. As the chart below shows, women MPs were more likely than men MPs to have been approached by someone else to encourage them to stand.

Chart 2: MPs who report being approached or encouraged to stand (n=97)

Data from the survey of sitting MPs



Families

For both women and men, family background was central to nurturing their initial interest in politics, exposing them to political issues and the political process. A large number of participants stated that one or more of their parents were active within a party or within community or trade union projects, or had held an elected position as a local councillor or an MP. These connections influenced their decision to get involved in a political party and in a number of cases to seek election as a Parliamentary candidate.

While the role of the family in cultivating political aspirations may not impact the number of women in politics, it is likely to reinforce the dominance of white and middle-class aspirants. Relatively few people in the UK are members of a political party and those who are unrepresentative of the population as a whole. The majority are male and middle class. Of the four biggest political parties (Conservative, Labour, SNP and Liberal Democrats) none has less than 96% white British members (Bale, Webb and Poletti, 2018), yet 13% of the UK population is from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) group (ONS, 2012).

Careers

Careers which offer exposure to national politics can also fulfil this role by nurturing political interest and introducing eligible citizens to the political sphere. Male and female aspirants, candidates and MPs whose former careers involved interaction with government reported that their professional experience demystified “formal politics.” Working in public service, policy bodies or directly within Parliament, for example, gave participants a sense of the role of MP, in addition to equipping with them with knowledge of the legislative process. Frequently, the decision to enter representative politics was considered an extension of their role in their previous career, which dealt with political or social issues.

I think with career choices, it's always just been what I've been passionate about and what I've been interested in, which then, obviously, overlaps with politics anyway.

Female MP

I definitely didn't make conscious career decisions to become a Member of Parliament. I was inspired to become a Member of Parliament because of my career.

Female MP

Political parties

Being part of or active within a political party is essential for gaining the credibility, experience and networks needed to become a candidate. Political parties are also key sites where individuals are exposed to the political process and develop political aspirations. Ensuring that women are present in local organisations, feel part of the party, and are regarded as prospective political actors is therefore critical. The organisation and culture of political parties is, however, a key barrier to women participating and progressing within party structures on the same terms as men (Kenny, 2013; Verge, 2015; Kenny & Verge, 2016). Despite growing numbers of women getting involved in politics, and high-profile commitment to increasing women's representation from party leaders, political institutions largely remain highly masculinised, promoting and rewarding masculinised ways of operating (Lovenduski, 1993; Duerst-Lahti & Kell, 1995). This emerged strongly from female aspirants who pointed to the various ways that party rules and norms hinder women's participation at this initial stage.

It's culture. It feels like the system is created by men for men.

Female activist

In some cases, participants also highlighted how this interconnects with race, highlighting the large number of white men in local structures as potentially intimidating for BAME women.

*I do think it's intimidating if you are a BME woman who isn't very used to kind of establishment places to come into a room where **there's a lot of old white middle-class men, it can be quite intimidating.***

Female candidate

MPs, candidates and aspirants also spoke about the ways in which parties organise which can facilitate the participation of certain groups while hindering others. The times, locations and set-up of meetings, for example is one way in which party structures facilitate able-bodied people without caring responsibilities. Childcare was a barrier to a number of women engaging more with their party.

I have ... children and it's quite difficult. I mean, they're growing up so it's less difficult now, but it's always been complicated juggling different aspects of life and a lot of the things that you're expected to do for PPC [prospective Parliamentary candidate] happen at evenings and weekends. So it was a challenge.

Female candidate

A number of female candidates remarked on the difficulties of combining childcare and political activism, stating that they often had to bring their children with them to events and meetings. While this was necessary in order for them to engage, the presence of children at meetings being accepted rather than frowned upon very much depended on the culture of the council or local party.

When I've taken my kids along to meetings I've been told, 'can your boys sit at the back? Is that all right?' It was not a really important meeting. Why were my children sent to the back of the room? It's like it's not appropriate to have children in the room.

Female candidate

Women across the parties who identified as disabled referenced times where meetings were set up without regard to access for those without full mobility.

*The Party is great, but as a disabled woman, probably not so great, but that's kind of reflected in everyday life as well, you do have to **develop a bit of tough skin for anything, not take it personally when people just are thoughtless** about things like you know, **putting the conference half a mile of walking away** you know, and that happened a few conferences ago to me.*

Female candidate



The selection meetings, you have to go along and make a speech with about 300 people in the room. When I got there, it was a podium up four steps with a microphone. They knew I was coming, knew me, I couldn't get to the microphone, I had to stay on the floor of the room and shout. ” **Female aspirant**

In addition to structures that disadvantaged some women and other underrepresented groups, culture and attitudes to women's participation emerged as an additional challenge. Female party members and activists spoke about, the various ways that women were “made invisible” within party structures. Participants described being spoken over, ignored, shouted at and patronised. There was a perception among many participants, across parties, that women's voices are quietened with men dominating group conversations and meetings. This suggests that gender norms remain embedded in local parties and serve to inhibit the participation and progress of certain women.

*The culture is **men constantly talking over women.***

Female activist

Many of the research's participants described an aggressive and combative culture at local party meetings. This was felt to be off-putting, intimidating and perceived as counter-productive. This was particularly true for women that decided not to run.

*When you start getting involved in politics, you suddenly enter this **very, very male environment** and there are so many meetings **that you just get shouted at on top of that.***

Female candidate

*I'm the vice-chair of my [local party] and I've stopped going to the meetings because **they are just that horrible I just can bear it anymore. [...] I don't want to sit and listen to abuse all night** because my view would be different to the majority of the room and so I would be shouted down by most of the [local party]meeting anyway.*

Female activist

Party demand

Political parties are crucial in tackling women's under-representation. This research found that party demand can create bigger supply pools – inviting women into the party through equality rhetoric, equality promotion and equality guarantees. Equality rhetoric is the verbal acknowledgement of the importance of equality and diversity and the need for a greater number of female representatives. These are most common oral and written statements identifiable in party speeches, plans and reports. Equality promotion refers to strategies which seek to increase the numbers of eligible and qualified women who come forward as potential candidates (Childs, 2011) including special training and mentoring programmes, financial assistance and the setting of “soft targets.” Equality guarantees ensure the selection of female candidates by making a particular social characteristic a necessary qualification for office and are often seen in the form of gender quotas (Childs, 2011).

These measures shaped the decision of a number of women who went forward for selection, reaffirming the positive impact of equality initiatives and discourse in achieving change (Lovenduski & Norris, 1993; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Caul, 1999; Childs, 2011, Kenny, 2013). Equality rhetoric was important in motivating women to take the next step as candidates. Female aspirants spoke about a specific point where they felt encouraged to run due to a shift in the demand for female candidates. Linked to changing party leadership, they described key points where the party began to promote the increase of women's



It was David Cameron on the TV saying I want women candidates. And I stood there looking at him thinking, I'm a woman. (laughter) That means it could be me. ” Female candidate

participation and communicated this message to party supporters and membership. In parties where there is an internal gender quota, which take the form of All-Women Shortlists (AWS), these measures acted to encourage political interest, and prompt women to stand for election, as female aspirants felt they had a realistic chance of being selected. Although aimed at ensuring the selection of women, gender quotas can also encourage women to become aspirants, both by demonstrating there is demand for “people like me” and increasing the likelihood of being successful.

There was a big call for more women in politics. And I just remember sitting, listening to Cameron speak. And I thought, well actually yes that's me you're talking about so I am going to do it.

Female candidate

Had it been an open short list I would have never gone for it because he [the other candidate] would have just got it. I always make the calculation of “is there any point in doing this?”

Female candidate

Party initiatives were recognised as important and valuable to increasing women's self-perception as potential candidates. Female MPs cited leadership and training programmes as particularly helpful in nudging them into running. Conservative Party women mentioned the AskHerToStand campaign, Women2Win and the Conservative Women's Organisation as positive initiatives where they came in contact with other women and which aimed to actively tackle issues around self-recruiting. Labour Women cited the Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme and Labour Women's Network as fostering their political aspirations. Political mentors, particularly an existing MP, were a key source of encouragement for many aspirants who decided to stand. These mentors were often encountered through work, family life or the party structure. Female mentors were particularly important in supporting and influencing potential aspirants to pursue a Parliamentary career.

I have always found women either women politicians or women who were more senior to me in Think Tanks or charities were absolutely by far the best and strongest mentors. They were really motivating for me and that was very very important.

Female MP

Someone else encouraged me to do one of the female MP weekends. At that point, I've never really considered it at all. And then you meet lots of other women thinking about it. You think, 'Oh, okay, this is totally doable.'

Female candidate

I can't think of anything that I thought would concern me about standing for election at the time, other than my own self-doubt and not really understanding how you go about it. I was completely politically, naïve in that regard. If I hadn't had the selection training, I would never have been able to do it.

Female candidate

5.2 GETTING SELECTED: FROM ASPIRANT TO CANDIDATE

Having made the decision to stand, political aspirants must then be selected by political parties. While a common argument is that political selection is based on merit, in practice, getting selected depends on a number of other factors. At this stage, we are concerned with understanding what is needed to get selected within UK parties, how this has resulted in a lack of diversity amongst political candidates, and how this can be overcome.

Our research shows that political selection in its current form is organised such that candidates require a number of resources such as personal finance, flexibility and party networks. These are harder for women to acquire due to the gendered nature of both politics and society. Men continue to have greater access to these resources due to factors such as the unequal division of domestic responsibilities, the gender pay gap and the barriers to party participation described earlier in this report.

At this stage of the process, party gatekeepers play a pivotal role. Research on political parties in the UK and abroad has shown that party gatekeepers employ a wide range of informal criteria when selecting the candidate (Murray, 2010; Kenny, 2013; Bjarnegård, 2013; Annesley, 2015). The over-selection of certain groups is therefore likely to be due to the attitudes of party members and informal rules about who is and who is not an “ideal candidate”. This research shows a history of party activism, professional and voluntary experience and a “local connection” are key considerations for UK party selectorates. While these criteria are not explicitly in favour of men, they often advantage men indirectly.

However, the research outlined in this section also suggests an explicit preference for male candidates and outlines the ongoing and explicit resistance to the inclusion of women and other marginalised groups within politics. We suggest that in many cases there remains an implicit or explicit model of the “ideal candidate” who is male. Overall, the research shows that the existing process is far from neutral or meritocratic, operating to create, reflect and exacerbate gender inequalities that exist in broader society.

Resources

We begin by considering the resources the research highlights as important for selection. In some cases, these insights will enable more women to begin the process prepared and equipped to succeed. We note though that often access to these resources is unequal and not in line with talent or potential. In particular, we note that access to many of these resources is highly gendered, with women facing greater barriers than men to accumulating them.

Skills

The research explored the skills and qualities required to run a successful selection and election campaign. We found broad similarities amongst women and men MPs as well as aspirants. The ability to both listen and communicate well were consistently cited as skills required to be both a good MP and successful selection candidate. In particular, MPs who had previously held public-facing roles referenced the benefits of experience in public engagement, public speaking and media skills in enabling them to communicate their political message to both party selectorates and voters and run a good campaign. The ability to run a team and to manage people also consistently came up as aiding those interviewed.

There is potential to grow the diversity of our Parliament here. These skills are not particular to politics or one career path. This is a sign that a wider range of people could have the kinds of core skills that support being an effective candidate.

Money

Money is a necessary resource for both selection and election. There has been discussion about how expensive it can be to stand for election, but much less has been said about the cost of seeking selection. Candidates mentioned the cost of phone calls, letters and travel which are necessary to contact the



A lot of it is about money... the main reason I wouldn't go back is I just can't afford to do it. ” Female candidate

hundreds of local party members eligible to vote in selection procedures. These costs are in addition to the cost of socialising and holding events to “curry favour” with the local party. Other research suggests that there is likely to be significant variation in these figures for each individual and by party (Campbell et al., 2018). Having invested in their selection, candidates found costs increase exponentially during the election campaign period. A good many candidates are selected years in advance of the election, so costs are not only incurred in the formal general election campaign but for a much longer period.

It is important to say that it cost my family around £40,000 for me to be elected [...] That is a massive barrier and I don't think that that should be.

Female MP

In acknowledging the immense cost of election and selection, a number of successful MPs cited the aid of personal finances, either their own or their partners, as mitigating this issue for them as individuals.

I was fortunate because I had money because I was being well-paid. That was the main thing really.

Male MP

I mean, the practical barriers were not that difficult. I just had to pay for it myself. It was fine because I was earning enough to do that.

Female MP

A number of participants felt the need to resign from their job in order to fulfil the requirements of a “full-time candidate”. Of course, this is not an option for those without significant financial security.

The change between the first time I tried and the second was that I saved up money. So I could quit my job and do it full-time. Because I knew from the last time I did it that that was what I had to do. I was lucky enough, very lucky enough, to be in a job that allowed me to do that before I quit. And I quit and I did it.

Female MP

Women who had not been selected explicitly referenced finance as a reason they did not succeed, and those who had been selected cited it as a reason they would not run again.

For me, when I think of the reasons I haven't stood, it's stuff like cost. It costs a hell of a lot to go through the PAB [Parliamentary Assessment Board] process; it cost a hell of a lot to stay on the party list every year.

Female candidate

I couldn't afford it; that's the bottom line, I just couldn't, I couldn't afford it, that's the truth.

Female councillor

The costs of political participation are undoubtedly gendered, as financial security interacts with segregated employment and unequal divisions of labour in the home. However, participants also identified this as an issue of socio-economic background. Childcare commitments aside, socio-economic background and financial resources aid both women and men in overcoming the economic barriers relating to the process. Our research therefore resonates with existing statistics which shows a decline in the number of MPs from manual occupations and working-class backgrounds and an increase in professional or middle-class members of Parliament (Cairney, 2007). One participant commented on how she felt class set her and other female candidates with childcare commitments apart.

*I went for a seat [...] and there were only two of us in the end that were in that race. And she got two more votes than me. But she's a lot older than me. **She had a more privileged background than me, a lot more financially secure. And she'd had the money and the time to go and door knock and garner her votes** in a very short period of time from when we'd been informed that we were shortlisted to when the actual selection event took place. It was a very short window of time. **I didn't have any money for fuel. I was still picking up the kids. And I couldn't arrange to get over there to knock on doors.** And her being able to do that made the difference. **And it wasn't gender. That was social class.***

Female activist

This highlights again the importance of ensuring selection processes do more than increase the number of women in Parliament but also enable more diverse women to succeed.

Time

The time and high level of personal commitment that parties require of candidates, already briefly acknowledged above, was another significant challenge. This time commitment was perceived as necessary to both secure selection and election. The sheer duration of these campaigns was perceived as specifically problematic. Candidates can be selected years in advance of an election. It was perceived that during this time they are expected to commit significant time to campaigning. For those who wanted or had a family, this level of time commitment was not compatible with childcare responsibilities. Candidates spoke about how other aspects of their lives, including their career, personal development, relationships and family life suffered significantly and this discouraged a number of women who had stood as candidates from standing again.

My selection went on for five months. So, it wasn't just a case of you had to find support, get them to the meetings. You had to find support and maintain support. I had to hold events every single week and I had a one-year-old baby at the time and so, it was difficult, and it was time-consuming.

Female MP

*I think it's a massive problem, **if you are meant to show your dedication to a party for three or four years, with no sense of whether you're going to get anywhere at the end of it, I mean, what they ask people to do is, it's hardcore.***

Female MP

*I think that actually **my marriage suffered** because of it. Because **my activism became my life really.***

Female candidate

*This isn't just a job, **this is a whole way of life, it's beyond a vocation and your family suffer, there is no question.** When my kids were younger there were things that I missed, I can't really capture those ever. So **you give up so, so much.***

Female candidate

*I'm mostly now at the point **where I probably won't do it again because it does take its toll. And there's loads of stuff that I haven't done** because I've had to do other things in the evening. Rather than doing a qualification in programme management or anything like that, **because I have to do canvassing.***

Female candidate

For some parties respondents reported that once approved for the central party list, potential candidates are expected to spend a significant amount of time canvassing in various local elections and by-elections. This commitment was perceived as necessary in order to remain on the candidate list.

*If you don't go [canvassing] , I don't know what the other parties are like, **but you will be turfed off the candidate list. So actually, we're fodder, we're candidate fodder.***

Female candidate

A number of candidates also referenced the physical and mental effects that the selection and election periods had on their health, which could be a compounding barrier for candidates with disabilities. The need to be so physically active during the selection process was perceived as a barrier to selection.

*I'd not spent time with my children, I'd lost business by spending time canvassing, my house was dirty, I'd not cooked for ages, I'd been giving the children tinned food. And **I'd lost a lot of weight and was really exhausted.***

Female candidate

***It's physically very, very difficult.** You have to go around and knock on every member's door and try and talk them into voting for them. Well, **if you can't walk very far or you have fatigue issues or communication issues, you can't do that.** You know? And everybody else is whizzing around talking to absolutely everybody and you're trying to ring them up and they're like, why are you ringing me, Joe knocked on my door and they've invited me up for a drink. So that's a barrier in itself.*

Female aspirant

Flexibility

Given the time and financial costs involved in seeking selection, flexibility is crucial. Both women and men in the research suggested that flexible jobs and supportive employers, particularly those which allowed people to manage their own time facilitated their campaigns in some way. Candidates reported needing to take substantial time off work, particularly in the latter stages of campaigns so that they could garner votes.

*I was greatly assisted in that I was a (council) cabinet member at the time and I **did get excellent support from officers. So I was able to manage things around my day and I literally went and knocked on lots of doors.***

Female candidate

*I've had conversations with people on the phone where they'd ask, 'Oh, but you're a Parliamentary candidate. **So why can't you come to this?'** And I'd respond, '**Because I am still at work.**' People start asking you to do things. And if you say no, you just end up in this terrible situation, because you then can't make up any ground. Because obviously, the current MP can make time for it shockingly. And other people who can and do self-fund, **there's a number of councillors and activists in my borough who don't work. And, therefore, always get selected and always do things. And you just continue at a disadvantage.***

Female candidate

Flexibility from employers was repeatedly cited by successful candidates as of high value and central to their success. Encouraging more employers to facilitate political participation could broaden the range of people (and the backgrounds they come from) that are able to succeed as part of the process. We note though that in addition to increasing the demands on candidates, long selection and election campaigns increase the challenge for employers in supporting employees to participate in this way.



Up until now men have appointed their buddies and nominated their buddies et cetera, who were all men. ” Female candidate

Personal networks and patronage

Personal networks within the local party and party membership are perceived as an essential resource at the selection stage. Participants suggested that political parties continue to operate on systems of patronage rather than merit, with selection based on who, rather than what you know. The need for internal party connections was also perceived as benefiting men. Again owing to unequal domestic responsibilities, it was thought that men are able to be more publicly oriented and have greater opportunities to generally build informal connections. It was also perceived that men tend to support and promote other men. We suggest it is likely that resistance to women's participation in local party structures is also likely to limit women's ability to effectively establish these networks at this level.

*You have to serve your time and build up your network locally and **you need to curry favour with local party activists** and you need to spend a long time working as an office bearer and establish your name and knowledge locally.*

Male MP

*I think that something about women as well, particularly women who have children or are carers for older people, **they will lose those connections in life and their connections become quite insular** whereas, I'm generalising now, most men have those informal connections through their work, through unions but **there is a definite gender split there in terms of networks and isolation.***

Female activist

This feature of the selection process deterred a number of women from running for these reasons. Seats were considered pre-determined to a certain extent and a number of women doubted their chances of getting selected within this system. Female MPs, whose background was not explicitly within the party had found they lacked the political networks once they began the selection process. While they felt they had the necessary skillset, motivations and drive to make a good MP, often bolstered by their previous careers, they found that the process of being selected required different resources. In a number of cases, candidates who had not come through the local party found that party members were already committed to a different candidate.

*I faced four years of being blocked, in terms of being able to stand and that was a real learning lesson. Because in my naivety, **you think you have a degree, you've got the skillsets, you work in the profession, you know how local government works, public sector and you think that's all that's required.** And then you suddenly have a real hard lesson of not knowing the process of how to be selected.*

Female MP

*I think, obviously having [career] experience in health is a good thing, so, I think that helped to sway people to choose me as a candidate. So, I think that's one thing, but **I didn't have networks...political networks, which is a drawback, because you find that people are all linked already and you're, sort of, an outsider.***

Female MP

*You already had groups that were voting with a certain slate. And so, it's almost like you were forced to join a group because it's the only way that you're able to get in. **You don't expect that because you expect everybody to work together; you expect people want to have the best representative for their area, who is going to deliver on the things that matter to them.** It isn't about that – it's about who does this group support and who does that group not support?*

Female MP

*People within the [local party], I found much harder to deal with, because I think **there's a power battle going on there [...]** I mean, they didn't select me as a candidate, first of all, because they had all their existing power structures and their existing friends and their existing ways of doing things and **I just felt this great sense of hostility, when I joined, because I was the only woman.** It's not in their interest to bring new people in.*

Female MP

Informal candidate criteria

Our research also suggests that there are a number of informal criteria that a candidate must meet to be selected. In a number of cases, these criteria were thought to make candidates acceptable to local members and more electable to the local constituents. These informal criteria were perceived as trumping evidence of aptitude in determining the candidate. Female candidates were expected to conform to criteria that they perceived to be more easily accessible to men, however, when they did conform in this way they still reported being punished by the selectorate. As one candidate phrased it “you just couldn't do anything right.” Our research therefore highlights the “double bind” for many women in politics.

A number of women stated that the informality of the process exacerbated the issue of selectorate bias and informal subjective candidate criteria. For many, it was unclear what the local party expected of them and what skills, background or experience they needed to have in order to get selected. Female candidates reported that the same informal requirement was viewed differently by different local parties. For example, while one woman spoke about being perceived negatively for having children and childcare responsibilities, another spoke about how the local party wanted a mother and were sceptical about the fact that she was single. Similarly, one woman spoke about how a charity sector background would have been beneficial to her while another spoke about such experience was perceived negatively by her local party.

Informal candidate criteria: local and party dedication

A strong record of party activism, an authentic personal narrative and a local connection to the constituency were all considered important in demonstrating a genuine commitment to the party and the community, rather than a desire for personal progression. Participants felt that party dedication was most frequently measured through one's ability to canvass and door-knock. Accordingly, this expectation was perceived as exclusionary for those with caring responsibilities and those who identified as disabled.

*I think it is very **important to prove that people have been active or activists.***

Female activist

They don't care what your job has been but what you have done within the community and the local [party.]

Female candidate

*The passport to the first level of selection is how much activism you do, and essentially **activism is a fancy word for pushing leaflets through doors, and some people can't do that,** I mean for some people that is just not an appropriate thing to be asking them to do, and I think that is probably the biggest barrier.*

Female aspirant

The need for a local connection to the area and a desire to represent that area in particular was also deemed necessary. While the need to be known and ideally to live in the constituency where you run as a candidate is a benefit, numerous women spoke about the difficulties of needing to uproot their lives, careers and families in order to build this connection. This was again thought to be more difficult for those with caring responsibilities. In some instances women aspirants felt local members were less likely to believe their (male) partners would relocate to support their campaign and found it easier to believe that female partners of male candidates would make the move.

You've got to be born there, your parents have to be from there, your grandads got to be born there. So, it really is a problem and there's resentment to people who try and transplant into potential target seats.

Female candidate

I think one of the things that's lingered is that even if the man has a wife with a career that she may be very wedded to in one area of the country, it's still sort of assumed, because they won't necessarily have met her, that she would follow. Whereas that same assumption isn't perhaps made of the woman.

Female candidate

In order to get selected participants expressed the need to present oneself as having the appropriate motivations for standing. The need to have an “authentic narrative” and a “personal story” was perceived as necessary in order to sell oneself as a “real person”, rather than a career politician to the local electorate. Candidates frequently spoke about the need to draw on their own life experiences in order to validate their motivations for running. While an appropriate story was necessary to get selected, female candidates felt that only certain stories were valid. Specifically, it was perceived that gendered experiences of injustice and or seeking to act for women were not deemed an appropriate motivating factor for political engagement or standing for election. Female candidates spoke about being explicitly warned by other party members against drawing on such issues, associating themselves with “women’s issues” or presenting themselves as being a feminist representative. Given that “representing women” was cited as a motivating factor for a much greater number of female aspirants and candidates than MPs, representing women may still not be considered a legitimate motive for entering politics. This suggests a continued resistance to the acknowledgement of sex as an important category and one worthy of representation.

I think one of the challenges about the authenticity of your narrative is something that really women face more than men. I had a very stark conversation while I was going through a selection process with somebody who is a Parliamentary candidate, very high profile, about some of the reasons why we went into politics and why we were passionate about women's rights and for me I'd been raped. The other woman she had an abortion and we were told by this very senior person at the time you don't talk about that because people will see you as a victim. I was very much told not to do that because I was a woman and I would be perceived as weak for doing it.

Female candidate

I found life experiences were more applicable. So, being a young person talking about housing in London. I own my property but I got a shared ownership one, being able to talk about how even that is no longer an option for a lot of people. I'm the only person in my family that's been to university. I grew up in Nottingham which has quite similar demographics to my seat in terms of child poverty and diversity, and things like that

and actually, that's the kind of thing that resonates far more with people than anything about what you do in your day job really. I was up against people who were along in life and career and things like that. I was better able to talk about that kind of connection than some of the other people that I was up against.

Female candidate

If you can make it [your career] part of a story, then it's useful. So, everyone knew that Sajid Javid was the son of a bus driver. And if you can link your background into something like that, then it can be quite powerful. But if not, then I often find people don't really care.

Female candidate

I was very blessed in having an extremely strong network of people all of whom had run very good political campaigns who donated their time to me. So I had people help me to craft my messages that would resonate with party members.[...] **I wanted to be able to tell a story of my own personal achievement, the things I had done myself, completely unlinked to background. And what I was actually telling was a story of woe. Because somehow that made me, I don't know a better person or more valid in their eyes rather than the person that I actually thought I was. And it was successful, but it was a bit soul-destroying.**

Female candidate

Informal candidate criteria: career history

It was also perceived that certain career histories contributed to making candidates acceptable or unacceptable to local members. Specifically, it was reported that working in public service or a career that demonstrates service to one's local community is beneficial. Local council experience was perceived therefore a natural stepping stone into national politics. Depending on the party, trade union experience or being a small business owner was regarded as particularly desirable. However, these careers were perceived as disproportionately benefiting men. While a business background was perceived as being extremely desirable by some local parties, one woman described how this interacted with gender such that it did not provide the same gravitas as it would for male candidates.

A man or a woman who has founded and run a business makes them think you're grounded in the real world. I remember going to a mock-up selection meeting and the feedback afterwards was, 'you referred to your office'. That made me too cold, I was too structured, I'm too much of a ball breaker. I am the businesswoman and yet that never really assisted me. I was always told I needed to be softer and fluffier.

Female candidate

Similarly, having a union background and union support was also perceived as gendered by some participants.

The union movement behind the political movement...I attended my local [union] branch meetings and it was all men. Every single person. I came to get the nomination...[for party role]. And then every time someone swore, it was like, 'we've got a lady present.' Literally mortifying. It just chases you out the room. You should go and don't come back.

Female activist

Career histories can also function to delegitimise potential candidates. Evidence from existing research in the UK suggests a "professionalisation" of political trajectories and the rise of the "career politician" (Durose et al., 2011). These pathways are typically followed by "those with work experience in politics, a university education, professional success, involvement in campaigning or an interest group, and a

particular skill set drawn from professional experience, such as the debating, advocacy and scrutiny skills of a barrister” (Durose et al., 2012). Using our survey and publicly available data (outlined in more detail later in this report) we are able to build a more detailed picture of the career paths of MPs. Our research confirms this existing evidence. The majority of MPs in our survey were educated to degree level or above. 77% (85) of respondents either graduated with a degree or postgraduate degree.

While this pathway into politics is becoming increasingly common, our research suggests that professionalised career histories are perceived as contrary to the informal criteria outlined above. While party dedication and commitment are key, a number of women spoke about how having experience within politics or a politics-related role actually worked against them as they were considered ‘career politicians’ and therefore thought to have disingenuous motivations. Whilst the analysis of *the Times Guide* suggests that women and men are similarly likely to have political roles across their careers, our survey suggested that women questioned were more likely to work in multiple roles typically associated with the professionalised career path to become an MP. Thirty-six per cent of women MP respondents had two or more jobs that form part of the professionalised politician’s careers route, compared to fifteen per cent of male MP respondents.

This creates a possible tension. While the professionalised route into politics is often looked down upon, this research suggests that it does offer women important resources in the form of knowledge and connections which encourage them to view themselves as potential candidates and navigate the selection process. These resources may also be gained through local party participation and activism, however, given that this is unpaid and given the gendered nature of party structures, this again disadvantages women and other underrepresented groups, who are less able to participate. As such, those that want to both avoid a narrow range of careers experience amongst their representatives and increase female representation will need to find other ways to give women access to these important resources.

There’s a real suspicion of career politicians. It used to be you’ve been a special adviser and that’s your career path sorted. Whereas I think people are now looking for a much more authentic career history. They want to know, have you worked in public service, have you run a successful business. I play up the fact that I’m an ex-teacher and I would never really talk about the fact that I worked for [national party head office] in a selection because I think that people value that public service experience more.

Female candidate

Those types of people, career type politician people, I think it’s harder for them, in the selection process, because they probably don’t have any other experience other than politics, and people are not really keen on then selecting someone like that.

Female MP

I mean, I had a period as a policy adviser, incredibly useful in helping you understand policy and how Parliament works but I would never mention that to a selection committee because I think they’ll be much more interested in what I’ve done setting up a school and working in the public sector.

Female candidate

I had a job that was actively unhelpful which was really challenging. So I had moved to London, started out working in a charity sector [...] It was problematic because people saw me and thought ‘you are a lobbyist, you went to Oxford, we know exactly who you are.’ And actually, you know, I’m the first person in my family to go to university. I’ve got a working-class background. The story was told for me. You were a lobbyist, you went to Oxford, we don’t want you. And that was pretty consistent.

Female candidate

*I'm a communications professional and that's my job now, I work full-time for a research institute doing comms strategy for them. **It was really clear that my skills were not valued, so when I said, "I've been a journalist in a national newspaper for 10 years."** The response from one of my selection meetings was, "Oh, so you've never had a real job." **I think comms skills are helpful if you're going to be an MP but it didn't help me in selection. I think it actively prevented me because they're not skills that I think the selection process is looking for.***

- Female unsuccessful aspirant

Resistance

The problem of unequal and gendered resources during selection was compounded by resistance from party members and the public to women as credible candidates. In some cases this increased the resources required by women candidates and created significant additional barriers. Resistance can be found in the structures that inhibit women's participation, as discussed above. It also emerges in the form of explicit and implicit preferences amongst selectorates for male candidates, abuse and hostility to women who step into public roles and opposition to equality measures which seek to address women's underrepresentation. These issues are discussed in the following sections.

Selectorate bias

While existing studies have shown that the electorate do not discriminate on the basis of gender (Norris et al., 1992), discrimination and resistance to female candidates by the selectorate was reported by candidates across each of the parties. Our research suggests that the model of an "ideal candidate" remains not only male but white, middle-class and able-bodied. This resonates with existing research, including research carried out by the Fawcett Society on UK parties fifteen years ago (2003a; 2003b; see also Durose et al., 2011). In a number of cases, party members, women and men, simply resisted the selection of a female candidate.

*The one that surprised me most **were women who didn't think I should be standing because it's a man's job.** So, yeah, there was opposition there. It wasn't easy. It definitely wasn't easy.*

Female unsuccessful aspirant

*In any selection that I've been there to watch other speakers, **there's been a bias towards wanting a male candidate upfront versus wanting a female candidate [...]** They want a male candidate, it's not the best candidate, they have a perception of what it is because of the older membership base and they've predominantly male candidates and they see that as the desirable candidate.*

Female candidate

*Sometimes the optics of the women, **they just think of an MP as a bloke.***

Female candidate

*I'd heard, through some councillors that I know, that a few of the **more senior councillors, who are all older men, were saying "We just need to get anyone else to stand, we can't have a young woman, we can't,"** and I think that was something that I was aware of going on.*

Female MP

These gendered perceptions intersect with ethnicity, such that BAME women perceived themselves to be further unfairly judged.



*I remember one of the times I went to one of the selections the second question in was **‘how can you do this and be a mother?’**”* Female candidate

*I think, **as an Asian woman, it’s almost like you have to prove yourself even more.** People don’t always want to take you seriously, and that can be quite frustrating.*

Female MP

Reinforcing these perceptions, one male MP admitted to the advantage they had as a consequence of reflecting the characteristics of the “ideal candidate.”

***I had a blessed existence as an aspiring young candidate.** I can’t possibly complain, **I had all the advantages.** I was white, male, Cambridge with a tinge of state education in my background to give – you know. I thought the industrial/financial background was also an advantage. **I looked like the young aspiring future Cabinet Minister that a safe [local party] in the Home Counties wants to select as their MP.** I had none of the disadvantages of being a woman, of being from the ethnic minorities, from being from a non-savvy background, I had every possible advantage.*

Male MP

It was also perceived that women would be less able to fulfil the role of a candidate and MP in practice because of gendered assumptions about women’s and men’s abilities and domestic responsibilities. Female candidates spoke extensively of being asked questions at various events and meetings about childcare and their marital status, questions that they felt would not be asked of their male counterparts and would not be considered acceptable in job interviews.

***None of the men who stood at the same time as me were asked about their children or their marital status or if there were plans for children or were they planning to get married or did they have a partner or anything.** None of them were. I was asked so many times.*

Female candidate

I was asked ‘well your husband died so you’re single so isn’t that a bit strange?’

Female candidate

*I think it was an entitlement thing and, whether that was because he was a man or whether because he had been in the Party a long term, or a combination of that, it’s probably the combination, but **they definitely felt I was less able because I was a woman, because there was lots of stuff like, “Oh, she’ll not be able to do the job. She’s got kids.”***

Female MP

One former candidate spoke about being de-selected as a candidate once she had a child due to perceptions that she would not be able to fulfil the duties required, while another described the dismay of her local party once they found out she was pregnant. These highlight the ways women are still heavily discriminated against during the selection process.

They came to my house, they de-selected me and then I really couldn’t do much about it. [...] They de-selected me and another woman who was a candidate, who was a council candidate, but she gave birth and I gave birth as well so we were de-selected at the same time. This was a very good council seat.

Female candidate



I was asked about my religion, I was asked about my ethnicity, things that you would not normally ask. ” Female candidate

I was pregnant when I was selected, but not showing and didn't own up. I took quite a long time to cop myself, which is rather embarrassing. There was quite a backlash to that once my local party discovered my 'dark secret'. And it was difficult dealing with that.

Female candidate

While these biases were clearly gendered, the ideal candidate reflects a number of other traits as mentioned above. Women from other marginalised groups felt that the selectorate discriminated on other characteristics too, including religious status, ethnicity and disability.

People automatically see your disability before they see the person, I've a mobility issue... So that was difficult because a lot of people felt I shouldn't stand, "Well, you're disabled. How are you going to do your job?" And so I came up against a lot of opposition in that sense.

Female aspirant

I had people saying things like, 'So how are you getting to the House of Commons? There are steps everywhere.' So there were people's assumptions about what you could and couldn't do.

Female unsuccessful aspirant

Women also spoke about the issues around being working-class. Working-class women reported being taken less seriously than other women and their working-class male counterparts.

Your voice carries less weight and your opinion carries less weight when you're in a room full of men because of the social hierarchy. But if you're working-class, you go down another step.

Female candidate

Abuse and harassment

Alongside these examples of explicit discrimination, many female candidates and MPs reported experiencing hostility, harassment and threats of violence from the media, the public and from members of their own party. Female MPs and candidates stressed the need for extremely high levels of resilience in order to withstand this behaviour, which they felt would not be tolerated in other working environments. Many of the female respondents perceived this as gendered, feeling that they face specific issues around abuse from both party members and the public. This issue was also thought to be compounded by lack of strong party will to address the problem. Our research suggests that tolerating this will affect the pipeline of candidates willing to stand for selection and that parties seeking to increase women's representation should actively challenge this behaviour.

But in lots of other places it will be tough, and people will be horrible and hostile and so on and, actually, each individual needs to work out what they need to insulate themselves, and that's the most important thing for politics. Working out what you need to insulate yourself and be confident and resilient.

Female MP

You need to be resilient.

Female MP



I wouldn't even go for selection and that's especially at the moment - it's so nasty and a lot of seats are already predetermined. It's so nasty now and targeted, I just won't even consider it. ” Female activist

I suppose that's where your experience with struggle and work ethics comes in[...] I do what I always do which is work hard, put that extra effort in and be twice as good. So very much a sense of sort of personal resilience.

Female MP

At the party level, going forward for selection without internal party connections, or violating the perceptions of the “ideal candidate” shaped the experience of women who felt that they were met with undermining behaviour from male party rivals and their networks. Attempts to hinder the women's selection included “vicious” and “nasty” verbal abuse from competitors, threats, attempts to block candidacies, and what was perceived as the “fixing” of selections. An aversion to the aggression and harassment that women experience during the selection process was identified as a strong factor that shaped the decision of the women who chose not to run.

I found the (selection) process pretty soul destroying, frankly. And then I found the process of being a candidate even more soul destroying, but yeah. I mean the selection... in particular because also it was always a shortlist which had been incredibly controversial because it stopped the favoured son from being basically automatically selected. I got spat at by members because they didn't like the fact that I was on the shortlist.

Female candidate

There is a big problem with internal party bullying in all of the parties. But that's been my worst experience, that the party currently just doesn't deal with it at all.

Female candidate

I was contacted by one of the other candidates twice, once to say would I step aside and support him. And I thought, okay, open to negotiation. What are you going to offer me? And he said nothing. Okay, well if you don't take me that seriously then no. And then he rang me up the following day and threatened me.

Female candidate

Symptomatic of the broader competitive and aggressive nature of the selection process, this climate was perceived as gendered in and of itself, and a poor and unequal process for selecting high-quality candidates.

We need to feminise the process of selecting MPs, we need to try and reduce the extent to which it is this old-fashioned, macho, competitive process. That's not how you get a job. And that's not how you select the best people by putting them basically in a boxing ring and see who comes out with the least bruises. And whilst we still continue to do that, we are only going to get people to put themselves forward who are prepared to go through that process.

Female unsuccessful aspirant

I think the whole system of becoming an MP is just so totally rigged based on the male approach. Why is it that we have to do hustings? You've got a couple of women and you got a couple of blokes who are just very good at shouting loudly. Who's going to win the vote on the night?

Female candidate



The potential for abuse is a lot worse I think for women than for men unfortunately. And that would be a barrier for me. ”

Female activist

The level of abuse from the public, the media and other parties, both online and in person, was also a discouraging factor for those who decided not to run. Female MPs also suggested that the levels of online abuse and treatment from the media they experience would have stopped them going forward to selection if they had known the extent to which they would be affected by it at the time they first put themselves forward.

*I was asked by my local party to stand, but I spoke to the woman who stood in 2017, she actually had to take the party poster out of her window because of abuse and stuff. **And because candidates have to have their addresses on their own ballot paper everybody found out where she lived.** The probably one thing that I thought was that **I can't put my family through this; I cannot put people through this.***

Female activist

*The only thing was the trolling and the aggressive stuff. **The four women who are from black, Asian minority groups that I mentor are seriously put off. They saw what happened to me and just said, 'I am not doing that. Okay, I'll carry on to be a councillor but you've got to be joking if you think I'm going through the next stage.'***

Female candidate

***If you are a woman and any other marginalised group then it is much harder- that double oppression does have an impact,** especially in politics and I think that impacts the type of abuse you get – it's very different. I think that that is gendered.*

Female activist

For some reason, the abuse aimed at women is way more vitriolic than at men.

Female candidate

This damning sentiment was reflected in the experiences of female candidates who recounted various times when they or others felt unsafe as a candidate. Participants spoke about their children being bullied in school, online trolling, verbal and physical aggression from the public and serious concerns about their own and their families' personal safety.

*There was one female candidate at the last election **who had to move house in the final days because she was so concerned about her safety and her family's safety.***

Female candidate

*When I was campaigning, **I would make sure I had somebody else with me, or we had two sets of cars, one at one end of the street, one at the other. So if there was a danger, I could actually get myself out of there.***

Female candidate

*One of the first campaigns I helped on we **actually ended up taking one of the other political parties to court for harassment.***

Female candidate

Resistance to equality measures

While women explicitly pointed to equality guarantees as encouraging them to consider standing and to see themselves as potential MPs they also described experiencing hostility and resistance as a result. In parties where rules around gender and selection exist, continued resistance to these rules was perceived as an obstacle to greater women's representation, and indeed fair processes of candidate selection. Participants reported that the party rules were often met with resentment and resistance from the local party, negatively shaping women's experiences of selection within the local party. Female candidates also commented that in constituencies where no rules around gender apply, local party gatekeepers consider open shortlists an opportunity for "the men to have a chance."

Open shortlists are men shortlists, absolutely.

Female candidate

*I think the problem that you see happen quite a bit with all women shortlists is that places that aren't women shortlists you can hear the narrative of **'there should be a man here because it's not an all-women shortlist so a man should get the opportunity.'***

Female activist

*Even though I stood on a shortlist, that in itself was a negative because it meant that people were very angry locally in the party **so I had to defend myself against the system in which I was going through.***

Female candidate

The seat where I was at was designated an all-women shortlist. And the local party chair was furious and resigned as a result. So the local party kind of split because of the all-women shortlist.

Female candidate

Winnable and unwinnable seats

While encouragement from parties is crucial in order to increase the number of female candidates, in order to increase the number of women ultimately elected, women must be selected in winnable seats. However, a number of women spoke about being asked to seek selection in local organisations where they had no chance of being selected. Participants from some parties perceived that women were being put forward on mixed gender shortlists, only to meet the formal requirement for gender balance or that women were asked to seek selection in order to ensure that the process appeared competitive.

*I think for me, the bigger challenge was the mandatory mixed gender shortlist, as in every shortlist had to have at least have a woman and a man. I was encouraged by a local party to get approved because I was me, which was encouraging. But I know once I was on the approved list, **I then got phone calls from local parties all over the country that I have never been to and had no desire to go to them, saying, 'We need a woman for the shortlist. Will you apply? Don't worry, we won't select you.'***

Female candidate

*They basically went through this performance of having to have every constituency have three candidates to choose from. There was one constituency where they wanted the local guy but [the national party head office] said, "No, you've got to have a proper selection so you need two other people." The first two dropped out because they knew it was just a performance. **A friend of mine was asked to go down and just sort of make up the numbers and she knew what she was being asked to do. She absolutely knew that there was no chance of getting it but she also knew that she needed to do it to sort of stay in [Head Office's] good books.***

Female candidate

5.3 GETTING ELECTED: FROM CANDIDATE TO MP

Having been selected, party candidates must then be elected by their constituents. At this stage of the process, voters are fundamental in choosing the MP from the slate of candidates. Here, we are concerned with voter discrimination against certain groups of candidates in addition to the resources needed to reach voters and run a good campaign. We further note the elements of this stage of the process, or perceptions about them that put people off progressing further on the journey to become an MP.

Studies in the UK have shown that voters do not discriminate against women at the ballot box and that electorate bias cannot be blamed for the under-representation of women in the House of Commons (Norris et al., 1992). Our research shows however, that candidates do perceive electorate bias as an ongoing problem which hinders the election of a diverse range of women. Furthermore, while voters are important at this stage, other actors including political parties and government remain key in ensuring the election of female candidates. Existing research has largely overlooked equality measures at this stage of the process, focusing mainly on selection. This research shows that parties must not only ensure women are recruited and selected, but also elected.

Resources

Here again we first consider the resources required to run a successful election campaign. These are considered to be in addition to those resources already identified as necessary for selection.

Party Support

At the election stage of the process, parties may give additional support and resources to certain candidates, giving them a better chance of success. A number of female candidates reported that they were not given the appropriate party support at this stage. This, in a number of cases, was due to the fact their seat was not considered a target seat. However, as highlighted above, the perception that parties may select women to run in less winnable seats was also mentioned by a number of female candidates. In a number of cases, women candidates suggested that parties did not communicate to candidates that their constituency would not be one where party resources would be focused. There was a strong perception that the parties' expectations of candidates to put in time, money and dedication without help or the possibility of success were unfair. Participants from some parties also described an expectation from their party that they would begin by running in unwinnable seats. This was felt to be extremely difficult.

*I was not a target seat. And after the election, they said, 'Oh, we thought you'd just be like a face on the leaflet.' I was like, 'Oh, I didn't know that. I threw myself in.' And I knew it wasn't winnable, but I still thought they wanted a real campaign. And I did my very best to do that. Afterwards, they were surprised. **You could have shared your expectations with me beforehand.***

Female candidate

*Starting in a sort of middling seat that I stood in, where there was almost the possibility of being a target if you just do this and you just do that. And it always goes a little bit further into the distance each time. I know that it's difficult to have a very clear targeting strategy, because you then can telegraph it to the other parties. **But I think there must be more clarity to candidates about what the expectations really are, and whether your seat is ever realistically, if you pass certain goals, going to be a target. Because there are people being sold a pup quite often.***

Female candidate

Government support

The role of Government in ensuring the election of women was also perceived as significant. Women who identified as disabled referenced the benefit of campaign support for aiding those who need it during the campaign period.

*When I stood the Cabinet Office was piloting a scheme called **Access to Elected Office which I tapped into to pay for a support worker**. So whenever I was out campaigning, I had a support worker which I recruited through an agency, **if I needed a driver, somebody to do my admin for me, help me around, just do the day to day things that I can't do because I'm visually impaired**.*

Female candidate

*I think Parliament plays lip service but **they got rid of access to the elective [elected] office fund** for example to disabled people, and obviously as a disabled woman that would affect me, **and it gives- it just gives subtle messages that you're not welcome**.*

Female candidate

We note the announcement by the Minister for Women and Equalities of a programme of support for disabled candidates, including a £250,000 fund to support disabled people's participation in the 2019 local elections (Mordaunt, 2018) as a response to this challenge.

Resistance

We have already raised the impact of gruelling and drawn out selection and election processes, abuse and hostility and resistance to women within the party. At this stage, we draw out additional sites of resistance, specific to the process of getting elected. In particular, it is likely there are additional challenges for women with additional protected characteristics at this stage.

Electorate bias

Few of the female candidates and MPs spoke about gender bias from voters as hindering their chance of election, however, it was perceived that the electorate in some more socially conservative areas do continue to discriminate against other marginalised groups. Respondents suggested that candidate ethnicity, religion and sexuality continue to shape voter choice, making it more difficult for a diverse range of women to get elected. This resonates with existing studies which show that white British voters, on average, are less prepared to vote for ethnic minority candidates, in particular, Muslim candidates (Fisher et al., 2015).

***Certainly, in my area for any ethnic minority candidate, there's a section of the population who will just be mistrustful**. Just on a local council basis, we've had a really excellent Muslim woman standing three times in a row in her local area, and there's a big chunk of her local population who simply won't vote for her.*

Female candidate

***I'm bisexual and I didn't feel able to be out during my campaign**. There were local party activists who had like reduced membership subscription and things because of the introduction of equal marriage. And there was a significant chunk of the local electorate that was very, vocally against it.*

Female candidate

5.4 TAKING OFFICE: BEING AN MP

Once elected, female candidates must assume their roles as MPs and take on the day-to-day tasks of political office. At this stage, our concern is the features of political life which present challenges for typically marginalised groups. This research focused primarily on making the decision to stand and getting selected. However, the findings do suggest that the role and lifestyle of an MP and the rules and norms of Westminster as an institution may hinder typically marginalised groups from continuing a political career and reinforces a negative perception of politics which deters other women from going forward.

Time commitment

In addition to the resources that had enabled them to succeed in their selection elected MPs stated the difficulties of managing their role as a representative and their personal lives due to the long and unsociable working hours, the required time commitment and the expectation that MPs be available to constituents around the clock. The prospect of managing the lifestyle of an MP was off-putting to those who decided not to stand, particularly by those who wanted a family.

*I'm pregnant now, but I was even then thinking that I wanted to start a family. The sitting hours are so antisocial, working on a weekend, you get very little time off and that doesn't really fit with having a family. **Not just having a family, it doesn't fit with having a proper work-life balance.***

Female activist

Westminster culture

The specific culture of Westminster, the traditions, informal rules and expectations were an issue for female participants. Much like political parties, Parliaments continue to be structured in ways that facilitate certain lifestyles and ways of being. Elected MPs remarked that Parliament was, and continues to be, structured to facilitate white middle-class men. The need to live in two places was thought to be particularly reflective of this.

A number of respondents spoke about the difficulties of dual-living for those with caring responsibilities, with some stating that they had to wait until their children were older to run for election. This is consistent with the age of Parliamentarians; the average age of MPs elected in 2017 was 50.5 years (Barton & Audickas, 2017). While childcare responsibilities were an issue for both women and men, it was perceived as reproducing the model of a male politician, given that it has traditionally been women who have taken on these roles. This is also consistent with the difference between the presence of mothers and fathers in Parliament. Forty-five per cent of women MPs have no children, compared to only 28 per cent of men MPs (Campbell & Childs, 2015).

***Parliament and politics were never designed to have anybody but white male lawyers, and that is how the whole of Parliament is designed even to the look and feel of it.** Part-time, white, male is how Parliament is designed. Because the men would go to work during the day then basically come to the Parliament in the evening and run the country whilst they're having a smoke on a cigar, and so that's how Parliament is designed to run. You're talking about centuries of tradition which you're basically undoing or trying to dismantle, so of course it's going to be masculine and discriminatory because it was never designed to be anything but an exclusive club.*

Female MP

Unless you've got a partner who doesn't work, the logistics is really, really difficult.

Female MP

*When I was elected, The House of Commons knew nothing about women. We were asked things like ‘**why can’t your wife take your children on the train?**’ and I said ‘**because I don’t have a wife. I have a husband and he works full-time.**’ So the whole system here was geared towards men.*

Female MP

***It would have been unthinkable for me to do this job whilst my daughters were growing up.** But they’re now [older]. That was definitely a significant factor in my decision of when was the right time to go and targeting the 2015 election was directly related to their age as well.*

Male MP

For female ethnic minority MPs, the feminist challenge to the culture of Westminster has not necessarily included a broader project for diversity.

I find that there are many white female MPs who do not consider other female MPs who are different, whether they are black or whether they are disabled, whether they are working-class, it’s almost as though there’s a lack of consideration for them and its very- they are very protective and insular of who they are as a group which is- which I think puts feminism back.

Female MP

Media scrutiny

Media scrutiny and negative treatment of MPs from the media was a preventive factor for a number of women who decided not to run. A number of participants spoke about the fear that their own personal and family history would become public knowledge, which they were not willing to allow.

*If you have any family that has anything that The Daily Mail might be interested in, then **you’re potentially opening your family or friends up to intrusion and that is [a] big consideration for me.***

Female activist

For women from marginalised groups, existing negative stereotypes about that group made this aspect particularly worrying and it was perceived that negative media attention would have the potential for even more adverse effects.

The whole scrounger rhetoric and how society is very, very negative towards people with disabilities. And being a woman on top of that I think that’s added.** [...] And they’re fuelled very much by government policy, very much. It feels quite unsafe to have a disability in this country at present. So the way that the press treats immigrants and immigration is in a very similar way that they’re treating disability. **So until it’s safer to be a disabled person, I don’t know.

Female activist

6. ABOUT THE CAREERS OF MPS

The research explored whether there are commonalities in the careers of MPs and whether these differ between women and men. We collected quantitative data on MPs' careers; their experiences of selection and election; and how they present themselves and are presented. This data was collected for both women and men MPs.

6.1 HOW POLITICIANS PRESENT THEMSELVES

Topic modelling was used to analyse the data held in the "About me" pages of MPs' websites. These sources offer insights into how MPs both present themselves to external audiences, and are perceived or presented in one political space.

The content of MPs' websites fell into three broad topics. The first was about local connections and personal history, including words such as "school", "work" and "local". The second was associated with ministerial or front bench activity using words such as "ministerial", "government" and "shadow". The third topic was about broader Parliamentary work using words such as "committee" and "Parliament". It also included some background on careers. This finding is in keeping with the qualitative research outlined already in this report, which suggested that a local connection was a key resource during selection and was important in establishing positive motivations for standing (i.e. a commitment to the community you are seeking to represent rather than personal advancement).

The differences between how women and men MPs present themselves in this format were fairly minimal. This is unsurprising, as by looking at MPs we are focusing on those who have "survived" the selection and election process. Presenting oneself as local is therefore important for both women and men; however, our interviews and focus groups with MPs, aspirants and party members also indicated that for women the informal requirement of a local connection to the area an individual is seeking to represent could be harder to establish, for instance, because of the impact of relocating family or the cost of moving to a new area.

Women MPs are slightly more likely than men MPs to describe themselves using words associated to Topic One (local connections and personal history) and less likely to use words associated with Topic Two (frontbench or government work). This may simply relate to the fact that fewer women hold or have held these senior roles. There is no statistical difference between women and men MPs in the case of the broader Parliamentary Topic Three.

Analysis of *the Times Guide* revealed a focus within the biographies on the political issues of the day. The first topic that emerged was associated with entries for Labour members around the theme of Jeremy Corbyn; identifying supporters, allies and internal opponents. The second topic was harder to pin down with words associated with Parliamentary work, but focusing on descriptions of MPs from Scotland and Northern Ireland. The third topic was also mixed, including words associated with Parliamentary work and local campaigning. Entries that were highly associated with this topic tended to explicitly mention the MP's position on Brexit. It is the nature of this method that topics identified are not always easy to pin down or interpret, as is the case here. As such further work was undertaken to manually code and analyse the careers content of *the Times Guide*, which is reported below.

6.2 BACKGROUNDS OF MPS: PATHWAYS TO PARLIAMENT

The qualitative research showed that pre-Parliamentary experience and careers can play a central role in facilitating access to political office. Analysis of the data held in *the Times Guide* to the House of Commons 2017 was used to understand the careers pursued by Members of Parliament prior to entering the House. Each Member's entry was coded according to whether it indicated they had held one of 23 different job types. The full list of job categories is available in Appendix One and background on

these categories is included in the methodology. For this analysis we focused on the 404 MPs who had entered the House during or after 2010, and whose experiences are therefore more relevant to current discussions of women’s political representation.

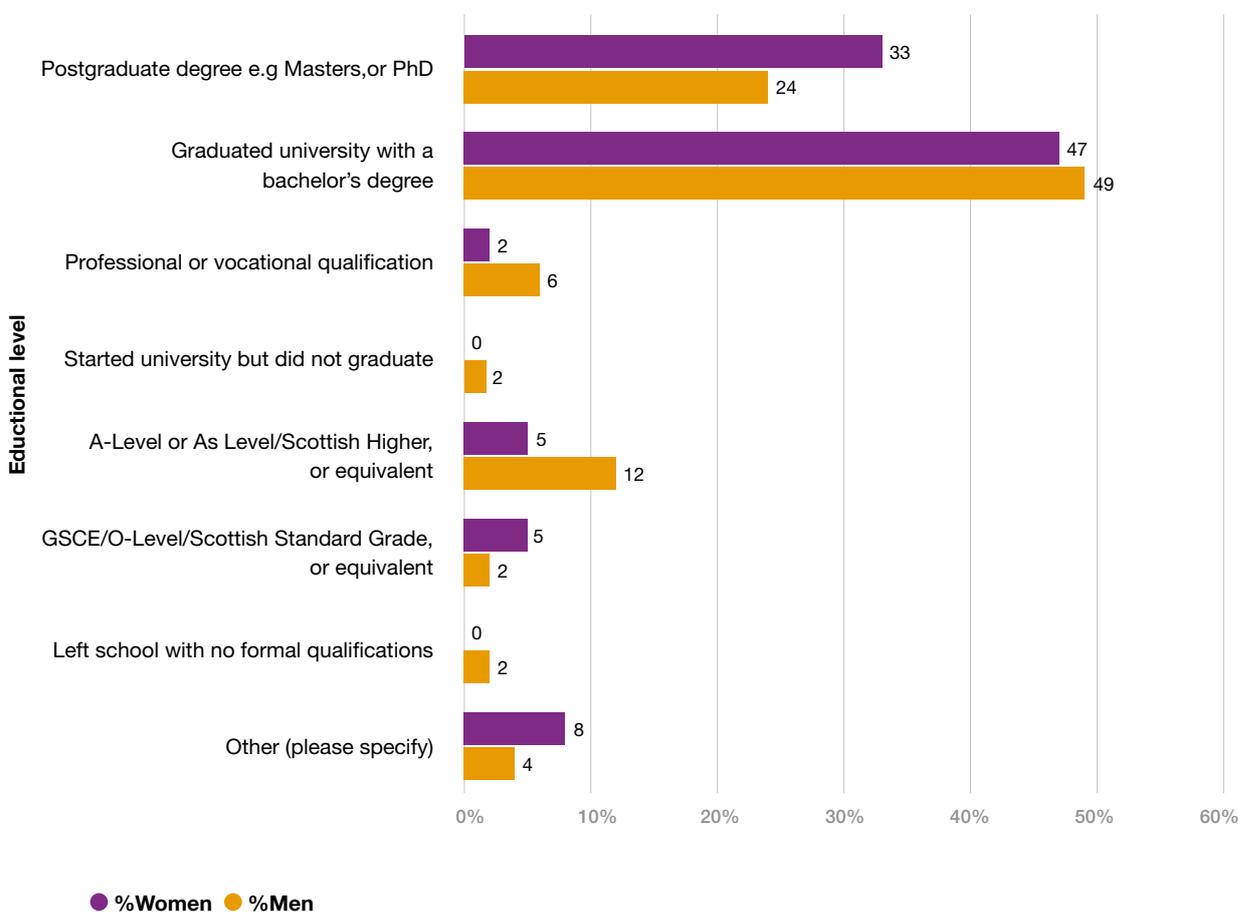
A survey of women and men MPs was also conducted to take a more detailed look at career paths prior to entering Parliament. The survey had 113 respondents or 18% of Parliamentarians who take their seats. It can be considered indicative of the experiences and attitudes of MPs, although not representative of the wider population. Due to the relatively small number of respondents the job categories used to analyse *the Times Guide* were merged to create a shorter list of 17 job types. The full list can be found in Appendix Two. Taken together, the quantitative data illustrates some commonalities in the career backgrounds of those who succeed in becoming an MP.

Education

The MP survey results show that a university education is a common feature of responding MPs’ backgrounds. The majority of MPs in our survey were educated to degree level or above. 77% (85) of respondents either graduated with a degree or postgraduate degree, with more women than men MPs in the sample holding a post-graduate degree. By comparison, 42% of 21-64 year olds in the UK labour market have a degree (ONS, 2017b). This confirms the findings of other research (Sutton Trust, 2010; Durose et al., 2011) which points to the professionalisation of political careers. While educational attainment was not significantly different between men and women, these findings do have implications for broader diversity.

Chart 3: Educational level of women and men MPs (n=111)

Data from the survey of sitting MPs



Careers

While a number of different careers were pursued by MPs prior to entering political office, we can see some commonalities among MPs' employment histories. An analysis of *the Times Guide* showed that the majority of MPs (56%) were listed as having worked in multiple roles across the 23 different categories.

Table 3: Proportion of MPs with one or more job types

Number of job types included in Times Guide entry	Proportion of MPs
0	3%
1	41%
2	43%
3	12%
4	1%

Data from the *Times Guide to the House of Commons*

The Times Guide also showed that five of the job categories had been held by over 10% of MPs prior to entering office. The most common experience was of a commerce, business or management role, which was held by 42% (169) of MPs. The next largest was a role as a party official,⁶ which 32% (129) of MPs had held. This was followed by experience of the legal profession at 16% (63), the voluntary sector at 14% (56), and journalism or media at 10% (42).

Table 4: Most common job types of MPs n=404

Job category	Proportion of MPs who have held a job in this category	Proportion of women MPs who have held a job in this category	Proportion of men MPs who have held a job in this category
Commerce, business or management	42%	31%	49%
Party official	32%	32%	31%
Legal profession	16%	16%	16%
Voluntary sector	14%	20%	10%
Journalism or media	10%	10%	11%

Data from the *Times Guide to the House of Commons*

Three of the five most frequently mentioned job roles - the legal profession, party officials, and journalism - had only a small difference between female and male MPs, of less than two percentage points.

However, a larger difference was apparent between women and men in their experience in commerce, business and management roles and the voluntary sector. Overall, more men MPs had experience in commerce, business and management roles. Women were 18 percentage points less likely to have experience in this area listed in their *Times Guide* entry (31% of women or 50, compared to 49% of men or 119).

This background was more prevalent amongst Conservatives. Fifty-eight percent (117) of Conservative MPs were listed as having a background within commerce, business or management roles. Although slightly more Conservative women were listed as having this background the difference between Conservative women and men was fairly small at four percentage points. Fewer Labour MPs were listed as having jobs within this category but the difference between women and men was much starker at (18% of Labour women or 15, compared to 31% of Labour men or 22). Although the numbers are smaller the difference was greater still for the SNP. No women SNP MPs were listed in *the Times Guide* as having roles within this category, but 55% (11) of men MPs were.

⁶ For the purposes of this analysis "Party official" includes party workers, political advisors and Parliamentary assistants.

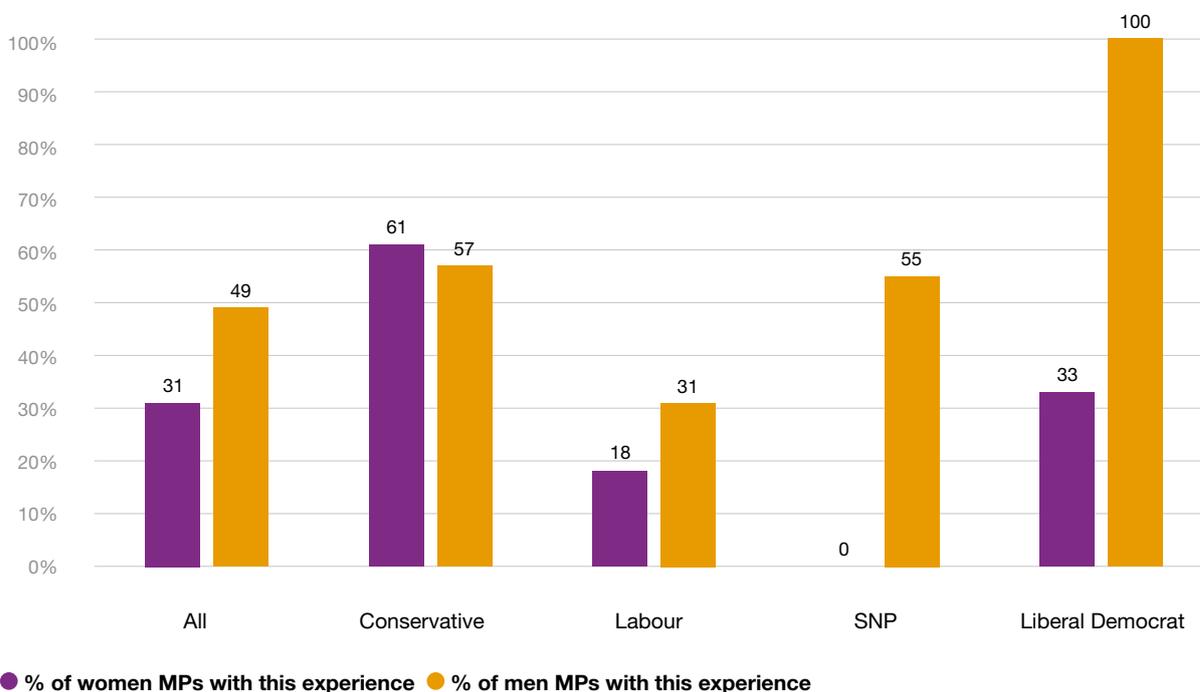
Table 5: Proportion of women and men MPs who have worked in commerce, business and management by party n=404

Party	% of women MPs with this experience	Number of women MPs with this experience	% of men MPs with this experience	Number of men MPs with this experience
All	31%	50	49%	119
Conservative	61%	34	57%	57
Labour	18%	15	31%	22
SNP	0	0	55%	11
Liberal Democrat	33%	1	100%	2

Data from the Times Guide to the House of Commons

Chart 4: Proportion of women and men MPs who have worked in commerce, business and management by party n=404

Data from the Times Guide to the House of Commons



There were interesting gender differences too in MPs who have experience in the voluntary sector in their entry.

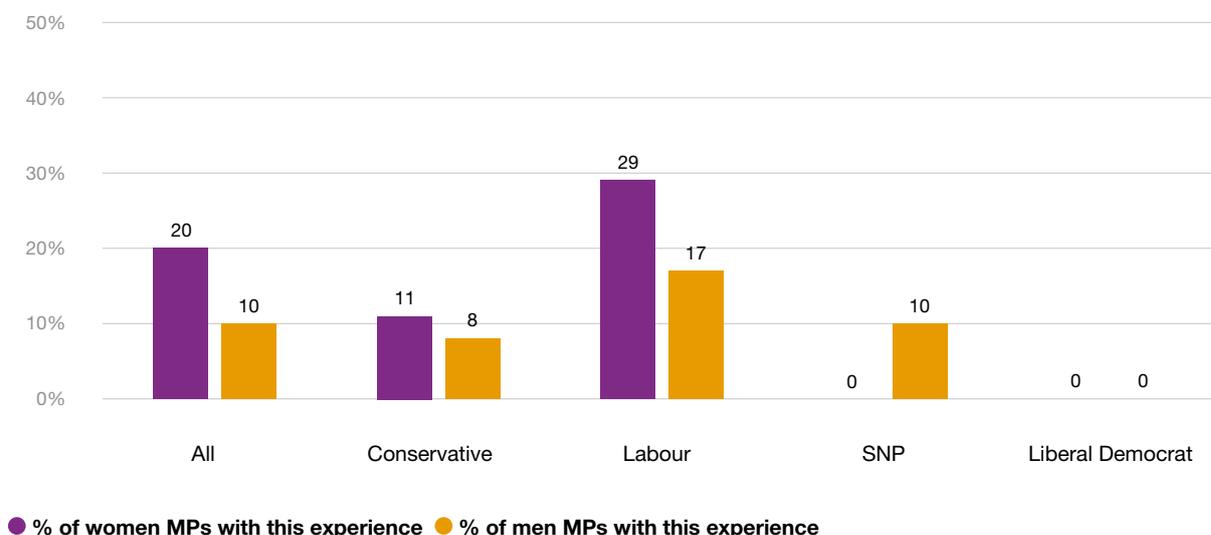
Table 6: Proportion of women and men MPs with experience of the voluntary sector by party n=404

Party	% of women MPs with this experience	Number of women MPs with this experience	% of men MPs with this experience	Number of men MPs with this experience
All	20%	31	10%	25
Conservative	11%	6	8%	11
Labour	29%	24	17%	12
SNP	0%	0	10%	2
Liberal Democrat	0%	0	0%	0

Data from the Times Guide to the House of Commons

Chart 5: Proportion of women and men MPs with experience of the voluntary sector by party n=404

Data from the Times Guide to the House of Commons



Overall, women were twice as likely as men to have experience in the voluntary sector included in their *Times Guide* entry. Experience in this sector was most common amongst Labour politicians but there was a small gender difference amongst Conservatives too. Conservative women MPs were three percentage points more likely than Conservative men MPs to be listed as having worked in the voluntary sector. The difference is largest for Labour MPs though with 29% (24) of Labour women having an entry for a role in the voluntary sector compared to 17% (12) of Labour men. There are interesting connections here with the findings of the qualitative research included earlier in this report. A number of women MPs and aspirants highlighted the value of voluntary or third sector careers, both in increasing their knowledge of politics, growing their interest and offering them credibility with the electorate. However, there is a challenge here too. Campaigning roles in the voluntary sector can be seen as typical routes for the “career politician”. The qualitative research also revealed perceived resistance to candidates perceived in this way amongst party selectors with many MPs and aspirants keen to avoid this label.

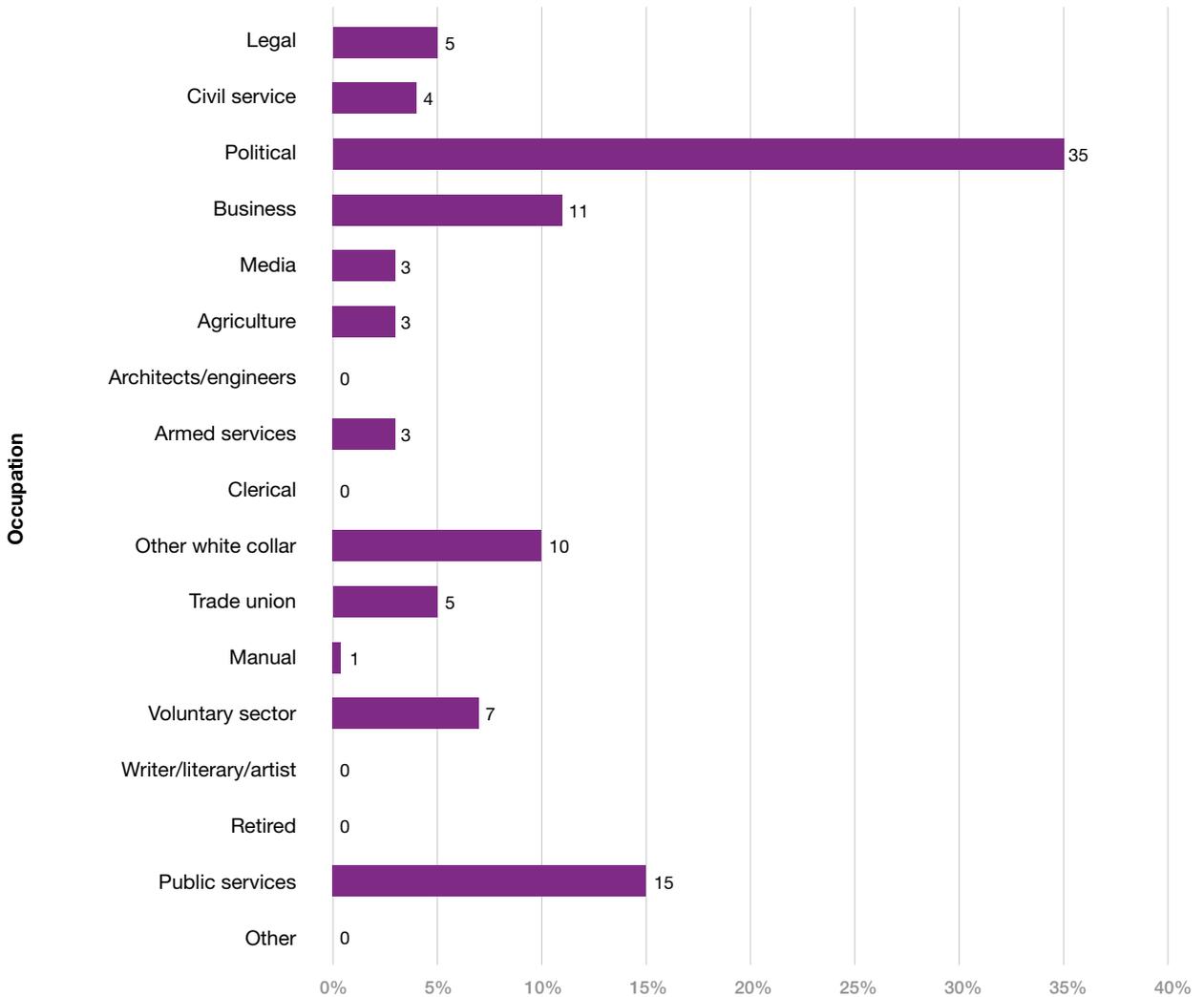
The Times Guide was also analysed to consider whether MPs had previously held another elected role, which for many MPs was that of a local councillor. Forty-four per cent of MPs who entered the House from 2010 onwards had been in a previous elected role – with a small difference between the 42% (67) of women and 45% (110) of men for whom this was the case.

While commonalities in career backgrounds can be observed, our survey asked MPs to consider which of the jobs they had previously done was *most helpful* in their selection to become an MP; 66% (64) selected the job they had immediately before entering Parliament. There was no difference between women and men here. The majority of these jobs were political (35% or 28) followed by public services (15% or 12) and business (11% or 9). This may in part reflect that the most recent job is considered most important and that many MPs had worked in politics prior to entering Parliament (for instance because selectorates consider most recent experience as most relevant), rather than political jobs offering additional value per se. However, whilst 25% (25) MPs were in political roles immediately before being elected we can see that a higher proportion and number of MPs selected a political role as the most useful.

Whilst the numbers are small this suggests that political roles may be considered to have particular value in becoming an MP. This echoes findings in the qualitative research that political jobs are useful as a way to gain insight into the political process, grow networks and encounter political mentors who act as vital sources of encouragement. For some women these jobs demystified the process and increased their confidence that they could undertake the role of an MP.

Chart 6: Most useful job held by MPs prior to election by type (n=81)

Data from the survey of sitting MPs

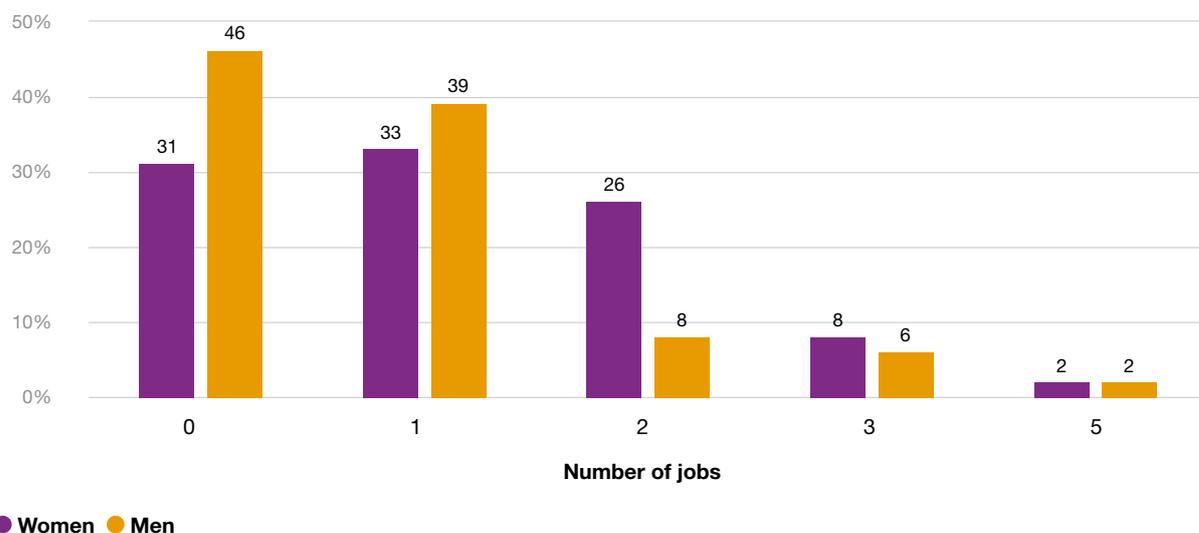


While *the Times Guide* showed us what jobs were most common, the MP survey sought to explore in more granular detail the number of jobs men and women MPs held. The survey suggests that women may have had more jobs that form part of the classic routes into politics. MPs were asked whether they had worked in a series of different occupations that are identified as traditional career steps in politics.⁷ As the figure below shows, men MPs in the survey were much more likely to have had none (46% or 24) or only one (39% or 20) of those jobs on their CVs. Contrastingly a majority of female MPs (69% or 42) had at least one of them and 36% (22) of women MPs surveyed had had two or more of these jobs (compared to 15% of men or 8). It may be that the women in Parliament amongst our respondents are more likely to have followed a “traditional” career, focused on jobs connecting them to politics.

⁷ Respondents were asked “Thinking across your career as a whole, and including the jobs you have listed already, have you at any point worked in any of the following organisations? A think tank, trade union, campaign group, law firm, media/ journalism, civil service/ local government”.

Chart 7: Number of classic career politics roles held by MPs (n=113)

Data from the survey of sitting MPs



Activism

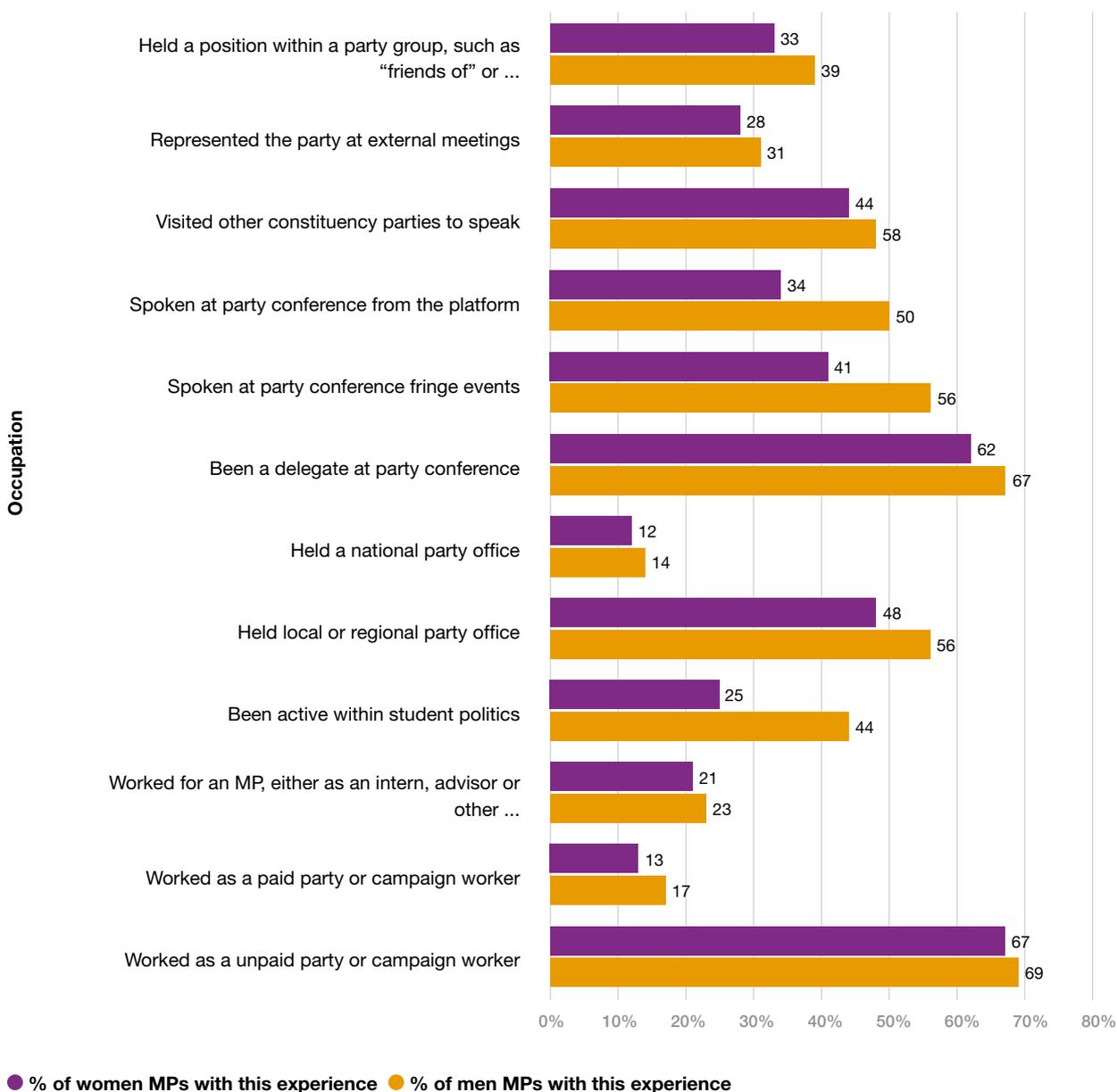
Demonstrating a commitment to the party and developing networks emerges from the qualitative research as essential to successful selection. Alongside their employment history, our MP survey asked participants about their previous experience of engaging in party activism.

Table 7: Experiences of party activism amongst women and men MPs (n=113)

Type of activism	% of women MPs who have done this	No. of women who have done this	% of men MPs who have done this	No. of men MPs who have done this
Held a position within a party group, such as a “friends of” or youth movement	33%	20	39%	20
Represented the party at external meetings	28%	17	31%	16
Visited other constituency parties to speak	44%	27	58%	30
Spoken at party conference from the platform	34%	21	50%	26
Spoken at party conference fringe events	41%	25	56%	29
Been a delegate at party conference	62%	38	67%	35
Held national party office	12%	7	14%	7
Held local or regional party office	48%	29	56%	29
Been active within student politics	25%	15	44%	23
Worked for an MP, either as an intern, advisor or other employee	21%	13	23%	12
Worked as a paid party or campaign worker	13%	8	17%	9
Worked as an unpaid party or campaign worker	67%	41	69%	36

Chart 8: Experiences of party activism amongst women and men MPs (n=113)

Data from the survey of sitting MPs



For the most part experiences of party activism were fairly similar across women and men MPs in the survey. It is worth noting though that participants were not asked about whether women were more likely than men to have undertaken each type of activism. In most instances, although the number of MPs included in the analysis is small and the differences between men and women MPs are very small, a higher proportion of men MPs had undertaken the activism. There are some examples with fairly large gender differences though. Men were more likely to have been active in student politics, 44% (23) of men MPs said they had done this, compared to 25% (15) of women MPs. Men MPs were 15 percentage points more likely to have spoken at a conference fringe event than women MPs. They were more likely again to have spoken at party conference from the platform; 34% (21) of women MPs had done this, compared to 50% (26) of men MPs.

These experiences are likely to be valuable for aspirants in demonstrating party commitment, building political experience and networks. Women in this survey clearly succeeded in getting selected and elected with slightly lower levels of activism. However, this evidence does chime with the qualitative findings in this report that deeper engagement can often be more challenging for women.

7. IMPLICATIONS

This research indicates that women and men who succeed in becoming MPs have taken broadly similar career routes, although experience in the voluntary sector may be more common for women and business experience less common for women MPs (with variations across the parties). Women and men MPs have similar educational levels and experiences of political activism. It is perhaps unsurprising that those who make it through a process have many similar characteristics.

While a common argument is that political progression is based on merit, in practice, becoming an MP requires a number of resources – resources which are not listed in job descriptions or in party handbooks. Careers can be an important source of these resources to women seeking to become MPs; they can offer insight into the political process and exposure to Westminster. They can create credibility, areas of expertise and encourage women to perceive themselves as potential MP material. They can also offer networks and mentoring relationships that are highly valued in the selection process. This may be why, whilst political career backgrounds were shared fairly evenly by women and men MPs, women MPs in our survey tended to have more of that experience.

Our research pointed to the necessity of good finances, plenty of flexible time, personal credibility and longstanding party networks. These assets can also be acquired through careers with many successful candidates and aspirants pointing to their ability to save money, stop working or manage their own time as highly important to progressing to the next stage on the journey to Parliament. However, these resources are not evenly distributed amongst societal groups in the UK. They give advantage to those who have high incomes, who are self-employed or employed in what are sometimes considered “career politician” roles, and those who have few caring responsibilities. Women on average are less likely to be as well placed as men in respect of these, although of course other identities, not least, race, class and disability, will mediate an individual’s resource.

We find too that for some women careers can create a “double bind”; offering valuable resources but also creating challenges to their credibility as “authentic candidates” with the “right motivations” for standing.

The research has also shown the ongoing and explicit resistance to the inclusion of women in politics. There are multiple sources of this resistance, both individual and institutional. Equipping typically marginalised groups with the necessary resources through careers and other means will not in and of itself challenge some of the deeply embedded opposition to their recruitment, selection and election. In order to ensure that women can fulfil their democratic right to participate and be represented within the political sphere this resistance must be addressed head-on.

Significant challenges to increasing women’s representation remain at every stage of the process to becoming an MP. However, we have found indicators of possible strategies for success – there are insights for women seeking to stand but perhaps more importantly for all those with a stake in growing the gender balance of our Parliament. We have found aspirants and MPs that are driven by a desire to contribute and support their local communities. The commitment to changing the balance of our politics at a national and leadership level is recognised and valued by women on the journey to Parliament. In some cases, the simple act of a political leader making a call for more women to participate played an important part in individuals embarking on the process of selection.

There is support too for party programmes intended to support women in this process. Importantly asking women to stand, encouraging them to see themselves as MP material and demonstrating that they are seen this way by their party makes a real difference to the supply of women. These interventions are likely to increase the supply of women candidates and help equip them for the process. But a step change in representation is likely to require tackling the underlying resistance to women in power, the processes that disadvantage them and other underrepresented groups and to our political culture more widely.

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APPENDICES

Appendix One

Job types used for analysis of the *Times Guide*

Legal profession
Civil service and local authority administration
Party official
Political/social/policy research
Commerce/management/ business/finance
Education
Journalism/ broadcasting/media
Physicians/dentists
Agriculture/ farmers
Architects/ surveyors/engineers
Armed services
Clergy clerical/secretarial
Other white collar
Trade union official
Manual worker
Voluntary sector
Writer/literary/artist
Retired
Councillor/other elected office
Lobbyist
Social worker
NHS
Other

Appendix Two

Merged job types for analysis of the MP survey

Legal profession
Civil service and local authority administration
Political: party official/political/social/policy research/
councillor/other elected office/lobbyist
Commerce/management and business
Journalism/ broadcasting/media
Agriculture/ farmers
Architects/ surveyors/engineers
Armed services
Clerical/secretarial
Other white collar
Trade union official
Manual worker
Voluntary sector
Writer/literary/artist
Retired
Public services: NHS/physicians/dentists/social
worker/ education
Other

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