

# What About **Women?**



## **ELECTION 2010 - WHAT ABOUT WOMEN?**

### **DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL REFORM BRIEFING**



**Fawcett**  
closing the inequality gap  
**wo** since **men**  
1866

[www.fawcettsociety.org.uk](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk)  
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<http://tinyurl.com/WAWomen>

# Democracy and Political Reform

*What About Women* is a coalition of over forty organisations, led by Fawcett that has come together for the General Election to ask 'what about women?'

## Purpose of this briefing

This briefing gives some background information on the issues behind the *What About Women* questions on **democracy and political reform**. It also includes a number of policy options from Fawcett and other *What About Women* campaign partners working on democracy and political reform. Links to further information can be found at the end of this briefing along with details of our partner organisations.

Women are not a homogeneous group and women's ability to participate in politics and decision-making will depend on a wide range of factors including social class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability, religion and caring responsibilities.

## The questions

*Women have a right to be equally represented in our political system and to have as much influence as men in decisions that affect their everyday lives and the society in which they live.*

- **How will you increase the number and diversity of women in parliament and government at the national and local levels?**
- **What will you do to ensure the voices of women are heard and acted upon by decision makers?**
- **How will you support a vibrant and sustainable women's voluntary and community sector?**

## Some key issues for women

Across the UK women are shockingly underrepresented in the political structures and decision-making processes that shape our lives. UK democracy and politics presents specific structural barriers to women standing for democratically elected positions. These issues are compounded for ethnic minority women and other women from marginalised groups such as women with disabilities, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender women and women from lower socio-economic backgrounds. An absence of women in decision-making, a lack of focus on issues that matter to women and girls and a shortage of avenues to make their voice heard often leads to disengagement with politics and a lack of confidence in the political system among women. Three quarters of women believe the current system of Government needs improvement.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 7*, 3 March 2010.



Women's civil society organisations support women to engage with decision makers and have a great deal of specific expertise on women's issues. However they remain under-funded and are under-represented on local and national decision-making bodies.

## Why increase the number and diversity of women in parliament and government at national and local levels?

The UK is now trailing in international league tables on women's access to positions of political power. Despite progress in the 1997 election, the increase in women MPs has stagnated. Evidence suggests that increasing the proportion of female MPs has real practical benefits as women bring different experiences and knowledge to parliament.<sup>2</sup>

- *The UK's current level of female MPs is 19.5% placing us 66th in the world.*<sup>3</sup>
- *At the current rate of progress it will take 200 years – another 40 elections – to achieve an equal number of women in parliament.*<sup>4</sup>
- *Women make up only 4 out of 23 cabinet ministers<sup>5</sup> and 7 out of 32 shadow cabinet ministers.*<sup>6</sup>
- *In Scotland in 2007, for the first time since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the number of women elected declined to 33.3%.*<sup>7</sup>
- *In Wales, women won 46.7% of the Assembly seats in 2007. However, this was also a decline on the previous election result of 50%.*<sup>8</sup>
- *Ethnic minority women make up only 0.3% of members of the UK parliament.*<sup>9</sup>
- *In recent years, the House of Lords has become increasingly more representative with 148 women members, 4 out of the last 5 leaders of the house have been women and 41% of appointments made by the House of Lords Appointments Commission since 2004 have been women. However women still make up less than 20% of Peers.*<sup>10</sup>
- *Of the 24 countries where women's representation was over 30% in 2009, the majority employed quota systems in one form or another.*<sup>11</sup>
- *Proportional Representation electoral systems can lead to an increase in the proportion of women in parliaments.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sara Childs, Joni Lovenduski & Rosie Campbell, *Women at the Top: Changing Numbers, changing politics*, Hansard Society 2005.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.cfwd.org.uk/uploads/pdfs/Women\\_MPs\\_across\\_the\\_World\\_2009.pdf](http://www.cfwd.org.uk/uploads/pdfs/Women_MPs_across_the_World_2009.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Sex and Power Report, EHRC, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> As at October 09 <http://www.cfwd.org.uk/resources/fact-sheets/women-cabinet-ministers-1919-2009>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.conservatives.com/People/Meet\\_the\\_Shadow\\_Cabinet.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/People/Meet_the_Shadow_Cabinet.aspx)

<sup>7</sup> Hansard Society, *Has Devolution Delivered for Women?* 8 March 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Hansard Society, *Has Devolution Delivered for*

*Women?* 8 March 2010.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.equalities.gov.uk/PDF/8134-TSO-BAME-FACTSHEET.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Hansard Society submission to the Speakers Conference on Parliamentary Representation, January 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Data derived from Inter-Parliamentary Union <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> and the Quota Project <http://www.quotaproject.org/uid/search.cfm#>

<sup>12</sup> Mary-Ann Stephenson, *Gender and Democracy: what works? Strategies to Increase Women's Representation*. British Council 2004.

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**The figures at time of printing for the number and percentage of women candidates in the three main political parties:**

Labour	177 (29.1%)	
Conservatives	131 (22.5%)	
Liberal Democrats	105 (21.1%)	(Feb 2010)

The inequality between men and women in political representation starts at the local level. Parliamentary candidates often start out their political careers in local government and the low numbers of women acting as local councillors feeds in to the low numbers of women in parliament.

- *Women make up 30.8% of local councillors in England and ethnic minority women make up only 0.8%.<sup>13</sup>*
- *In 2003, 27.7% of candidates in the Scottish local elections were women but by 2007 this figure had declined to 22.5%.<sup>14</sup>*
- *In the UK, women constitute 30% of local councillors but only 16% of council leaders.<sup>15</sup>*
- *In 2008, ethnic minority women made up 0.8 % of local councillors in England.<sup>16</sup>*

## Why ensure women's voices are heard and acted on by decision makers?

Women are more likely to be certain they will vote than men but less likely to feel that they can influence decisions within their communities.

- *Only 39% of women feel able to influence decisions in their local area and only 30% feel able to influence national decisions.<sup>17</sup>*
- *More women say they are certain to vote than men – 56% compared to 51%.<sup>18</sup>*
- *During Oxfam's Gender and Community Engagement in Manchester project, 82% of women reported feeling that they had no or very little influence over decisions regarding their communities.<sup>19</sup>*
- *Only 28% of chairs of Local Strategic Partnerships in England are women.<sup>20</sup>*

## Why support a vibrant and sustainable women's voluntary and community sector?

Women's civil society organisations provide important support and space for women to engage with decision-making and have been responsible for bringing about significant gender equality changes in legislation, policy and public perceptions. However, women's organisations constantly face funding shortages and are under-represented on Local Strategic Partnerships, despite the specific expertise about women's issues and gender analysis they possess.

<sup>13</sup> National Local Census of Local Authority Councillors, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Hansard Society, *Has Devolution Delivered for Women?* 8 March 2010.

<sup>15</sup> [www.cfwd.org.uk](http://www.cfwd.org.uk)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.equalities.gov.uk/PDF/8134-TSO-BAME-FACTSHEET.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/pdf/1345295.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 7*, 3 March 2010.

<sup>19</sup> *Not seen and not heard? Gender, Community Engagement and Representation*, Oxfam ReGender Briefing Paper, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> E. Gudnadottir, S. Smith, et al. *Where are the women in LSPs?: Women's representation in Local Strategic Partnerships*, Urban Forum, 2007.2008.



- *Less than 2% of voluntary and community sector representatives on Local Strategic Partnerships are from women's organisations, despite the women's sector making up 7% of registered charities in England and Wales.*<sup>21</sup>
- *45% of women's organisations interviewed by the Women's Resource Centre believe they have the power to influence government.*<sup>22</sup>
- *Women's organisations represent around 7% of the voluntary and community sector.*<sup>23</sup>
- *In 2006 only 2% of central government funding to voluntary and community organisations went to women's organisations.*<sup>24</sup>

## Policies that could make a difference

**Policies proposed by Fawcett and other *What About Women* campaign partner organisations to create a democracy that works for women and girls:**

### Women in politics

- All parties to publish their plans setting out how they intend to achieve increased female representation and how they will act to eliminate any discrimination or harassment on the basis of sex, race or other grounds within their parties.
- Effective use of positive action such as all-women shortlists with a priority for selecting under represented women.
- Equality and diversity training for party selection committees and party members.
- A robust mechanism for taking forward key recommendations from the Speaker's Conference.
- Set targets for progress on women's representation as women MPs, councillors, MEPs and the introduction of compulsory quotas if targets are not met.
- Ensure democratic institutions adopt family friendly hours of work.
- Introduce a proportional voting system.
- Ensure the House of Lords is fully elected using a proportional electoral system.

### Listening to women's voices

- Sustainable funding for women's civil society organisations.
- Ensure that public authorities do not misinterpret the Gender Equality Duty to cut 'women only' services or restrict the activities of women's organisations.
- Funding for programmes and organisations who work with women from diverse backgrounds to raise their awareness of how politics impacts on their lives and how UK political institutions work.
- Greater representation of women and women's organisations in Local Strategic Partnerships.

<sup>21</sup> E. Gudnadottir, S. Smith, et al. Where are the women in LSPs?: Women's representation in Local Strategic Partnerships, Urban Forum, 2007, <http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/research-reports/where-are-the-women-in-lsp-s>. See also Getting Women into Local Strategic Partnerships: Knowing your community, improving local services, Oxfam, September 2009, <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/gender/getting-women-into-lsps.html>

<sup>22</sup> *Why women? The women's voluntary and community*

*sector: changing lives, changing communities, changing society*, Women's Resource Centre, 2006, p.44.

<sup>23</sup> Gudnadottir et al., Where are the Women in LSPs? Women's representation in Local Strategic Partnerships, Urban Forum: London 2007. [http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/files/ufpublic/where\\_are\\_the\\_women\\_in\\_lsps\\_local\\_strategic\\_partnerships\\_2007.pdf](http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/files/ufpublic/where_are_the_women_in_lsps_local_strategic_partnerships_2007.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Snapshot audit of central government funding streams, Women's Resource Centre, 2006 (unpublished).

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The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women states: *'States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country' (article 7) and 'Adoption by States Parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination as defined in the present Convention' (article 4)*

## Further information and resources:

[The Fawcett Society](#)

[www.fawcettsociety.org.uk](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk)

[Engender](#)

[www.engender.org.uk](http://www.engender.org.uk)

[Wales Women's National Coalition](#)

<http://www.wales-womens-national-coalition.org.uk/>

[Centre for Women and Democracy](#)

<http://www.cfdw.org.uk>

[The Candidate Watch page of CFWD](#)

<http://www.cfdw.org.uk/resources/candidate-watch>

[CFWD Fact sheets](#)

<http://www.cfdw.org.uk/resources/fact-sheets>

[Hansard Society](#)

[www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk)

[www.womenatthetop.wordpress.com](http://www.womenatthetop.wordpress.com) – Hansard Society blog to be launched 8 March

[Women at the Top, 2005 report – Women at the Top 2005 report:](#)

<http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/downloads/archive/2007/08/23/Women-at-the-Top-2005.aspx>

[Audit of Political Engagement 1-7:](#)

[http://hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/parliament\\_and\\_government/archive/2007/08/08/Public-engagement.aspx](http://hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/parliament_and_government/archive/2007/08/08/Public-engagement.aspx)

[No Politics Please We're Women briefing paper:](#)

[http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/recent\\_events/archive/2008/10/15/no-politics-please-we-re-women.aspx](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/recent_events/archive/2008/10/15/no-politics-please-we-re-women.aspx)

[Inter-Parliamentary Union international statistics](#)

<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

[Engender](#)

<http://www.engender.org.uk/projects/38/Power-and-Participation.html>

Links to further information and resources can be found on the *What about Women* pages of the Fawcett Society website [www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/whataboutwomen](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/whataboutwomen)