

Why are there so few women MPs?

From 1918 when women were first permitted to stand for Parliament until the 1997 election only 168 women were elected as MPs. Before the 1997 election the UK ranked 49th in the world for the proportion of women in the lower house, with a smaller percentage than any European Country, the United States or Canada.

In 1997 Labour's policy of selecting from all women shortlists in half of their winnable and target seats led to a doubling of the number of women MPs from 62 to 121. However even after this dramatic increase women only made up 18% of UK MPs.

The problems facing women who might wish to stand for parliament have been identified as the 'four Cs' – *culture, childcare, cash and confidence*

The culture of politics

The culture of British politics is not supportive to women. The style is confrontational with an emphasis on scoring points. Fawcett research among women voters has shown that many women are put off politics altogether by the way they see politicians behave. One woman said 'it is a nightmare in Parliament when they are on the telly.... It seems like they are going mad, shouting and roaring at each other'. Another said, 'I watch it sometimes and I cannot understand a word because they are all shouting at each other'.

This dislike of the style of UK politics is shared by many women MPs. A survey of women MPs carried out by Fawcett after the 1997 election showed that 63% thought it was harder to be a woman than a man in parliament. The main reasons given focused on the culture of political life with women complaining about 'male public school attitudes' and 'job culture

Childcare (and other caring responsibilities)

Women are more likely than men to have main responsibility for childcare, and for caring for elderly, sick or disabled family members. (click here for more information – link to caring section) These caring responsibilities are a problem for women before they are even elected. Running for selection requires attending evening meetings several nights a week and the difficulty of arranging childcare, combined with the cost, can mean that women reject the idea of standing for election before they even start.

Cash

Women earn less than men at all levels and across all sectors of employment, and are therefore less likely to be able to afford the expenses in running for selection (click here for information about women's incomes). Would be candidates need money to cover trips to the constituency and overnight accommodation if they don't live in the area, publicity materials and the costs of childcare if they are mothers.

Confidence

The practical problems, first of running for selection, then of being an MP, and the cultural image of what an MP is like, means that some women lack the confidence to put themselves forward. Most of the political parties now offer training sessions to encourage more women to stand by giving them confidence.

Other barriers

The 'four C's' can provide an explanation of why fewer women than men come forward for selection, but they cannot account fully for the lack of women in parliament. There is no shortage of able women in any of the political parties, but the numbers selected remain low. Even when the percentage of women candidates increased during the 1980s the proportion elected remained small.

Women candidates are less likely to be elected because they are more likely than men to be fighting seats which they have little or no chance of winning. Prior to the 1997 election very few women were selected for winnable, let alone safe, seats.

The main reason given by women MPs themselves for the lack of women in parliament was prejudice among local selection committees. Research by Fawcett into women's experience of candidate selection carried out after the 2001 election revealed both direct and indirect discrimination against women candidates, as well as instances of sexual harassment.