

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Biliau Diwygio | Reform Bill Committee

Bil Senedd Cymru (Rhestrau Ymgeiswyr Etholiadol) | Senedd Cymru (Electoral Candidate Lists) Bill

Ymateb gan Joyce Watson AS, Cadeirydd Cawcws Menywod y Senedd | Evidence from Joyce Watson MS, Chair of Senedd Women's Caucus

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## **The need for and impact of gender mechanisms**

### **Submission from Senedd Women's Caucus, led by Joyce Watson MS, Chair**

- I am giving evidence as chair of the Senedd Women's Caucus. We have met to discuss this and this is an updated version of the evidence previously submitted.
- Giving evidence with me will be Sioned Williams MS, Plaid Cymru, Janet Finch-Saunders MS, Welsh Conservative and Rhianon Passmore MS, Welsh Labour.
- The Senedd Women's Caucus was established last year with a mission to bring together women Members of the Senedd from across the political parties to work purposefully, promoting and supporting women's participation in politics and identifying current barriers within our parliamentary system.
- Last June the Caucus heard evidence from Senator Fiona O'Loughlin, Chair of the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) Women's Caucus, on their use of gender quotas in elections, towards the wider goal of achieving gender equality in Ireland.
- At the Caucus' discussion of this evidence, Sian Gwenllian MS stated that mechanisms should be an essential part of the reform package.

Reforms would be incomplete without this action, and to fully represent all the women of Wales the Bill should bring forward effective mechanisms.

- Rhianon Passmore MS spoke of the importance of a suitable workplace and care infrastructure to enable all members to work effectively. She referred to data from Reykjavik on young people's perceptions of gender equality in Iceland.
- Carolyn Thomas MS shared results from a school visit she did with Girlguiding Cymru. This showed the impact of unconscious bias on young people, such as boys talking over girls in the classroom and girls on the school council still not feeling that their voices were heard.
- Sioned Williams MS said that women Senedd members had been impactful in changing the agenda in Wales, with work on subjects including work/life balance, domestic abuse and the forthcoming Women's Health Plan. This approach makes space for male members to tackle similar subjects, such as work by Huw Irranca-Davies MS on menopause.
- Several Caucus members reported that, in their experience, 'you can't rely on people doing the right thing' in internal party selections.
- Some felt that it was important that this action was enshrined in law, rather than being left to political parties, normalising it as a first step towards equality.
- Parties have rigorous selection processes ensuring good quality candidates, contradicting the argument that women candidates may not be 'the best person for the job.'
- In the 25 years since Welsh devolution, the public has consistently elected governments with a commitment to equality at the heart of their election manifestos and their programmes of government. The first

Welsh Assembly Government made equality a cross-cutting objective for all of its work, and this principle has remained throughout subsequent government programmes.

- Since the Senedd was established in 1999, the laws and rules that govern the institution specifically require that its work should be conducted “with due regard to the principle that there should be equality of opportunity for all people.”
- Wales had only ever had four women Members of Parliament prior to the 1997 general election, from Megan Lloyd George in 1927 to Ann Clwyd in 1984. From 1993 the Labour Party committed to actions to redress imbalance by implementing all women shortlists in half of ‘winnable’ seats for the next general election. This was controversial but resulted in an increase from one to four Welsh women MPs at the 1997 election. [\[Link\]](#)
- The establishment of the National Assembly for Wales presented an opportunity to create a new political culture in a brand new institution, addressing concerns about representation, among other desired changes.
- Gender equality mechanisms were used by some parties in the first Welsh Assembly elections in 1999, resulting in 24 female members out of 60. Welsh Labour used twinning, resulting in 15 of 28 Labour members being women, while Plaid Cymru used a zipping method on party lists, resulting in 6 of 17 members being women. The Welsh Liberal Democrats elected 3 men and 3 women, while the Welsh Conservatives, which did not use any mechanisms, elected nine men.
- Gender balance was achieved in the 2020 cabinet of the first Assembly, taking Wales from among the worst female representation in Europe to world-leading through these actions. [\[Link\]](#)

- In 2003, Wales became the first country in the world to have an equal number of men and women Assembly Members. [\[link\]](#)
- However, I believe that the Senedd's status as a world leader, which has received international praise, should not be taken for granted. We have seen the gender balance change across elections and by-elections, and it currently stands at 43% women and 57% men.
- Women represent 51% of the UK population according to the 2021 census and women are approximately 50% of the world's population. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- I would argue that democratic institutions such as the Senedd and Westminster should attempt to adequately reflect and represent the needs and specific policy concerns of half the population.
- Parliaments represent their entire populations. More diversity of representation brings a broader diversity of views, making parliaments more representative of the populations they serve.
- Fair representation leads to increased voter trust and bolsters the legitimacy of the governing body. Increased legitimacy leads to more trust between voters and government, and political space operates more effectively. [\[link\]](#)
- It is broadly recognised across Western democracies and institutions worldwide, including in the EU Parliament, that concrete formal and informal measures to address gender inequality are required to reach gender parity within politics.
- When cultural, socio-economic, and institutional structures are built by men for men, enforcement and implementation of women's policies can fall short.
- It could be argued that gender quotas should be viewed from the perspective of social and democratic justice. With half the UK's

population being women, women have the right to be included in political decision-making and outcomes that reflect their representation in society and the population as a whole. [\[link\]](#)

- Calls for quotas are often met with claims that they are anti-meritocratic. Womens' Equality Network Wales (WEN Wales) have submitted evidence rebutting this, and I concur with their arguments. Our current society is not meritocratic, and underrepresented groups face a range of challenges which traditionally dominant groups do not.
- Research has shown that, far from being underqualified, many of the women elected through mechanisms have been more highly qualified than their male counterparts, and the mechanisms themselves have encouraged them to come forward. [\[Link\]](#)
- The National Assembly's emphasis on equality led to further equality initiatives across public life in Wales [\[Link\]](#)
- The National Assembly for Wales was designed to deliver inclusiveness, including an emphasis on committee work to develop public policy, limiting the institution's working hours in order to promote a work-life balance, the requirement for gender-neutral official titles, and rules on the language permitted in political debate. [\[Link\]](#)
- In my opinion, aspects of the Senedd's programme of work, such as women's health and rights of carers, may not have been prioritised without the female perspective of lawmakers.
- A Cambridge University study found women lawmakers are more likely to propose policies that champion health and education, as well as being more likely to roll out laws that tackle sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and rape. [\[link\]](#)
- US research demonstrates how prominent female politicians can inspire other women to enter politics and how female leaders motivate

other women to run for office. As more women 'break the glass ceiling' and move into high political positions, it sets new precedents for society. Women in leadership positions inspire younger generations to set similar aspirations, triggering a cascade of positive growth. Women icons and mentors encourage a more politically active society. [\[link\]](#)

- The American Economic Association estimate that 15% of seats in a political body can change the political agenda but a proportion of 40% of seats is needed to pass women's friendly policies. [\[link\]](#)
- When laws establishing rules to promote parity are issued, it increases the share of women three times faster, according to a study conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). [\[link\]](#)
- According to the UN Women and the Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023 map, more women are participating in political decision-making worldwide, but gender equality still has not been achieved. They believe that gender quotas are one of the most effective and important temporary special measures, which can be implemented in different forms. [\[link\]](#)
- Meryl Kenny, professor of gender and politics at the University of Edinburgh says: *"Focusing on parties redirects attention from individual solutions to institutional strategies to rectify women's political under-representation and men's over-representation. Gender quotas are an important aspect of encouraging women's participation. The global evidence suggests that, if well-designed and properly implemented, quotas—whether adopted voluntarily by political parties or enshrined in law—are one of the most effective means to ensure significant increases in women's numerical representation."* [\[link\]](#)
- Gender quotas have achieved international recognition as a viable source of affirmative action. The principle of equal political participation

has been embedded in multiple international conventions and declarations, beginning with The Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. Article 4 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) recognises quota systems as measures that are needed to 'kick-start' women's political representation, particularly in countries where women have traditionally been under-represented in the national legislatures.

[\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)

- Institutional support outside of the UK for gender quotas and equality and the consensus opinion can be evidenced by the Spanish PM, Pedro Sanchez, announcing a law promoting gender parity in politics and business. The gender equality law will require more equal representation of women and men in politics, business and other spheres of public life. [\[link\]](#)
- Additionally, to decrease inequality between men and women in the workplace, multiple European countries have legislated quota regulations in favour of women. Since 2016, a gender quota has been entrenched in German law, followed by a significant rise in the representation of women in target positions. [\[link\]](#)
- Ursula von der Leyen became the first female president of the European Commission in 2019, promising to deliver a Union of Equality – starting with her own team. Her Commission is the most gender-balanced yet, and includes the first separate equality commissioner. [\[Link\]](#)
- President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, said:  
*"Gender equality is a core principle of the European Union, but it is not yet a reality. In business, politics and society as a whole, we can only reach our full potential if we use all of our talent and diversity. Using only half of the*

*population, half of the ideas, or half of the energy is not good enough. With the Gender Equality Strategy, we are pushing for more and faster progress to promote equality between men and women."* [\[link\]](#)

- In the UK, women currently constitute around a third of MPs and local councillors, with only seven out of 23 cabinet ministers in Westminster being women. [\[link\]](#)
- In the UK, the first woman to sit in parliament was elected in 1919. In 1987, women made up 5% of MPs. Since then, the number of female MPs has grown, reaching 34% after the 2019 general election. The largest jumps were at the 1997 election when the proportion of women MPs doubled from 9% to 18%, and at the 2015 election when it rose from 22% to 30%. [\[link\]](#)
- While progress has been made across government and parliament in recent decades, women remain underrepresented in both Houses of Parliament, the cabinet, the senior civil service and among ministers and special advisers. [\[link\]](#)
- The UK ranks #48 globally according to the percentage of women in the UK Parliament (not including the devolved nations). [\[link\]](#)
- Globally, as of 1 January 2023, 11.3% of countries have women Heads of State (17 out of 151 countries, monarchy-based systems excluded), and 9.8% have women Heads of Government (19 out of 193). [\[link\]](#)
- Women are underrepresented in politics and governments worldwide. According to the IPU, a global organisation of national parliamentarians, only 26.5 percent of parliamentarians are women. In about 22 countries, women comprise less than 10 per cent of government members. [\[link\]](#)
- Of all the regions, Europe continues to have the highest number of countries led by women. No EU country has reached a 50/50 sex ratio

in parliament nor had a majority of women MPs. In 2021, Sweden had the highest number of female MPs with just over 47%, followed by Finland, Belgium, Austria, Denmark, Spain, Portugal and France. Iceland, a non-EU country, is on par with Sweden. This figure is the highest ever achieved in the European Union. [\[link\]](#)

**18 April 2024**

# Women's Caucus

## Terms of Reference

May 2022

This document sets out the working arrangements for the newly established Women's Caucus.

### Purpose

The mission of the Women's Caucus is to bring together women Members of the Senedd from across the political parties:

- To work purposefully, promoting and supporting women's participation in politics and identifying current barriers within our Parliamentary system.
- To develop and advocate policy and practice initiatives that address issues affecting our women Parliamentarians and society.
- To advance the agreed agenda of the Caucus within political parties and other spheres of Senedd influence.

The Caucus may engage in a wide range of activities in pursuit of the progressive realisation of removing barriers to effective political participation and enhancing equality within the Senedd.

The Caucus will be formed of all women Members of the Senedd.

1. The steering group will comprise of:
  - Chair (Joyce Watsons MS as Commissioner with responsibility for Equalities)
  - Vice-chair (Llywydd)
  - 3 Senedd Members\*



*\*To ensure party balance and alignment of relevant workstreams, these representatives will be the elected women Senedd Members that sit on the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Executive Steering Committee and represent the Senedd on the CWP.*

*\*\* Comment: Alternatively – if the Chair has already identified alternative Members she believes would be suited and wishes to approach, we can take a different approach or even a combination of models.*

2. It will be the responsibility of the Chair and Steering Group Members to consult the Members, call meetings and keep Members informed of the work of the Women's Caucus.
  
3. The full membership of the Women's Caucus will meet at least annually. However, it is envisaged that the full membership would be called to meet by the Chairperson and Steering Group up to four times a year.
  
4. For Steering Group meetings, three Members of the Group must be present for meetings, with one being either the Chairperson or Vice Chair. Secretariat support will be provided by the Llywydd's Private Office.
  
5. The caucus is established for the Sixth Senedd term and the Terms of Reference effective from 2022. Amendments of the Terms of Reference and termination of the Caucus will be made by agreement of the Steering Group Members.