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Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 19 November 2024

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
25th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
*Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)
*Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Sarah Boyack MSP (Scottish Labour Party)
Dr Rebecca Mason (The Young Women's Movement)
Ann McGuinness (Scottish Green Party)
Cailyn McMahon (Scottish National Party)
Catherine Murphy (Engender)
James Tweedie (Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party)
Talat Yaqoob (Women 50:50)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katrina Venters

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 19 November 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:02]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Karen Adam): Good morning, and welcome to the 25th meeting in 2024, in session 6, of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. We have received apologies from Marie McNair.

Our first agenda item is a decision on whether to take in private item 3, which is consideration of today's evidence on the report of the Scottish Parliament's gender-sensitive audit. Do we agree to take that item in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Parliament Gender-sensitive Audit

10:02

The Convener: Under our second agenda item, we will take evidence from two panels of witnesses on the report of the Scottish Parliament's gender-sensitive audit. On our first panel, I welcome Catherine Murphy, executive director of Engender, who joins us online; Dr Rebecca Mason, research and policy lead at the Young Women's Movement; and Talat Yaqoob, consultant and co-founder of Women 50:50. Thank you for joining us. I refer members to papers 1 and 2.

I invite each of our witnesses to give an opening statement.

Catherine Murphy (Engender): Thanks, convener. I apologise for not being able to join you in person, and I appreciate your accommodating me online.

As you mentioned, I am the executive director of Engender, which is a leading national policy and advocacy organisation in Scotland. We have been working for 30 years to secure women's social, political and economic equality and to realise women's rights in Scotland. One of our key priorities is ensuring women's equal representation and participation in politics.

We fed into the Parliament's gender-sensitive audit via our membership of the advisory group—the steering committee. We were really pleased with the outcome of the report, and we are really pleased that progress is being made in implementing many of its recommendations.

We undertake research and campaign to ensure women's increased representation at a range of levels, including in local government, the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and Westminster. In recent years, with Elect Her and Women 50:50, we have undertaken a campaign called making it happen for 2027, which aims to increase women's representation particularly in local government.

We work extensively with political parties and provide training and development through our equal representation in politics toolkit, which is a tool for parties to audit their internal practices. It gives them pointers and recommendations on everything from internal party culture to candidate selection processes, communication and engagement.

I will stop there and pass over to my colleagues.

Dr Rebecca Mason (The Young Women's Movement): The Young Women's Movement is

Scotland's national organisation for young women's leadership and rights. We are informed, shaped and led by and for young women who want meaningful change in their lives and across society. For 100 years, we have supported all young women and girls across Scotland to lead change on issues that matter to them. We believe that it is for young women to determine the changes that they want and need, and we provide them with resources, networks and platforms to collectively challenge inequality. As an organisation, we meet young women where they are at, and we work in lots of different ways, places and communities across Scotland. We create safe spaces where young women gather to learn, explore issues that matter to them and lead change.

Today, I will mainly focus on our young women lead programme, which supports young women to make change at local and national levels while developing their leadership skills, knowledge and confidence. Young women lead began in 2017 as a leadership programme for young women aged 16 to 30. It provides participants with a unique and exciting safe space to share their experiences and work together to create tangible change. Initially operating at national level with the Scottish Parliament, it has evolved over time into regional programmes across Scotland, and, since 2017, we have worked with 127 young women leaders.

Talat Yaqoob (Women 50:50): I am an independent consultant and researcher as well as co-founder of Women 50:50. Women 50:50 was launched in 2014, so we have been doing that work for 10 years. It is a voluntary, non-funded community campaign that has cross-party and no-party support. Its purpose is to amplify the voices of women and, in particular, to consider legislative candidate quotas, which would mean that there was an impetus on all political parties to put forward at least 50 per cent women candidates. We have wide-ranging support from the third sector and across parties, too.

Legislative candidate quotas already exist in one form or another in more than 90 countries around the world, and we strongly believe that, without such baseline legislative change—that is, while the application of quotas remains voluntary—we will not see the activity that is required from political parties.

I should note to the committee that I am currently conducting research on behalf of Elect Her. Indeed, I was commissioned to do research on political cultures and how they can be improved. That research will not be published until very early in the new year, but I will request for it to be shared with the committee once it is published.

On Women 50:50's position, we regularly hear from women about what prevents them from accessing politics. Although much of that is absolutely about the way in which political parties conduct themselves, their internal mechanisms and, in particular, their reporting mechanisms, a wider conversation is needed about societal historical and systemic inequality—particularly around how that inequality illustrates itself via online abuse, which becomes in-person abuse because it is permitted and enabled, and which is disproportionately more likely to happen to women of colour, migrant women, LGBT women and disabled women. That intersection of inequality must be at the forefront of the work that we do on this.

The Convener: Thank you. We move to questions from the committee. I will start us off and get right to the basics. Why is it important to have equal representation of women and men in the Scottish Parliament?

Catherine Murphy: At the most basic level, it is an issue of fairness, justice and democracy to ensure that the widest diversity of our communities is represented in our elected parliamentary forum. Minoritised and marginalised communities and women often have specific perspectives on how policy impacts their lives, which differ from the historical norm of policy that has been developed primarily by white, middle-class men. Women and minoritised and marginalised groups have much more experience at the coal face in terms of how those policies impact people's lives and of whether they improve them or not.

Having a greater diversity of people elected into parliamentary spaces has enormous potential to improve the quality of the policy that is made in those spaces and, ultimately, the outcomes, which benefits society as a whole. That is my basic view, but extensive research has been done on these issues globally, and a major study that was undertaken by the global institute for women's leadership at King's College London has done a meta-analysis of all that research.

Looking at 500 studies from around the globe—although the vast majority of the studies were undertaken in North America and Europe—it found some key trends in the representation of women in political decision making and, in particular, in leadership. For example, it found that having greater numbers of women elected into parliamentary spaces benefits not just women but society as a whole, and that women leaders seem to create more equal and caring societies when they are given greater levels of power.

There is evidence to suggest that more women in politics leads to better implementation of welfare, education and health service infrastructure, and better policy in those spaces,

as women have a specific understanding of how those systems work for the most marginalised. There is also evidence that women tend to have a more co-operative and inclusive leadership style that benefits parliamentary spaces. Further, around the globe, there are indications that having more women in Parliaments can lead to lower levels of corruption and greater overall trust in democracy. Without wishing to create competition, I note that there is an indication that women tend to do more work in their constituencies than male elected representatives.

There is an enormous amount of research that indicates that the strength of democracy is improved by having greater diversity in our parliamentary systems and that the quality of the policy that it produces is improved overall. At the most basic level, that summarises the position.

The Convener: Thank you—that is quite a lot to absorb, but it is important that we get to the bones of the issue.

Dr Mason: To follow on from what Cat Murphy has said, I note that there is a lot of research to show that there is improved decision making when we have equal representation in Parliaments. UN Women has found that women's involvement impacts decision making in a positive way. Examples of issues that are linked to higher levels of female representation include better childcare in Norway and more drinking water projects in India. Having equal representation in their country's Parliaments also shows women that their voices, views and experiences matter. Decision making is better when diverse experiences are represented at the table—that is proven. We also note that, obviously, diversity does not stop at gender and that our representatives should reflect society in all different sorts of ways, whether based on age, race, culture, religion, disability or socioeconomic position.

The evidence shows that there is an increased consideration of women's priorities when women are in Parliament. Research in other Parliaments shows that the increased presence of women has an impact on getting issues such as violence against women and girls and women's health on to the political agenda, and other studies highlight positive impacts on issues relating to women's work, finances and equality under the law.

I would argue that the increased participation of women in democratic processes makes young women want to also be involved in the process even if they are not standing for Parliament. Having increased numbers of women in politics encourages women to contact their own representatives and participate more as citizens.

I am happy to talk about this later but our "Young Women Lead 2024" report—I have copies here today if anyone would like to read it—shows that there seems to be a lack of trust in the political system on the part of young women in Scotland at the moment, which puts them off engaging in democratic processes. Young women have told us that they are sometimes even put off voting because they do not think that it matters or that anything will change. We argue that that is one of the main reasons why it is important to have equal representation, as it is important that young women can see themselves in their elected representatives.

Talat Yaqoob: What has been said has been really comprehensive, so I will not duplicate it. I would just add that one of the reasons why we count the number of women who are in politics is because it is one illustration or example of progress in society. We have to approach the underrepresentation of women in politics, and what I refer to as the overrepresentation of men in politics, as a democratic deficit. If we talk about it in those terms, we respond to it as an urgent and democratic need to tackle the issue.

10:15

Further, although it is not just about what happens in politics, that 51 per cent being represented in politics has a consequence on what the media looks like, on which experts are engaged within the media and on wider public institutions. It is why women's visibility matters in wider spaces, too. People often look to our democratic institutions as leading by example, which is why it matters that women are fairly represented in them.

Many of the studies that have been conducted have viewed women as an homogeneous group, so it is very important that, when we talk about that 51 per cent, we are talking about women and their diversity, because it is diversity that enables us to make good, fit-for-purpose policy.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Good morning to the panel members and thank you for all your evidence and your answers so far.

What do you feel are the barriers to women coming into politics and how can those barriers be removed?

Talat Yaqoob: I know, from speaking to women over the past decade who have been involved in and worked alongside Women 50:50, that there is a whole range of barriers. One is that there is still a very clear feeling that politics is a boys club. There is, beyond a few weeks before candidate selections open, a lack of outreach to women by political parties. There needs to be engagement, and resourcing for that kind of activity and outreach, throughout the year, deep within communities.

We need to ensure that we are approaching women from marginalised communities and encouraging them to understand and participate in politics. It is really important that we do not see that as some kind of deficit model, in which we need to do some training to educate women on politics. Women are highly educated on politics. The competence and enthusiasm absolutely exist; it is access that is the problem—it is about whether politics reaches women in communities.

A wider issue, which concerns us across the board, is the erosion of trust in politics, which prevents women and those from marginalised communities wanting to participate in politics.

A third barrier, which I have mentioned, is the online—and wider—abuse and increasing hostility within the political and public sphere, particularly for women. Women are disproportionately more likely to experience threats online simply for having an opinion. Unless that is tackled, that will act as a barrier to women coming forward and participating in politics.

I will describe two more barriers, then pass on to the other panellists. Another barrier is time. Women are disproportionately more likely to have caring responsibilities and take on care work. The idea that they can perhaps do campaigning in the evenings or at the weekend, without access to care and support, means that they are more likely to deselect themselves from participating in politics. That needs to be understood and modernised for women's lives.

Finally, there is the issue of disposable income. Participating in politics comes with the need to have sufficient finances to campaign and engage, including the finances to access childcare, if that is what you require. The availability of disposable income has an impact on who has access to politics.

Dr Mason: I will very much add to what Talat Yaqoob has said. As part of the young women lead programme, young women told us that politics does not really feel accessible to them at the moment. They feel as if politicians do not communicate directly with them in accessible and engaging ways about the issues that matter to young women and have an impact on them. They told us that they feel as if there is a lack of opportunity for meaningful engagement and a perceived lack of accountability among those in positions of power. Decision makers perhaps do not tend to meet young women where they are at, both physically and in terms of their knowledge and understanding.

The young women described feeling a wee bit alienated by reports or committees in general—they felt as though they could not engage with that at their level. There is a lack of trust in the political system among young women, which puts them off engaging in democratic processes. Young women feel as if there is not a sufficient feedback loop for them to express their opinions or see active steps to make a real change.

This year, some young women in the programme told us that Parliament feels like "too big a system" for them to be able to have a tangible impact on it. Young women often do not vote due to that disillusionment and their belief that nothing will change. Young women have told us that they have more trust in community groups where there is a will to include, listen to and make decisions on their best interests. They also noted that there are few of those spaces for young women specifically, as community groups often tend to focus on children or older people.

Interestingly, young women in rural areas told us that their elected representatives are more visible in their communities, while young women in urban areas told us that they rarely see politicians unless it is an election, which influences how they perceive politics. They told us that young women could feel more involved in politics if elected representatives connected with them in their communities or online, which means meeting them where they are and engaging with them in an accessible way that meets their needs.

One young woman on the programme stated:

> "When we create a space for young women from all backgrounds to share, we gain deeper insights into solutions that benefit a wider community. As women, we care for our communities, not just ourselves."

That is important and echoes some of the discussions that we have had about women as leaders.

Misogynistic harassment and abuse online are a huge barrier. We all know that politicians, as elected representatives, are subject to scrutiny from the media and the public, as they rightly should be. However, the level of abuse and harassment that is directed at young women, and women in general, in politics is not acceptable. It is no wonder that that is putting young women off from standing as politicians. They do not want to face that in everyday life. That is huge and really needs to be tackled head on.

Catherine Murphy: I completely agree with everything that Talat Yaqoob and Rebecca Mason said. Another factor is the underinvestment in networks for women. There is evidence that, historically, women's networks within political parties and parliamentary spaces—that could be cross-party networks as well—which can foster greater confidence and share information for women, have not consistently been given the prioritisation and funding that are needed.

There are also financial barriers to standing for election. We know not only that, overall, women do not have the same financial power in society as men, but that standing for election generates particular financial costs. Related to that, we also see a trend that presenteeism is often a factor in being selected to stand within parties. I refer to people having the time to do lots of leafleting, for example, or be really active and visible in their local party. However, there is a greater barrier to that for many women, particularly those who have childcare responsibilities, and there are costs associated with being so present. Therefore, we know that there are higher financial barriers for women.

Rebecca Mason and Talat Yaqoob mentioned culture. There are the wider cultural issues of violence against and hostility towards women, particularly marginalised women, such as black and minority ethnic women and disabled women. However, the cultures within many political and parliamentary institutions are not particularly attractive to women, because they are seen as being particularly combative, hostile, dismissive and patronising. A lot of work needs to be done within those cultures not only to attract women to put themselves forward but to retain them. We also have a particular issue with retaining women in elected roles. There is a high level of drop-off across the board.

Evelyn Tweed: That is a really important point for me. There is plenty of research that shows that elected women do not come back—they do not stay. Why is that? Obviously, there can be negative selection processes, but what else is happening? Why are women not staying in politics?

Catherine Murphy: I will answer that quickly and then hand over.

The systems that we have inside our elected spaces and for candidacy, elections and external communications have, historically, been built with ingrained bias that works against women, so to situate yourself within those systems is exhausting. It takes a consistent level of pushback and resilience that can be very draining for people. You have to exert so much energy, be so tough and push so hard to get elected only to find yourself in an elected space where you are up against it even more. I have never been elected to office, so committee members would be able to speak to this better than me, but I imagine that that is entirely demoralising and even probably more exhausting. Therefore, we need to ensure that our parliamentary and local government spaces are better.

The rate of progress also needs to be better. There has been significant progress in Scotland, particularly since the advent of the Scottish Parliament, but it is slow and non-linear. We take two steps forward and one back. A lot of women are not seeing a rate of change that is quick enough for them to be able to stay in those jobs or to put themselves forward.

The obvious issue in recent decades is the vast increase in threats of violence and hostility. That applies particularly in online spaces, but there have been some tragic cases in which that has pushed over into physical violence. Those things have a major impact. I fear that politics is becoming potentially an even less attractive prospect for many women and the barriers are being broken down at far too slow a rate.

We went to nearly all the parliamentary conferences over the past few years. It was absolutely astonishing how consistently we were told, particularly by local councillors, about the scale of abuse and violence that women face online and the lack of support that they are up against not only internally within parties but in local government. They are expected to just deal with it, and so many of them told us that they were not standing again because of that alone.

Talat Yaqoob: The research that I am currently conducting is about that issue and how Scotland can create specific solutions to it. I am interviewing women who are in Scottish politics or have left, and I hope to share that research as soon as possible.

It is important to say that, 10 years ago, when we launched Women 50:50, it was an easier sell than it is now to talk to women about participating in politics. I have to be honest about that, although I do not like to say it, because the purpose of the campaign is to encourage women to participate. Actually, however, the primary purpose of the campaign is to change the culture of politics.

We have the women who want to participate, but we have not succeeded with the other part of that purpose: taking responsibility for changing political cultures and the actors within them. That includes not only the institution of the Parliament but the institutions of political parties taking genuine responsibility for tackling those cultures so that the women coming forward want to come in and do not just survive but thrive when they are there. That is the problem that we have, so it is a harder sell for me now than it was when I launched Women 50:50, and I just have to be honest about that.

From the work that I am currently conducting, it is clear that there is absolutely an issue with misogyny and threats of violence online. However, the dominant conversation is sometimes about trolling online and not about the microaggressions, everyday sexism and patronising and dismissive attitudes that are encountered in the political

setting. That still exists, and we still hear about it from women directly at local and national level.

Therefore, although we should absolutely respond to threats online, it is for people in politics to lead by example on how society should operate more widely. Those microaggressions, the everyday sexism and the multiple overlapping inequalities that exist in politics need to be tackled, because we need leadership by example.

10:30

We have what I would refer to as a revolving door. We are encouraging women to come in, but they are staying for one term and then leaving. That means that there are more women with the narrative that they would not encourage other women to participate. That negative narrative is being taken back to women in communities. We can ill afford that, given that we do not have fair representation of women, particularly women from marginalised backgrounds.

If we are to do something about that, political parties need to take responsibility for the cultures that exist in their parties. Key to that is investment in reporting mechanisms that are independent from the political process, that can be trusted, that women can turn to and that will see consequence. Without that, a culture is permitted and enabled that allows the status quo to exist.

The same type of independent reporting needs to exist in councils and in Parliament as well as in political parties, because the issue is wider than that. There should be a space within the democratic institution to seek support. Reporting and support are required.

Dr Mason: I have nothing to add to what Cat Murphy and Talat Yaqoob have said. One thing that came up in the programme is that young women perceived a lack of employment rights in elected roles. They spoke to female councillors and MSPs, and there seems to be limited access to maternity leave and other employment rights, particularly financial, as well as time barriers. Perhaps that is putting women off entering politics in the first place or why they just leave after a term.

Evelyn Tweed: Given what you said in your research, Talat, should all political parties have a long-term strategy for not only encouraging women into politics but supporting them to stay in politics? As you outlined, it is about not only survival but thriving.

Talat Yaqoob: There is absolutely a need to do that. There is also an opportunity to change political cultures through parties having a strategy, and by having a cross-party approach to achieving success rather than just survival. That creates collaboration. I understand that the gender-sensitive audit recommended a women's forum in the Scottish Parliament. I would caveat that by saying that it would depend on the resourcing, authority and accountability that the forum had to enable it to implement change. Political parties need a strategy, but there is also a place for a cross-party contingent. That creates different cultures, collectivism and cross-party working. There is a space for that, too.

At the moment, we have certainly won the battle on getting more women candidates in position, but we are locked into an approach of a lot of that work being done a mere few months before an election. In the case of a by-election, it is sometimes a few days or weeks before. There is no on-going resourcing and strategy, as you put it, for investing in women, supporting them and helping them to succeed, particularly for women who experience inequality, discrimination, sexism and misogyny after they are elected to Parliament or local councils. When they experience that, the support space does not currently exist.

A second caveat—there are multiple caveats now—is that, although the focus is rightly on women, a long-term strategy is needed for those who think that sexism and misogyny are acceptable within politics. There is a strategy on supporting women, but where is the long-term strategy on culture change, accountability and challenging sexism, misogyny and, in fact, any kind of discrimination across politics?

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Good morning. Thank you for joining us this morning.

I want to follow on from Evelyn Tweed's questions on culture. I note that all of you, in your opening remarks, talked about how your organisations or groups support women. Given the importance of the culture point that Talat Yaqoob made, can you say a little more about the mechanisms and other things that, when you work with parties and politicians, you use to try to make a dent in that toxic culture?

Talat Yaqoob: I have to be honest and say that, because it is a non-funded voluntary organisation, Women 50:50 does not do intensive work with political parties. Most of that work is done through Engender, which has an excellent toolkit and project in that respect.

However, all of that engagement work is voluntary, and it might well be a case of people in political parties—usually women and those from marginalised backgrounds—coming to our organisations and saying, "I would like this to be taken seriously by my political party. What can I do?" Therefore, as well as experiencing inequality, they take on the burden of trying to tackle it, when

such issues should be taken forward across the board within political parties. All of the engagement is voluntary and, as a consequence, it is patchy, and it is often done by those who have experienced inequality.

As for the mechanisms that Women 50:50 uses, the main one is data. For example, when we, as a voluntary organisation, count candidates, we have to get our spreadsheets out, and we count all the candidates that we can. At local election time, that will run into the thousands. It is imperative that I say to the committee that that work would be made a lot easier if section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 were enacted. I know that that is for Westminster to pursue, but it would mean that all political parties would be mandated to publish their diversity data on candidates. Currently, we have to put together and publish information that is publicly available online, without making any assumptions about anyone's background. It is patchy, and it is done on a voluntary basis, but even that can create reputational damage if you are not meeting the representation threshold that we would expect for women.

In short, our main mechanism is evidence and data gathering, which would be made a lot easier through the enactment of section 106.

Maggie Chapman: I take your point about what Women 50:50 is there to do. I know that others will ask about data in a bit more detail later.

Cat Murphy, what are the mechanisms around culture that Engender uses to engage with political parties?

Catherine Murphy: As Talat Yaqoob mentioned, we have quite a comprehensive toolkit for this sort of work. A lot of the work to demystify and unpack these issues has been done not only in Scotland but in the rest of the United Kingdom and internationally. It is not that we are in the dark on this; there is a huge amount of evidence and recommendations out there that make it clear what we need to do.

As I have said, Engender has quite a comprehensive toolkit that works almost as a skeleton audit. It enables parties to go right through all their systems and processes and to audit what they are doing, with key recommendations and guidance, including on culture, recruitment, assessment processes and so on.

As well as the toolkit, we have two other things. First, we worked with 17 other organisations, including Women 50:50 and the Young Women's Movement, to develop a theory of change on these issues. It has been signed by up to 17 different organisations that work on such issues, and it includes clear recommendations that go right across the board for parties and parliamentary spaces and that set out in a comprehensive way what we think we need to do in Scotland.

Secondly, we are doing some research that looks specifically at women's experiences of selection and candidacy. In many ways, it is almost complementary to Talat Yaqoob's work. We are just getting some of the information and research now—it will not be published until the new year—but it shows quite clearly that, although there are organisations such as Elect Her, which does amazing work to support women in becoming candidates and once they have been elected, that sort of thing is vastly insufficient.

Perhaps I can give you some idea of what I am talking about. Engender and Elect Her are tiny organisations, and we do not necessarily have direct access to people. It is fairly easy to identify MSPs or MPs once they are elected, but it is much more difficult to identify candidates or people who are thinking about standing for election. We do not have the infrastructure to do justice to such a task.

Local councillors, in particular, are underserved. It is very difficult for us even to identify all the local councillors in Scotland, and we are really dependent on people who are thinking about standing, who are running or who have been elected finding us and seeing what support we can give them. We are not always able to reach the people whom we need to, because they are just not aware of us.

The voluntary sector—the third sector—can play a really important part in that regard. We want to push the research, we have very clear recommendations, and we have done a lot of work on this. However, that is no substitute for parties building this into their own infrastructure. It is just far too difficult for us to reach everybody whom we need to reach. In any case, if you are standing as a candidate, you want to know that your party will support you and that it will take culture issues seriously.

Dr Mason: I will add to what has been said by pointing out that our young women lead programme has only 14 spaces every year and that the 2024 programme, which specifically focused on democratic wellbeing, received more than 150 applications. There is a real need for young women who are interested in getting to know the political system and in understanding politics, but we, as a third sector organisation that is also quite small, just do not have the resources to meet it.

We recently evaluated the programme since 2017 to see what young people were telling us about how they participated, what they wanted from the programme and where they went on to. Figuring out where people have gone on to is

really important, and we found that more than 85 per cent of the young women went into professional development and leadership-type roles.

We were told that it was really important to bring young women into the parliamentary space in order to demystify the Parliament, because many young women do not really understand what goes on there and how it affects them. The people involved were asking for, among other things, education on what democracy looks like in Scotland and how they can practically participate in democratic programmes. Can they speak to their local MSP instead of emailing them? Are there other opportunities out there for them? They also argued that, in order to demystify the parliamentary process, they would appreciate more video content from elected representatives on how to engage with them and more explanation of the various differences in the Parliament. How does a member's bill compare with a Government bill? What do cross-party groups do? What does cross-party collaboration look like?

We feel that demystifying the parliamentary process has led young women to form an interest in politics, and those who have participated in our programme have gone on to become councillors or to stand in local elections. However, as we have been saying, it takes cross-community collaboration to do that sort of thing.

Maggie Chapman: I want to pick up on a couple of things. Talat Yaqoob said that there can be a risk to political parties in being transparent about their data or their processes for achieving or moving towards equal or inclusive representation. Given some of those challenges, what should political parties be doing? For the Holyrood elections in 2026 and the local government elections in 2027, what do you want political parties to focus specifically on?

Talat Yaqoob: Political parties are likely to be selecting their candidates currently. As for what political parties need to be thinking about, we can talk about women running as candidates, but the question is whether they will be put in a winnable seat. It will, of course, depend on how people vote on the day, but there is a clear preference for spaces that polling tells us are more likely to be winnable, and they are more likely to go to those who are referred to as favourite sons in political parties.

Significant work needs to be done, not just to have 50 per cent of candidates being women but to find out where those women are positioned and whether they are positioned in places that will mean that they become elected representatives. Legislative candidate quotas do only half that job. They do not do the other half, because that is for political parties. It is an indication of a culture when winnable seats are not in the hands of women, so there is something to be done, and parties need to reflect on that.

10:45

I have a wider point that links to the one that was made about the longer-term strategy for outreach, support during elections and support to succeed after elections. Now is the time for parties to work with Engender's toolkit and to engage in and think about their processes beyond selection. What is the strategy to enable women to succeed, and what resources will be put into that?

Most, if not all, political parties have some kind of equalities groups. They have women's groups and might have BAME groups, but those groups are far on the periphery of political parties' work. There is a big question about what authority, resources and importance they are given within parties. The annual conference should not just be an opportunity for women to talk to one another; that conference should influence the work of the party and beyond. There are a few things that parties can do right now, and a key aspect involves providing resources for the women in the parties and for their infrastructure.

Dr Mason: I agree with everything that Talat Yaqoob said. It is also important for parties to champion diverse forms of leadership. One thing that came out from our programme is that young women believe that, to be a successful politician, you have to be a particular sort of hard-line person, perhaps with a hard shell. That is not always the case. It is important for parties to encourage more effective forms of leadership and feminist leadership in particular.

It is also important to figure out who is missing rather than just including women in the mix. It is important to meet young women where they are at within their communities and to identify opportunities for women to engage and grow within the parties.

Another thing that came out from the programme is that young women are really interested in engaging with the Parliament but feel that it is not accessible for them at the moment. Therefore, there is a need to provide easy-read versions of reports that are produced so that they can understand what is happening and what is being said. There is also a need to encourage the use of British Sign Language as standard across the Parliament. Meeting young women in their communities or online to discuss issues that matter to them was also an important point that came out of the programme.

Maggie Chapman: Cat Murphy, what should political parties focus on between now and 2027?

Catherine Murphy: I agree with what Talat Yaqoob and Rebecca Mason said. We have a comprehensive toolkit.

I will pick out a couple of things. Parties need to approach the issue with a level of transparency. There is a perception, which I do not think is unwarranted, that a lot of the information about how to stand or get selected as a candidate is steeped in language for party insiders and those in the know. It is not accessible to people who are not as steeped in internal party politics and operations. Therefore, there is a basic need to have information that is easy to understand and that people can access without needing to be in a certain clique.

The same things apply to the recruitment processes—to any recruitment processes. Who is on the panels that do the selection? Is there diversity on those panels? Do you have a competency and a skill set? Are you asking consistent questions? One thing that has already come up through the research that we are doing at the moment is that women have told us that recruitment panels ask highly sexist questions about childcare, not from the point of view of providing support but to problematise their reality as potential care givers, for example.

Parties should adopt the really strong diversity and inclusion practices that you would expect from any employer, and the point that Talat Yaqoob made about investing in networks and giving them teeth is really important, too.

We should also, to the extent that it is possible, see whether parties can do anything to lessen the financial barriers that women and marginalised groups face by providing support in that respect. After all, those can be major barriers to people coming forward. In any case, ensuring that the processes are fair, transparent and accountable is a really basic thing that parties can do, but, unfortunately, it is not being done enough.

Maggie Chapman: Thanks. I will leave it there, convener.

The Convener: Evelyn Tweed has a brief supplementary question.

Evelyn Tweed: What would you say to parties that took gender inclusion measures last time and have 50 per cent or more female representation in the Parliament just now, but which have made no decision about 2026? My worry is that, if we do not consider such measures again, we will go backwards and fall below 50 per cent again.

Talat Yaqoob: I would say that it is naive to think that, just because you have done something once, you have changed the entire culture or society's view of the political culture and space for women.

We can look at all-women shortlists, 50 per cent of candidates being women, the zipping of lists or twinning—I can go into what those different things mean, but I assume that they are known. Multiple methods can be used, and it would be short-sighted not to pursue them when they have been tried, tested and proven over decades, and there is evidence that shows that they make a difference.

One of the questions that I often get asked is: does it not have to be about merit? It is important that I tackle that very clearly. Meritocracy is a myth if 51 per cent of the population is not represented in the Parliament. Currently, we do not operate in a meritocracy; we operate on favour. As has been illustrated, when you pursue such methods—whether it be quotas, twinning or zipping—and take the effort to ensure access for women, you invite merit that probably should have been there already. There is evidence that the capacity and competence of parliamentarians have improved as a consequence of those kinds of measures being put in place.

It is imperative, not just for the sake of representative candidacy but for the sake of the quality in our Parliament and our councils, that parties take such measures seriously and pursue them. After all, having one-off measures in one year does not work, as was proven by the dip in the number of women who were elected in the second and third Scottish Parliament elections after devolution in 1999. There was actually a reduction in the number of women who were elected. This is therefore not some linear thing, and those processes need to be in place for as long as there is societal inequality.

The Convener: We also have a supplementary from Pam Gosal.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you for all your opening statements. They contained really important information.

I want to go back to Talat Yaqoob's point about merit. As one of the first women of colour, the first Sikh and the first Indian woman in the Scottish Parliament, I would never want to have been selected, just because I was a woman of colour. I would love to have been selected because I deserved to be—and I hope, and think, that that was the case; I had the experience and the talent, and the selection was merit based.

I have spoken to many people—I train a lot of BAME women—about whether this issue is about merit. To me, this is more about the opportunity being there, the policy being there and strategies being there with parties. You should never think that you should be number 1 or number 2 on a list, because you are of colour or because you are a woman. Therefore, I would like you to give me a

little bit more information on that. Those are not only my personal views and experience, but the views of the BAME women whom I work with a lot.

Talat Yaqoob: Absolutely. I do not think any woman or anybody from a marginalised community wants to be patronised into any position. However, by taking those kinds of measures, we are trying to undo historic institutionalised inequality. It is about creating a level playing field for people to be able to play to their competency instead of being a foot behind as a consequence of institutionalised inequality. Many people from marginalised backgrounds say that they want to get there based on their competency. The purpose of those measures is to tackle the incompetency that prevented someone from having access in the first place.

When we have those conversations, we hear exactly that rhetoric is used to dismiss such measures—"We want you to get there on merit, so we do not want to patronise you by putting those measures in place." Is it not more patronising to leave the status quo intact and assume that those who are marginalised will find their way to the same space when they have not been given the access of opportunity that exists for others?

It is not a level playing field. Those measures are creating a level playing field for everyone to play to their strengths rather than stay at the back of the line. That is all that those processes are.

You must also remember that those processes get you through the door, but the selection process and the procedures are the same. The process of campaigning, door knocking and trying to get people to vote for you is the same. Similarly, when it comes to being in Parliament, giving speeches and taking a bill forward, you are in the same place as everybody else. Your competency needs to lead you there. All that is happening is that the door is being left ajar in the same way that it is for everybody else.

Pam Gosal: Thank you for clarifying that. I also believe in access of opportunity.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Talat Yaqoob, you talked about the positive action measures that some political parties are taking to increase the representation of women MSPs. In your opinion, are some measures more successful than others?

Talat Yaqoob: Across the board, the success of any measure depends on two things—actually, I should not say two things, because I am probably about to say a few things. First, success depends on how early in the process measures are put in place. If they are put in place in relation to the occasional by-election, or close to an election happening, they are often reductive and do not work.

The second thing is how much work is happening to challenge attitudes within political parties towards those measures. If not much is being done, the women and people from marginalised groups who get in on those measures then have to take on the discrimination of people who assume that they have been shown favour. It is important to think about the kind of attitudinal change and push that has happened to tackle that kind of negative attitude and ensure that there is genuine, evidence-based communication about those measures within political parties.

The final thing is investment in and consistency of the range of different measures. All-women shortlists are often the most impactful measure. They ensure that a range of competent women can be chosen from for a particular seat or position. However, there is not enough evidence to tell us which measure is making the biggest impact, because there is not consistent use of those measures across political parties or, within a political party, across elections. We should probably invest in that data, and Women 50:50 could probably do some work around assessing that.

All the measures have their space and position, particularly with proportional representation and the difference between lists and constituencies. What is missing is consistent use of the measures and tackling negative attitudes towards those processes inside parties.

Tess White: So, having all-women shortlists and looking at winnable seats are important.

Talat Yaqoob: Yes, that measure has been the most promising approach so far, but there is not enough evidence to tell us what zipping lists and twinning has achieved, because those measures are not consistently used across political parties.

Tess White: Cat Murphy, you talked about legislation change; is that essential, or would anything else be more impactful in achieving change?

Catherine Murphy: There is scope in the Equality Act 2010 for positive measures, so the law allows for those things. There could be a tightening up of the law to clarify certain areas, but we very much support the continuation of positive measures, whether they involve twinning, all-women shortlists or zipping.

To reiterate Talat Yaqoob's point, there is evidence to suggest that the impact might vary based on the electoral system—that is, whether it is first past the post or proportional representation—so it is hard to say that one measure is more definitive than the other. In general, we would very much advocate for the

retention of that suite of options for the foreseeable future.

11:00

We need look only at the non-linear way in which progress in representation of women has occurred in the Scottish Parliament to see that, when we take the foot off the gas, that representation decreases. It has not been consistent throughout the existence of the Scottish Parliament—it has gone back and forth. Therefore, we know that we need a firm, clear foundation and clarity in the law about what parties should be doing, and, as I said, we would very much advocate for retention of these measures for the foreseeable future.

Ultimately, we want to live in a society where women and marginalised groups are given every bit as much of a fair hearing; however, we do not think that that is the reality at the moment. The systems that have built up over hundreds of years have not yet been fully redesigned to work for women and marginalised groups, and until that fully happens, we are going to continue to need positive measures such as quotas, twinning and all-women shortlists.

The law as it currently stands allows for that. We might need to improve it slightly, but we think that, at the moment, it is strong in allowing for these kinds of positive measures.

Tess White: With regard to the pipeline, we have touched upon the fact that women are, primarily, the carers, which means, almost, that they are time poor, and yet they still have to do campaigning. They do not have the financial resources either, and then, when they become an MSP, the childcare support is not available. In the Parliament, childcare is only available for just a few hours a day, and we have late sittings, too. What would you say to political parties—and the Scottish Parliament—about the things that the parties need to do differently to attract and retain women candidates?

Dr Mason: As part of our evaluation of the young women lead programme, we spoke to women who went into politics in various forms, whether it be joining political parties as staff, standing as councillors or going on to stand as MSPs, and they told us that what would have really helped them in the early stages of their political careers would have been a kind of mentorship scheme that would have allowed them, say, to talk to other women who were already on their journey in politics. Obviously, though, we would caveat that by saying that that sort of thing should not overburden women or other minority groups; after all, it is always women who take up the position of talking to other women.

The programme alumni also told us that the connections that women make with each other are really important in fostering leadership throughout their careers, and they emphasised that young women and girls need a space to get to know each other so that they can discuss things that are important to them safely and sensitively. Apart from the obvious things such as childcare and other financial concerns, other issues that young women who have sought to enter into politics think are important include the parties improving safeguarding mechanisms for them while they are on public platforms to protect them from hate speech and misogynistic harassment and improving accountability mechanisms when they report a complaint within the party.

I think that that is one thing that has come through for us: when women make a complaint after experiencing something from another party member or within their constituency, those complaints have not been followed through. There has been no transparency, and they do not know who is investigating the complaint or who is on the board. We feel, therefore, that a lot of young women become disenfranchised and want to leave and not be in that space again. It is all about ensuring that parties are really clear about where complaints are going, who is involved, and that they are being taken as seriously as they should be.

Tess White: So, it is about having internal procedures to deal with harassment and bullying. You have also talked about the need for trust and people knowing that these things will be followed through.

My final question is on a fairly topical issue. This week—and recently, too—we have seen reports of sitting female politicians in good seats potentially facing deselection ahead of the 2026 elections. It is almost as if they have been paving the way for male candidates, and there is this sense of entitlement. I know that we are short of time, but does the panel have any suggestions as to how we can approach a situation in which personal, male or party interests trump, are seen as more important than or are prioritised ahead of attempts to widen representation?

Rebecca Mason, I see you are nodding your head. What would you say to that?

Dr Mason: I would just go back to the point about transparency. It is very difficult for us to say that someone has gone into a position based solely on gender. What came out of the programme was a feeling among young women that there is a total lack of transparency in who is being selected or promoted through the party lines. We need more accountability mechanisms so that people can understand the reasons for a

woman being deselected and a man being put in that position.

Tess White: Did you want to comment, Talat?

Talat Yaqoob: I agree with Rebecca Mason. This is about having a commitment to women's representation, full stop and about the culture within a party. It is rarely about one candidate versus another; it is about the entire culture and about enabling. For example, if we are using mechanisms to ensure that women are represented, those cannot be removed because of political whim or convenience or when polling shows that something may or may not be winnable. Those mechanisms must be committed to as part of the foundations and principles of all political parties, not changed according to political whim or will.

Tess White: We are short of time, so I will hand back to the convener.

The Convener: We move to questions from Pam Gosal.

Pam Gosal: You have spoken about collecting data and about the great research that you are doing. Thank you for that; it is important. How does collecting data improve the diversity of candidates for political parties? I know that you have touched on that but it would be good to hear a little more, because I hope that political parties are listening today and will hear about the benefits.

Cat Murphy, you spoke about some of that so would you like to start?

Catherine Murphy: At the most basic level, there is now little excuse for not collecting diversity or intersectional data about candidates who have or have not been selected. Data collection is worse with local elections where there are more candidates.

It is hard for us to track the changes that are occurring and to fully understand who has or has not been selected and the reasons why that has happened. That data is also a critical element of accountability for change. If we do not have oversight of who is being lost at the candidate selection stage, it is very hard to hold parties or the broader culture to account or to understand how to make changes.

Data is therefore absolutely critical and it is hard to understand why collecting it is not standard practice. We would argue that the UK Government should enact mechanisms that sit within the Equality Act 2010 and that would legally mandate that. We support that and have called for section 106 of the act to be enacted. In the absence of that, we think that parties should collect that data as standard for all elections, including those of MPs, MSPs and local councillors.

Talat Yaqoob: I agree with Cat Murphy. We have been calling for quite some time for section 106 to be enacted because it is there but not being utilised. Without that mandate, political parties are unlikely to publish diversity data because doing so would not be a particularly good news story. That is why the data is not published, but the fact of it not being a good news story would create the need, for reputational reasons, to try harder to put in place some of the strategies that we have all been asked about and have been discussing today.

Throughout our existence, we at Women 50:50 have often been asked in the run-up to an election whether we have the numbers. We provide those numbers voluntarily but can only do so based on publicly available candidate information. We tally up the number of women candidates and the number who are women of colour or are disabled, but we can only do that on the basis of what has been publicly declared or is publicly available.

Collecting demographic diversity data is really important in giving an accurate picture of who is involved in politics, who has been given access to selection and who might be elected. That data is an incredibly useful accountability tool and is normalised in so many other public spaces and institutions that it is becoming somewhat ridiculous not to have that as part of standard political practice. That data is needed and political parties should consider providing it to be a reputational matter, even if that is not made mandatory. At the moment, the emphasis should be on the enacting of section 106 of the Equality Act 2010.

Dr Mason: It is important for parties to understand where they are currently standing and what needs to change. We also need to collect data on women who might want to stand or register an interest in doing so but who do not get to that stage, because it is important that we can see where women are dropping off. Perhaps if more engagement could be done to raise their interest further down the line, that would be helpful.

Pam Gosal: Thank you for those responses.

Rebecca, you have talked about leadership, and I want to touch on the issue of role models. We all know—certainly, I do—that, when you are growing up and you see someone in a certain position on television, in the street or wherever, it can make you think, "I want to be there. Why can't I be there?" As I said, that is what happened with me. That is how you get the ambition to be there.

My party—the Conservative Party—has had three female Prime Ministers, four female leaders, including a BAME leader, and two female leaders in Scotland. What more can councillors, MSPs, MPs and parties do as role models to attract more

people by saying to them, “You can be an MP, MSP or councillor, too”?

Dr Mason: Young women have told us that they just want politicians to meet them where they are—it is all about demystifying the process of politics. It is all well and good to see people on TV, as you have said, and to hear people talking about being in politics, but if you do not even understand how the space works and you do not see yourself in it, it is very difficult to instil that sort of change. Young women told us that they found it really helpful to come into the parliamentary space and to speak to politicians, as it helped them to see themselves in their elected representatives.

One thing that has come out through the programme is that young women feel that, even though, as you have said, there are a lot of women in politics at the moment, the Parliament is a male-led system. It comes back to the issue of culture and the need to do more to change the culture of politics so that women actually see themselves represented in their elected representatives.

Talat Yaqoob: Role modelling is really important, but I want to emphasise that, as with making sure that there is gender parity in committees, if there are not enough women to do the role modelling, the burden of representation will fall on very few shoulders. For example, there are two women of colour in Parliament. They can be positioned as role models, but how many people can they be role models for, if there are not enough of them in Parliament in the first place? Role modelling is a method of encouraging others from marginalised backgrounds to come in, but you need more representation to enable it in the first place.

As for what political parties can do, an issue that really needs to be considered is who political parties put forward for key speeches, media appearances and so on, and who is given a platform once elected. I am the founder of an organisation called Pass the Mic, which was launched in 2019 to carry out research, particularly on underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women of colour in the media, commentary and beyond in Scotland. With the University of Strathclyde, we analysed the media response during the 2021 election. When we analysed four weeks of media—more than 3,000 Scottish news stories—we found that 6.5 per cent of those who were interviewed or who were commentating were women; across the board, 1 per cent were women of colour; and women of colour were more likely to be photographed and included in images than to be heard from for their opinions.

That is the landscape that we exist in. If there is something that political parties can do, they also need to think about the platform that they give to the women who are already in the parties to be in the media, to be the speaker at events and to be the role model.

Pam Gosal: You are right—you have to have a platform. I am very lucky: I am going to an ask her to stand event tonight, and then I will be having an interview with you next week. You are right that there are only two women of colour in the Parliament, and we cannot be everywhere, but we are quite fortunate in that we can be on certain platforms and can have that voice.

Do you not think, though, that it all comes back to being in leadership roles? As deputy chair of the Scottish Conservative Party, I know that, when I speak, I am going to speak for all those women of colour—that is what I am doing today for that minority group—but I am also speaking for all those women who are represented in a more merit-based system. Again, how important is leadership when it comes to these roles?

Talat Yaqoob: Leadership is certainly important, but in a hierarchical infrastructure, there are only a certain number of spaces in leadership, and leadership can mean different things. There is leader and deputy leader, but there is also the leadership of role modelling. The issue is where the platform is afforded, full stop. There are different types of leadership, and it is the visibility of that type of leadership that matters. Political parties can absolutely do more to enable that.

11:15

Pam Gosal: Thank you, Talat. Cat, do you have anything to add?

Catherine Murphy: The international research that I mentioned earlier indicates that role models play an enormous part in encouraging women to think about and see themselves in parliamentary spaces. However, that falls down when aspiration meets reality and women go into those cultures and spaces and are not supported. That can be very difficult.

To build on Talat’s point, I think that men in parliamentary spaces can play a big role in helping to manage and moderate that culture and in ensuring that the culture is not sexist, patronising and hostile towards women, and that men pick up the mantle and help to address those issues internally in those spaces. Seeing diverse women in leadership positions and elected to Parliament is hugely important from a role model point of view, but men can also be role models in a different way, and, most importantly, they can be allies in this. I really stress that.

The other thing that the evidence indicates, although it has not necessarily come up today, is that more women being elected to Parliament leads to the prioritisation of or greater attention

being given to issues that are important to women. That is clear from the fact that there have been a lot of member's bills in the Scottish Parliament on issues such as period poverty, breastfeeding and safe access zones. That also sends a message to young women—and, indeed, to all women—that the Parliament cares about the issues that they have. That is relevant to role modelling and communicating issues that have historically been underprioritised in parliamentary spaces.

The Convener: We move on to questions from Paul O'Kane, who joins us online.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. I am keen to follow up on some of the earlier discussions about international examples—or, indeed, examples elsewhere in the UK. Ireland is currently having a general election. I appreciate that that is a slightly different context, given that Ireland's political parties have state funding, but this will be the first election in Ireland in which 40 per cent of candidates have to be female or parties will not receive their state funding.

I am keen to get a context. Obviously, we have some state funding mechanisms in the UK, such as Short money. Have people given consideration to how that could be used as a device to ensure that quotas are put in place?

Talat, do you want to come in first?

Talat Yaqoob: We have already discussed the financial implications of running a campaign and participating in politics. The Scottish Government launched the access to elected office fund specifically for disabled candidates, and it is important that those types of initiatives continue.

Consideration should be given to broadening out such initiatives to cover access to support for wider considerations, such as caring responsibilities and childcare, that would enable women—marginalised women, in particular—to participate fully. That might include things such as translation services. Consideration should also be given to the provision of state funding that enables those from marginalised backgrounds to be candidates, regardless of the political party that they are standing for. The access to elected office fund is an example of that, but the Scottish Government should consider continuing that fund, investing in it and widening it out to marginalised communities to provide what individuals who are running might need.

Paul O'Kane: There is Short money at Westminster, which is payable to parties that have a certain level of representation, and there are leaders' allowances and so on in the Scottish Parliament. Should we explore whether such money should be dependent on action in this area, as is the case in Ireland?

Talat Yaqoob: There is scope to look at that. As someone who pursues legislative candidate quotas, I know that the evidence suggests that voluntary mechanisms tend to get us to about 35 per cent of candidates being women. People think that the figure is 50 per cent and that an equilibrium has been created, but it has been proven that voluntary mechanisms will not get us to 50 per cent, so other interventions are needed. Although we have voluntary toolkits and engagement activities, everything is dependent on political will and the engagement and enthusiasm of individuals. There needs to be less carrot and more stick. What happens in Ireland is one of the ways in which we could do that, so it should be considered in Scotland, too.

Paul O'Kane: You have helpfully lined me up for the next issue that I want to explore, which is the voluntary nature of guidance. Wales is going to issue voluntary guidance ahead of the 2026 election. I presume that the witnesses' view is that the Scottish Government should, at a minimum, do that, but, from what Talat Yaqoob said, other things need to be done, too.

Does anyone else want to reflect on those two points?

Catherine Murphy: I agree with what has been said. Voluntary guidance is the minimum that we would expect. It is certainly better than nothing, but it is not taking us as far as we need to go quickly enough.

The assumption that what we have at the moment is enough is interesting, because the outcomes—the number of women who are being returned in different elections and our non-linear progress, whereby we take two steps forward and one step back—do not demonstrate that that is the case. The assumption that the way things are at the moment is just great and that that will get us there is false; we need to do more. We should consider a legislative approach.

On the funding issue, we know that there are major financial barriers and that those barriers are not equal across the board—the most marginalised face the highest ones—so we need to look at whatever we can do. It is a case of investing in the health of our democracy and in the quality of the outcomes in our parliamentary spaces. Ensuring that our policies have the most impact is a very good use of money. Ultimately, the whole of society will benefit from that. It is not about favouring certain groups; it is about creating a level playing field and improving the outcomes for everyone.

Paul O'Kane: I will try to pull together what we have talked about this morning, because I appreciate that we have covered quite a lot of ground. If you could give one piece of advice to

political parties, what would it be? Political parties can be agents of change, although there are varying levels of examples of that.

Talat Yaqoob: That is a very difficult question, because I have a book's worth of potential things that parties should do. It comes down to creating accountability in cultures. Of the things that are most difficult to change, one is the persistent enabling of discrimination, sexism and inequality in political cultures. There needs to be an audit of the cultures in political parties, with independent scrutiny and trusted reporting mechanisms, because if there is a safe place to report, we will know what the issues are, and if there is independent scrutiny, people will be less likely to perpetrate problems, because they will know that there will be real consequences. My advice would be that there should be genuine auditing of cultures, independent scrutiny and reporting.

Catherine Murphy: My first piece of advice would be that the parties should move quickly. If they have not done the groundwork for the local elections in 2026 and 2027 and the parliamentary elections in 2026, they should now make a concerted effort to move quickly. A comprehensive guide is available. All the different organisations have told parties exactly what we think they should do. There is a comprehensive breakdown of the different steps that are available through the toolkit and other documents. Our theory of change document is available, and we can send it to people.

Finally, as part of that, parties should be bold. We get the feeling, whether it is justified or not, that there is a slight swithering at the moment among some political parties about whether they should keep their foot on the gas or whether they have done enough. We would say that they have not done enough. Some of the parties were really progressive in the past, and we want them to keep that up, because the job has not been completed.

My advice would be to be bold and to move quickly.

Dr Mason: The parties should show women that their voices and experiences matter and that they matter not only on international women's day, once a year, or during the 16 days of action. Sometimes, young women feel as though parties only focus on issues that affect women at specific points in the year or in the lead-up to elections, so parties should show that they are committed to listening to and including them.

Paul O'Kane: Thank you.

The Convener: As members are content that they have asked all the questions that they wanted to ask, I will ask the witnesses whether there is anything that they want to add before I bring the session to a conclusion.

As no one wants to add anything, I will suspend the meeting briefly to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

11:26

Meeting suspended.

11:33

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. We move to our second panel of witnesses. I welcome James Tweedie, director, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party; Ann McGuinness, co-convener, women's network, Scottish Green Party; Sarah Boyack MSP, who is attending on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party; and Cailyn McMahon, local government officer, Scottish National Party.

Maggie Chapman: Convener, for full disclosure, so that colleagues know, I put it on the record that Ann McGuinness is a member of my parliamentary staff team.

The Convener: Thank you, Maggie. That is on the record.

Would our witnesses like to begin with an opening statement?

James Tweedie (Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party): Thanks for the invitation to come today. The Scottish Conservative Party is keen to utilise the full range of talent that we have and to ensure that we have as diverse a range as possible of candidates and elected representatives. In the past few years, an increasing number of women have been elected to the Scottish Parliament from our party, and we want to ensure that that continues as we promote and encourage female candidates.

The party, our candidates board and our affiliated organisations, such as Women2Win and the Conservative Women's Organisation Scotland, aim to grow the number of our female candidates and elected representatives, through a number of measures such as active recruitment, bespoke support and training, one-to-one mentoring and strategic advice. At present, 29 per cent of our MSPs are female, but at the last election, the percentage of newly elected MSPs from the party who were female was 50 per cent. That demonstrates the progress that can be made and that we want to continue. At that election, our first woman of colour—who is Indian—was elected to the Scottish Parliament.

I am pleased to work with our partner organisations such as Women2Win, the Conservative Women's Organisation Scotland, Scottish Conservative friends of BAME, Scottish Young Conservatives and the Scottish

Conservative disability group, to make sure that we do everything that we can in this field. There is still work to do, and we are keen to do it, to ensure that we have as diverse a range as possible of candidates and representatives.

Ann McGuinness (Scottish Green Party): Good morning. As Maggie Chapman said, I am a caseworker in her office, but I am here today as the co-convener of the Scottish Greens women's network, which works to promote gender parity at all levels in the party. We provide a network of support to empower women to take on roles in the party and in wider political spheres as well as elected roles; we then move on to providing peer-to-peer support when women achieve their political goals. To go back to something that Talat Yaqoob said earlier, we are volunteer run, and we tend to be run by those who have experienced inequalities the most.

We have conducted research within the Scottish Greens to identify barriers to politics. Through that, we found that women tend to face substantial structural and social barriers at the earliest stages of their involvement in politics.

We in the women's network also work a lot on survivorship bias. We are very aware that we are not speaking to the women who have not made it very far—who have given up at their first branch meeting, for example.

We recognise that there are measures that organisations can take to break down some of those barriers—in particular, those that are faced by women from different socioeconomic backgrounds and by people with caring responsibilities or disabilities—and we believe that all women deserve the same access to opportunity that has, historically, benefited men.

The Scottish Parliament has quite a lot of work to do within its own walls—as was also highlighted earlier—such as the gender balancing of committees and a practical crèche facility for women to use. Those are just a couple of examples. The Parliament has the resources and the influence to lead by example on such issues, and it would be great to see that happening. The gender-sensitive audit is a good tool for driving that change and leading by example—if the recommendations are fully implemented. However, it will take a concerted effort across multiple sectors to redress the inequality of access and inequality of opportunity in politics and wider decision making that have been to the benefit of men and the detriment of women for millennia.

The work that the Scottish Greens are undertaking has had good outcomes, but we have still quite a long way to go. I look forward to being part of the discussion today.

Sarah Boyack MSP (Scottish Labour Party): I am delighted to be here to represent my party, Scottish Labour, as one who was involved in the Women 50:50 campaign before the Parliament was established. It was our ambition that the Parliament would represent the entire country, and women needed to be at the heart of that.

Since our first elections in 1999, we have had twinning. The aim of that is to ensure that women have equal chances to get elected, both from constituencies and from the list. We twin the seats for the constituencies—two seats are twinned together—then we have the list seats. That has not given us 50 per cent at every election, but it has taken us close.

How the numbers of women elected has increased across the parties is a matter of pride. However, there are loads of issues that we need to think about now: the barriers that have been mentioned; the economic disadvantage that women face when it comes to campaigning; how keen their employers are to let them be candidates for election; the social attitudes that are still there, such as lower expectations of women; and the discrimination that women face, particularly on social media, which has changed dramatically over the past couple of decades.

Another issue, which has been mentioned before, is childcare. It is an issue for us, and it is something we need to take a strong look at when it comes to the retention of women, so that women do not just stand, have their voices heard and get elected, but can stand again.

In our party, we do a lot of mentoring by and shadowing of MSPs to give women the chance to see what being an MSP is like and how they can contribute. Our mentoring groups do a lot of work with the Jo Cox Foundation and the Fabian Society, enabling women to come into Parliament. Not all of them go on to stand as MSPs, but it helps a lot of them with their work in business, the third sector or whatever they are involved in, and it gives them confidence and an understanding of the Parliament.

As for our internal party structures, we have a women's committee. Getting involved in it is quite competitive, but it comprises women from our local constituencies, our trade unions and our affiliated organisations. We have an annual conference that is useful for networking and giving women advice and a platform as well as experience. At the moment, both the chair and vice-chair of our Scottish policy forum are women, and all our constituency delegates happen to be female, too. That is not a requirement—it is just what the competition is at the moment. We are also liaising with our trade union colleagues to give women that chance, so that they have the aspiration and, indeed, support to enable them to be candidates.

At the moment, 45 per cent of our members in the Scottish Parliament are female, and we have equality in our shadow cabinet. However, I go back to my point that this is not a case of doing something once and it is fixed; we need to be thinking about it all the time. I therefore very much welcome the fact that the committee is having the inquiry and I am keen to answer its questions.

Cailyn McMahon (Scottish National Party): Thank you so much for having me here today.

The SNP is solid in our belief that gender equality is crucial for our democracy, and it is something that is embedded in our party constitution. That is why it has been SNP Governments that have had the first ever gender-balanced and female-majority Cabinets. Over half—53 per cent—of our MSP cohort are women, and almost 60 per cent of our Government is made up of women, too.

Gender equality is something that needs to be embedded in the constitutions and, crucially, the cultures of all our parties. It was only through our identifying and prioritising gender equality in the mid-2000s as a tangible goal when it came to representation in our Parliament that we were able to plan ahead. It was anticipated that it would take us three election cycles to achieve parity in the Scottish Parliament, but it has come to fruition after only two, as a result of the hard gender-balanced mechanisms that we have had in place in the past two Scottish Parliament elections.

Although we have made progress, there is still a lot of work to be done, both within our party and across all parties, to ensure that our Parliament truly reflects the diversity of Scotland.

Although we have seen increased representation of women, with more women serving as MSPs across political parties, I am very conscious that supporting women into politics does not begin and end with candidate assessment and election cycles. As has been mentioned, leadership roles on committees and in the party leadership are still dominated by men, and that is something that we must strive to get past, in terms of gender balance, to ensure that women have equal opportunities to shape decision making and policy once elected.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss with the committee all the important work that the SNP is doing and has done to prioritise gender equality in our internal processes and the scope of the work that has still to be done.

The Convener: Thank you all. We will now move on to questions from the committee, and I will start off.

I asked the stakeholders on the previous panel why it was important to have equality between men and women in the Scottish Parliament. How important is it to your party that we have that equality? I ask James Tweedie to respond first.

James Tweedie: I would certainly say that it is very important to our party. We want to make sure that we have equality at all levels, not just in the Scottish Parliament but in councils and the UK Parliament, too. As a lot of the evidence on this issue shows, you get better decision making with wider and more diverse groups, and a more representative party and Parliament are more inclusive, encourage other candidates to come forward and are more able to represent the overall population and ensure that people feel that there is someone they can see and come forward to. In short, it is very important to our party, and we want to do everything that we can to promote it further.

11:45

Ann McGuinness: In the Scottish Greens, we think that gender balancing is really important at all levels. It is discussed frequently. We have gender balancing of co-conveners of all the internal committees that run our party and we have it at branch level, and that is then put through to gender balancing of candidates when we put people forward for election. We are a feminist party and we work really hard at all levels to promote gender balancing.

Sarah Boyack: In Scottish Labour, we have gender balancing at the local, campaign level, at the constituency level and at the executive membership level. From day 1, we have had a 50:50 approach to the selection of candidates to enable women to be elected both in the constituency and on the list.

For us, it is really important to have women at the top table in relation to policy. I think of leaders and deputy leaders that we have had over the years, and one of the things that we have worked hard on is getting women leading on policy issues and getting our male colleagues to support them—it is absolutely critical that men take responsibility.

I made a point about our women's conference and our ensuring that we get female delegates to our conferences. It is about gender balancing throughout the whole structure and encouraging it in our student representatives as well. It is about ensuring that equality for women—among other equalities, obviously—is central to every way in which people could get involved in our party.

Cailyn McMahon: Gender balance is extremely important to me and the SNP and, as I have mentioned, we have prioritised it continuously over the past couple of election cycles. We are having to navigate new ways to continue to prioritise it, as we are precluded from having hard gender-balance mechanisms in constituency seats for the

next election. That has meant that we are focusing more on the wraparound support that women get when it comes to coming forward for selection, although, for regional lists, that can still look like a gender-balance mechanism.

We are also focusing on the provision of training and resources to develop political skills. There is engagement with our national office-bearers—particularly, our national women's convener—through hosting a series of events outwith election cycles specifically around candidate assessment, to ensure that the process is continuous throughout every year.

In the SNP, we also prioritise supportive policies, both in practice and in relation to policy making around work-life balance, such as party policies that are flexible on working hours and childcare. For example, we facilitate crèches at our party conference and for our candidate assessment training days, so that those events are accessible to all parents.

Similarly to other parties, we engage with our affiliate organisations and national executive committee. Our national executive committee regional representatives are gender balanced, with one all-female shortlist and one open list—obviously, women have the option to stand on both those lists. The regional representatives make up a large bulk of our national executive committee, which helps to ensure a minimum gender balance there.

Our affiliates in particular work especially hard on gender balance. Our youth wing, student wing, LGBT wing, disability wing and BAME wing all work quite closely together on the facilitation of events and social networking to ensure that a culture is created whereby women feel confident enough to step forward.

The Convener: We move to questions from Tess White.

Tess White: I will start with Cailyn. How does your party reach out to potential candidates to increase diversity, and at what point during the electoral cycle does that happen?

Cailyn McMahon: As I have mentioned, equal representation and reflecting Scotland's diversity are embedded in our constitution and party rules, which means that we continually repeat the message that we want to encourage people from underrepresented groups to come forward in our candidate assessment process. That applies to Westminster and local government elections as well. Those who may initially be encouraged to apply during one of those electoral cycles could end up standing for the Scottish Parliament.

As I mentioned, different affiliates host events that are aimed at the groups that they represent. The invitations are usually extended through their respective mailing lists and they promote those events on social media to try to encourage people who have never engaged with their organisations before to get involved. That usually happens well over a year out from the election cycle to ensure that we have plenty of time to consider all the gender balance mechanisms that are available to us.

Sarah Boyack MSP: We want to reach out to women to be candidates, which is an on-going issue.

Tess White: How does your party reach out?

Sarah Boyack MSP: We positively encourage women to get involved through our women's conference, our mailings, the work that we do on mentoring to ensure that women are encouraged from the grass roots, and through links with our trade unions. There is no pressure on anyone to stand if they get involved in the programme. Sometimes, women come back a couple of years later, having got the experience. We promote women's involvement at every level, not just in the run-up to the elections, but in the years in between as well.

Ann McGuinness: In the Scottish Greens, each branch is responsible for maintaining a relationship with the women who would be likely to stand as candidates. The women's network does some work to support them with training to help to get people ready for selection time. In the electoral cycle, we also have the local elections and the Westminster elections, and the same candidates tend to come forward so that they get experience in standing for those seats, albeit that they are unwinnable for the Scottish Greens. However, that means that when we get to the Holyrood elections, we have a small bank of candidates who are ready for them. It is down to the branches to reach out and ensure that they contact potential female candidates.

James Tweedie: We actively recruit and headhunt potential candidates through the party and our affiliate organisations, Women2Win, CWOS and SCBAME. Tonight, I am doing an "ask her to stand" session as part of that work.

As the other witnesses have said, it is a rolling process throughout the parliamentary session. There are so many different elections in Scotland that, often, people come forward for one election, stand for another and then stand in the future. It is about building the experience, because it is takes years for some people to get through the process. We do that constantly on a revolving basis, because it is important.

Evelyn Tweed: Good morning, panel, and thank you for being here.

On the previous panel, we heard that there are various barriers to women coming forward and standing. We heard a lot about harassment and online abuse. What is your party doing to tackle that?

Cailyn McMahon: We are looking at that, with a focus on our internal codes of conduct and complaints mechanisms. We are looking at the wider wraparound support, as I have mentioned, with the goal that those internal structures will better address issues such as discrimination and harassment that are more likely to happen to women, especially online. Our party's national executive committee has implemented various strands of work, ranging from bullying and harassment policies to sexual harassment panels. When women come forward with complaints, they can be escalated in a more direct and specific way in the hope that there would be a more tangible outcome to ensure that those behaviours are not continually perpetuated in the party.

On the wider actions that we are taking to encourage women to come forward to stand, the early steps in our candidate assessment process stress our diversity aims, encouraging applications specifically from women, disabled and BAME members. Those affirmative actions and our targeted recruitment have helped us, as 53 per cent of our elected candidates in Holyrood are women. I hope that we will be able to replicate that in the next election.

Sarah Boyack: I want to highlight two things. Firstly, we need robust safeguarding mechanisms, whether that is with regard to elected representatives, party activities or campaigning, so that there is a route to make complaints to the party to ensure that attitudes are challenged where that is needed. With regard to campaigning, that is critical particularly in relation to young people, to ensure that they get support and guidance.

With regard to online harassment and training and support, we have seen a huge change in relation to social media over the past few years. We are doing a lot of work through our women's network and on building women's confidence, because the extent to which women experience harassment through social media is unacceptable. I was recently made aware of the work that the Scottish Parliament has done on that. It is really important to highlight that there must to be a consequence where people take abusive action online. It does not matter which party it is or whether it is a candidate or an elected representative—we all need to challenge that together.

Ann McGuinness: The Green Party has quite a robust code of conduct, which we can use to remind people of the rules. That usually de-escalates internal issues before they develop, and we have a complaints procedure if it goes further than that.

With regard to the online abuse that women receive, we try to put in place measures to protect our candidates. That includes candidates having a team of people who can check their emails and tweets. It is very difficult to protect women from abuse because it is such a wide societal issue. We can create a peer-to-peer space and a safe space for women to come to after they have experienced abuse, but it is nigh on impossible to stop it altogether.

James Tweedie: We also have a very clear code of conduct that applies to all members. The general terms of membership specifically include aspects around anti-harassment, anti-bullying, tolerance and respect for others, as you would expect, and any breaches of those membership terms are subject to our party's complaints procedure.

As other witnesses have said, online abuse has been evolving and it has become a lot more prevalent in the past few years. We also have networks and staff and volunteer support, which we try to put in place around candidates to support them as much as possible.

Evelyn Tweed: What work is your party undertaking in advance of the 2026 elections, and how does that work differ from what you did in 2021?

James Tweedie: Our rules for 2026 have not yet been set or agreed—we are in the process of forming our rules. We are at the stage of recruiting candidates—reaching out and identifying candidates to go forward. I cannot really say how the process differs from the 2021 election process because the rules have not been set yet. However, we are learning a lot of lessons from the 2021 process and the surveys of candidates that we did around that time to ensure that we take consideration of those lessons as we develop the rules.

Ann McGuinness: We also have some processes going on inside the party. For the 2021 Holyrood elections, all our MSPs were elected on the list system, and we had a rule that all the lists would be topped by a woman unless there was an incumbent male MSP. The result of that was that we elected three men and five women, which we are very proud of. We have not gone through the process for the upcoming election yet, but I assume that we are going to adopt something similar whereby we try to raise the profile of women and put women into positions that, at the very least, are not already occupied by a male.

Sarah Boyack: We have started inviting potential candidates to put their names forward, so

that work is under way. The approach that we have taken for the past few elections is to twin the constituency seats—so that is two seats. Of course, there are also new parliamentary boundaries. Until we have the detail, it is difficult to say exactly which seats are which. However, for the past few elections, we have twinned the seats so that there is internal selection, with all party members getting two votes. They get a vote for their preferred candidate—a vote for the man who they would like to see selected and a vote for the woman who they would like to see selected. We did that for the UK elections in this year's campaign.

On the list, whoever gets the highest vote gets to top the list and it is gender balanced after that. In the 2021 election, we also had an internal party campaign called step aside brother, which was to encourage the top man on the list to step aside and let a woman stand at the top of the list. That was not a requirement at all; it just tried to make people inside the party aware that we wanted to maximise the number of women who were getting elected. That is what we have done in the past few years, and it has worked.

12:00

Cailyn McMahon: Our candidate assessment processes have begun, and our applications closed last week, so we will undertake our interviews and assessment training days in the coming weeks and months. As I mentioned, when we invite people to apply, all the messaging around our candidate assessment stresses our diversity aims and encourages applications from women and people from diverse backgrounds.

At the Scottish Parliament elections in 2016 and 2021, we used all-female shortlists in constituency selections to increase female representation. We asked if a male incumbent MSP from the SNP was standing down and that was where the all-female shortlists were implemented.

Following the initial use of that in a limited number of seats in 2016, the number of retiring SNP MSPs in 2021 meant that wider use of all-female shortlists gave us the opportunity for equal numbers of male and female constituency candidates. The experience of that process in 2016, which was the first time that all-female shortlists were used, showed us that there was generally little resistance to it in our party, and it was generally welcomed as a positive step that enabled us to take the leap when it came to high levels of retirements in 2021.

Although some people thought that it would take until the 2026 election cycle to achieve parity, we were successful earlier than we thought, which has meant that we are having to renavigate for this time around. There is an acceptance that work will be needed to maintain the position without the option of all-female shortlists, so it will mean looking at regional lists. In the past, that has meant giving our national executive committee the ability to put candidates on the internal selection list, so if we receive applications and the successful applicants for each individual regional list are not gender-balanced, our national executive committee has the power to add women or those from any other diverse background to the list to give our members more variety and options and to ensure that gender balance is more likely.

The decision is one for our national executive committee, and no decisions have been on it for 2026 as of yet.

Evelyn Tweed: This is my final question. As the earlier witnesses said, it is important that we have about 50 per cent or so female representation in the Parliament. If we have strong female candidates who are doing a good job as MSPs right now—strong, competent women—and if there is a problem with the retention of those women and making sure that they stay here in 2026, as the previous witnesses said, what is your party doing to make sure that those women will still be here in 2026?

Cailyn McMahon: Our priority tends to be gender-sensitive campaigning, whether it comes into party policies, and making sure that crèches are available and that politics continue to be accessible to women once they are in the door, so that they can continue to engage. It is also about making sure that practices such as canvassing and chapping doors are not an off-putting experience for women who get involved in our party. We have buddy systems for when people first get involved, and we have a general policy that women do not go into tenement closes by themselves.

We try to make sure that this culture of understanding around differences and gendered experiences of politics is understood across the board in our branches. That tends to help us to retain women at an activist level in our branches, and that is usually where women gain a sense of community and are more likely to have their political career supported to the point of standing for election.

Sarah Boyack: One of the main things that we do is to support women through campaigning to ensure that they are involved, encouraged and know that they will get support.

The issue about retaining women cuts right across the parties. In the 2021 election we lost several women—about five or six—who chose not to stand. They were all talented, and some of them had been very senior in their party. There is also

an issue about the nature of being an MSP. I refer to things such as decision time, crèche access and what women give up by being elected. There is something for all of us to reflect on about the Parliament.

As parties, from the branch level to our national executive committees and conferences, we do as much as we can to support women and to be positive. It has got tougher, given the social media environment over the past few years, but we can do more together across parties as well as internally to them. That is critical.

Look at where some of our candidates come from. We sometimes get councillors standing as parliamentarians. Being elected as a female councillor is a tougher challenge than being elected as a parliamentarian because the salary is smaller. For a single woman who has kids, the economic decision is much tougher.

We need to think about retention, where women who already have good experience might come through as candidates and how you support them to do that.

Ann McGuinness: The Scottish Greens are a small party. We will have four female incumbents at the next Holyrood elections. To be honest, there is more that the wider party structure could do. I imagine that it will fall to me to go and have conversations with all four of those women to ensure that they stand again. That is where the women's network in the Scottish Greens comes in: we provide peer-to-peer support. We do our best, through branches as well, to make women feel welcome and comfortable.

James Tweedie: It is absolutely right to say that the retention of female parliamentarians is a real issue. I agree entirely with Sarah Boyack about it being an issue for all parties. At the previous Scottish Parliament election, most of our female parliamentarians stood down or did not recontest the election, and that speaks to that issue. There is a wide range of reasons for that, often across parties, but I want to have conversations with all female parliamentarians about what those reasons might be so that, where there are party issues, those can be dealt with and, where there are cross-party issues, we can all work together to try to minimise them.

Evelyn Tweed: I have a supplementary question for Cailyn McMahon. This is specific to our party, but if a sitting MSP came in on an all-women list and is very competent, strong and doing a good job, will there be any protections in place to prevent a male person from challenging her?

Cailyn McMahon: I am not aware of conversations about that having taken place at a national executive level or a candidate assessment committee level, but I am happy to take it away. It is a valid point and we should prioritise it.

Maggie Chapman: Good afternoon, witnesses. Thank you for being with us and for your comments so far. I want to unpick a little bit of what you said and help us get a clearer picture.

You have all, in different ways, mentioned things such as codes of conduct, policies against bullying and harassment and complaints processes that different parties have. This is perhaps a cheeky question but, from your perspectives and given what you know and have heard at the meeting, do those processes work to protect and support women who are elected, are considering standing as candidates or just want non-elected positions of leadership in the party? When I say "non-elected", I mean not elected to local government or Parliament—there will be internal elections as well.

However, do those mechanisms work? Are we able to use them to support and protect women from the everyday misogyny, microaggressions and sexism that were clearly highlighted to us by the previous panel?

Cailyn, I will start with you and work my way along the panel.

Cailyn McMahon: There is a substantial amount of work to be done across all parties—and I absolutely acknowledge that there is work to be done on this by the SNP, too.

As I mentioned earlier, our party has a member code of conduct that covers bullying, harassment and transgressions, which can be referred to our member conduct committee or else to our national secretary, who can intervene in situations where there is an agreement that behaviour has fallen short. However, things have often stagnated or have not resulted in tangible progress, because of the long-term culture, which brings me back to my earlier point about the creation of our sexual harassment and bullying panels. They answer directly to the member conduct committee and our national executive committee, in the hope that having a more streamlined process will result in more material action on such issues.

As a back-up—or perhaps not a back-up, but a separate stream of support—confidential support services are available to any member of our party who feels vulnerable as a result of an experience associated with being involved in our party and in politics. It is a kind of last resort, and the hope is that we can focus our minds on moving forward to more tangible action on such matters. There is definitely work to be done across parties on the toxic culture that surrounds politics.

Maggie Chapman: Thanks, Cailyn. Did you want to come in, Sarah?

Sarah Boyack: There are two things that I want to reflect on, the first of which is that, as part of our approach, we have safeguarding mechanisms by which matters eventually get escalated to the general secretary and our national executive committee. With any complaint that gets worked through to that point, action will be required, but I think that a lot of this is about making best practice guidance available to people so that we do not get to that position in the first place.

Secondly, we have in our women's committee a very strong internal party mechanism. An individual complaint will go through the party system to the general secretary, but an issue about culture will likely be picked up by the women's committee and then pushed to both the national executive committee and the general secretary. I think that it is fair to say the women's committee does not stay quiet. If they sensed that there was a particular issue, those women would stand up and require action to be taken.

This is not a big issue in the party at the moment, and I think that that is partly because of the general expectation that any problems will be addressed, and that you do not want to go there. It is all about making sure not only that there is a good culture but that everybody is aware of what is expected of them, whether they be an activist, a party office bearer or an elected representative.

Ann McGuinness: We have a robust code of conduct that on the whole—and this goes back to what Sarah Boyack was saying—allows us usually to hold people to account before something becomes an issue. Again, though, it often falls to the volunteers in our party who are suffering the inequalities, the bullying or the harassment to remind people of our code of conduct. That is an issue.

We also have a complaints procedure, but I will freely admit that I think that we have some problems with it. For example, our party has no mechanism for anonymous whistleblowing or for people to make anonymous complaints. If, say, any sexual harassment were going on, there would be very limited means of redress within the Scottish Greens, and that is a real failing.

As a result, it falls to peer-to-peer support and our rallying around each other and providing a bubble of support around our women. I am very aware that, as Talat Yaqoob said earlier, this is about reporting and supporting. We do the supporting really well, but the reporting part is missing.

James Tweedie: Any complaints or breaches of our code of conduct are referred to our party's management board and then potentially to the party's disciplinary committee. That process is there. In answer to your question whether I think that it works, I would say yes, but it is always under review for any deficiencies or problems that might develop, and we are always happy to look at any criticisms of or concerns about it.

All office-bearers in the party at the level of the management board, the disciplinary committee and the candidates board, as well as local party chairmen, are required to undertake regular equality and inclusion training to ensure that there is an appropriate culture.

We do all those things, but we are always happy to look at whether there is anything that we are not doing and to try to improve.

12:15

Maggie Chapman: I appreciate that there is a challenge, because political parties function in a wider society that is still patriarchal, sexist and misogynistic. There is a real difficulty in that, even if parties have the best processes and systems in the world, if the culture is wrong and if the context of that culture is still unequal, they are pushing everything up a hill—probably backwards—and it does not feel very progressive.

You mentioned some of the formal rules relating to the gender-balancing mechanisms for candidates. Some of you have already talked about how you promote gender equality in your parties, but could you say a bit more about that? We focus on candidates and elected representatives, because that is what the world sees, but so much of that comes from the structures and the support in our parties. Could you say a bit more about how you ensure that you get women, including disabled women and women from minority ethnic backgrounds, into positions of leadership in your parties? We should not consider only those for whom the public can vote.

Cailyn McMahon: A good example in the SNP is our national executive committee, in the sense that, in the elections that take place every year at our conference, we elect a group of conveners with various diverse backgrounds that match up with our affiliate organisations. For example, the convener of the SNP BAME group is elected at the SNP BAME conference, and we also have a national BAME convener, who is elected at our national conference. The same applies with our women's convener and our women's group. We have a youth wing, and I would argue that we need to take the same approach for our youth officer, and I would say the same for our LGBT wing. We need to ensure that the same approach is taken across the board.

In the case of our disability convener, our BAME convener and our women's convener, there are

two strands whereby only people from those groups are elected on to our national executive committee. That ensures that more options are available for people from minority backgrounds to take part in our national executive committee. In the same way as when people are elected to the Parliament, that means that the policies and the approaches that are decided on are more reflective of our party.

Beyond our national executive committee, it is down to our branch structure to get women involved and keep them involved. There is a lot of work to do in making our branch meetings more enticing to young women and more accessible for those with disabilities and those with minority ethnic backgrounds. Our affiliates play a really strong role in that regard. In the SNP, we are really proud of the strength of our affiliate organisations, which play a large part in encouraging people from different backgrounds to get involved in the party and in retaining them. That gives a supplementary experience to a branch experience alone.

Sarah Boyack: I am thinking about every level. There is the issue of encouraging affiliates to have not only women but people from different backgrounds involved in their structures, so that there is diversity. Affiliates are key, and trade unions are critical, too. There are different geographies across Scotland, so we need to ensure that, regardless of where people live, they are able to get involved in our party and our affiliate structures.

I mentioned Scottish Labour students earlier. That group is critical in allowing younger people to get involved, and we should ensure that it takes a very open approach in order to get women involved.

The Scottish executive committee is critically important, because that is involved in the architecture of who is in charge of the party and making sure that there is women's representation coming through from the affiliates and branches. The Scottish policy forum, which I mentioned earlier, is important in terms of developing our policy approach, not just in terms of the rules and regulations of the party.

It is important to ensure that, at all of those levels, there is a mix of diversity, with particular support for women and encouragement for them to get involved. The branches must have a 50:50 split in their elected representatives, and we have specific reps in relation to other aspects of diversity—reps from ethnic minorities, disabled reps, youth reps and so on. The women's issue is addressed not so much by having a women's rep but by having that 50:50 split. It is important to ensure that that approach is integrated.

Ann McGuinness: The Scottish Green Party is a grassroots party and has co-conveners at every level. A branch will always have at least one woman co-convener—the other co-convener could be male, but is often also a woman. In the national party structure, there are committees that organise various parts of our party. Our policy committee has two co-conveners, at least one of whom must be a woman—at the moment, both are women. Similarly, at least one of the co-conveners of our membership committee must be a woman, and so on. Each of the co-conveners of those national committees sits on our party executive. The only unbalanced top of any committee is in the women's network committee, where we have two women co-conveners. That all means that our party executive ends up being skewed towards women, because we have more seats on it.

We also believe that you have to see it to be it, at every level. We notice that, in our branches where we have more active voices of women, we are able to bring in more women. We see that in our policy committee, where the fact that we have two women at the top means that more women get involved in writing our policy. Having women taking on those leadership roles helps bring in younger women and women who are newer members of the party, because they can see that example.

James Tweedie: I would point to the our affiliated organisations, such as Women2Win, the Scottish Conservative women's organisation that I mentioned earlier. The Scottish Conservative Friends of BAME is another good example of those organisations, as is the Scottish Young Conservatives group. They are all strong organisations within the culture of the party. That means that they are actively engaged in partnership working with us—as a staff member, I work closely with those organisations on a weekly basis. The approach is not just about supporting candidates; it is also about recruiting members and ensuring that there are forums in which members can get involved, in various forms.

We did not necessarily have such strong affiliated organisations five or six years ago, and having them has ensured that there is space for everyone to be involved in the party, and demonstrates that we are looking to be as inclusive as we possibly can be.

The Convener: We move to questions from Pam Gosal.

Pam Gosal: I was going to say good morning, but it is the afternoon already, so good afternoon. I thank the witnesses for their opening statements and all the information that they have provided so far.

My question is on candidate lists. What action are you taking to ensure that women candidates are included in electable positions on party lists? Obviously, diversity is important, as I well know as one of the first women of colour and the first Indian woman to come into the Scottish Parliament. However, we all need to ensure that selections are based on merit and that women are placed on party lists because they would make an excellent elected official.

From personal experience, I can say that I would never have wanted my party to have selected me because of the colour of my skin or because of any other category that I was placed in. I would always have wanted to have been selected and elected based on my ability.

How do your parties balance diversity and merit?

Cailyn McMahon: With regard to our candidate selection processes, we are on the same page as you. The best legislation comes from lived experience, but how we recruit people with that experience is the issue. A main focus of ours is avoiding the tokenistic behaviour that you mention and ensuring that the way in which we get women involved enables them to make meaningful contributions.

One downside of the rigid gender balance mechanisms that we had in the past is that some people claim that those who are elected via such steps and mechanisms are somehow less qualified than others, but that tends to be said only by those who have never faced the barriers of having any of those characteristics. The conversation is nuanced and we consider it to be useful. It might seem tokenistic on the surface but it is about continued support. In situations where regional lists do not include any women or anyone from a disabled or minority ethnic background, we can have meaningful and substantive conversations with women before we ask them to go through the assessment process to be added to those lists.

It is important to balance merit with diversity, but they work hand in hand.

Sarah Boyack: It is hugely competitive. We spoke earlier about encouraging women to stand, giving them support and raising their profile. That is important, but, when it comes down to it, the twinning of constituency seats and the ranked order of the lists are hugely competitive. People can be nominated by affiliates such as trade unions or environmental organisations. They meet members one to one and the members can question them.

The party has internal hustings where huge numbers of members turn up. That is very competitive, which is partly why encouragement and training are absolutely crucial before people reach that stage. It is important that they are not thrown in at the deep end and that they know what they will be challenged with, so that they can step up to that with their professional and political interests and ambitions. That is how we do selection. It is quite a long process, but we have tried to make it open and accessible. Our members are up for that and they get involved in the process.

Ann McGuinness: Members in each region vote on our regional lists. We rely on candidates to come forward, then there are hustings and all the members in that region vote for who they want to see at the top of the regional list. In the past, we have occasionally gender balanced those lists, but internal research that we have done shows that, on the whole, women tend to be better qualified, which makes us think that some structural or societal sexism might be coming into play if men get more votes at those hustings. We have occasionally balanced the number of women in the lists, but that does not happen all the time. If necessary, we will zip those lists, alternating women and men.

We spoke earlier about winnable seats. The wider policy of the Scottish Greens is that 40 per cent of our candidates, for any election, must be women, and that if we have identified a seat as being winnable we must have 50 per cent women candidates. We up our game to have more women in position for seats that we are more likely to win.

Pam Gosal: Can I probe that a little? How do you balance merit with diversity? Having a quota is all well and good, but I hope I got elected because of my ability—perhaps I should ask my party director about that. It is important to look at both merit and diversity, so how do you balance that if you use a quota?

Ann McGuinness: As Talat Yaqoob said, there has been historical inequality in access and opportunity, so if we want to create equity we have to lift up some demographics in society a little to give them equal access. We do not have equal access for people with disabilities, people from working-class backgrounds or women, so we must occasionally have a little bit of a helping hand. However, that does not trump what a man has achieved, if he is genuinely better qualified or in a better position for the job. It just gives a bit of a boost to women, especially in a list situation, in which there is zipping—it means that the best women are at the top of the list and the best men are at the top of the list.

12:30

James Tweedie: We do not have any form of quota. Our candidates are selected by members

and supporters on merit. We monitor meetings and selection processes to make sure that rules are followed and that selection is based on merit and not any other factor.

As Ann McGuinness said, winnable seats were mentioned earlier. At the most recent election, about 26 per cent of our candidates overall were female; however, in winnable seats, 35 per cent of our candidates were female. Women were therefore statistically more likely to stand in winnable seats—and, as I said, of our new MSPs, who were elected at that election, 50 per cent were female.

Our system is based on merit, but it is important that we are looking at how many women come through and, more generally, at the diversity of the group, so that we can be sure that our system is fully open and meritocratic.

Pam Gosal: Our previous panel of witnesses spoke about the importance of collecting data on the diversity of candidates. They meant collection by them as organisations, obviously, for research, but that is also important for you, as representatives of the parties. Do you support the idea that your party should collect and publish data on candidates?

Sarah Boyack: We definitely have data on candidates. I suppose the issue is about whether it should be published. I am thinking of UK, Scottish and council elections—all the electoral opportunities.

As I have been listening to all the witnesses, I have been thinking that I will do a feedback session to the party, because it has been interesting to hear from people from different parties, and from the previous panel of witnesses, about the issues. Once the committee has done its report, it would be useful if you could send it to us all, to make us reflect on whether we can do more.

We have data on who is selected, and we know who was nominated. Part of the challenge in Labour's 50:50 policy is that, when you select people, you do not know what your numbers will be. You know where your best chances are, but we select people on the basis of where the candidate wants to stand, and they give it their all, but that does not necessarily mean that they will automatically be elected, because, at the end of the day, that is up to the voters. After these conversations, we probably all need to do a bit of reflection.

James Tweedie: We publish such data already, voluntarily, for UK parliamentary, Scottish parliamentary and council elections. We have done so for a number of years.

Ann McGuinness: We have not effectively and consistently gathered candidate data. We definitely should do so, and I see value in that. We share our limited data with Elect Her and Engender whenever they approach us to ask for it.

I have no issue with our sharing that data, assuming that it would be appropriately anonymised.

Cailyn McMahon: I agree. I am absolutely in support of publishing, without impacting on individual privacy. Tracking such data is one way in which the SNP has managed to succeed in having women at more than 50 per cent of its representation in the Scottish Parliament.

Sarah Boyack mentioned something that we could expand on, potentially. We have feedback sessions from our candidates after an election, but we could, potentially, expand that to women who have gone through our candidate assessment process and who have either not been selected or have been successful in passing it. That would be helpful.

My understanding is that the party began to track female representation more than 20 years ago—obviously, I did not work there at the time. Looking at the number of applicants, those who were successfully assessed, those who sought selection, those who were selected and those who were elected is what allowed us to identify that the problem in our party came from the application stage.

We have a scenario whereby the majority of women in our party who come forward to be assessed are approved and our mechanisms are solid enough to support women into the election stage. Where we fall down, however, is in the number of women who apply in the first place. Over the years, we have taken steps to overcome that issue and to intervene so that more women find themselves in winnable positions, which is a key aspect.

The Convener: We move to questions from Paul O'Kane.

Paul O'Kane: I asked the earlier witnesses about legislative interventions for quotas, in particular. Ireland is having a general election in which, for the first time, 40 per cent of candidates will be required to be women or the political parties will not receive their state funding. Obviously, Ireland has a different system in that the state funds political parties. We have mechanisms in Scotland and the UK to fund political parties, whether it be short money or money for leaders' allowances and that kind of thing. Do the political parties believe that such a measure merits exploration or would people shy away from that wider conversation?

Don't all rush at once to answer.

The Convener: We will start with Ann McGuinness.

Ann McGuinness: I am happy to come in on that. As was said earlier, a lot of research has been done in that area by the likes of Elect Her, Engender and Women 50:50. It would be useful to have a legislative framework to encourage parties: the Scottish Greens already do it. It would be great, but how we do it is more challenging because, as you say, we do not have state funding. It would take some exploration but I would welcome some barrier, as it were, that says that someone must be at a certain level of competence, and there must be a certain level of gender balance before it is accepted.

James Tweedie: We would not necessarily advocate for that; as Ann McGuinness said, there would be a lot of questions about how it might work. Ireland has a different electoral system and it often ends up with candidates being placed in less winnable positions at the last minute. There are disadvantages to going down that avenue. It needs to be looked at, but I do not think that we would advocate for it.

Sarah Boyack: In the Scottish Parliament, Labour has done 50:50 since day 1, although it has not always delivered 50 per cent women elected members from the candidates. Part of it is about sharing best practice.

The aspiration that we should all do this has definitely spread across the parties, so I would be interested in some analysis of the Irish situation, and I understand that Wales has also been discussing gender balancing. It would be good to look at other legislatures to see what difference it has made and what the benefits are, and have it as an option to consider.

I would not go down that route automatically, but asking the question will make us all reflect. I would look at the evidence to see what happens. We took a voluntary approach that has become stronger in the past 25 years, but, as others have said, it is not a guarantee and it does not mean that it will happen at every election. It would be good to do a bit more follow-up work on that and reflect on what really works.

Cailyn McMahon: I agree. It sounds as though it is definitely worth exploring the idea. As much as we have discussed changing the culture around politics and making sure that there is cultural shift, there also needs to be legislation to back it up. It sounds like an interesting way of making sure that the effort is cross-party and, as with the Welsh explorations that Sarah Boyack talked about, making sure that uniform advice and other mechanisms are in place across all political parties, because that would help us to further our aims.

Paul O'Kane: My other question was about Wales and that has been covered, so I am happy to hand back to you, convener.

The Convener: Thank you. Tess White has indicated that she would like to come in.

Tess White: Before becoming an MSP, I worked in human resources for more than three decades, so diversity and inclusion are in my DNA. However, there is a balance to be struck. My final question to the witnesses seeks a yes or no from each of them. When looking at all-women shortlists, does your party think that a trans woman should be included on such a list? I realise that this is a sensitive topic, but I am looking for guidance on how the political parties navigate it.

Sarah Boyack, would you like to go first?

Sarah Boyack: Yes. I cannot answer that directly because I have not been that close to the selection process. We could definitely get you that response.

Cailyn McMahon: Yes, absolutely. We have a written definition of transphobia that has been approved by our party's national executive committee, and we stand by it in our internal selection processes.

Ann McGuinness: Yes, as Cailyn said.

James Tweedie: We do not have all-women shortlists so it would not apply.

Sarah Boyack: I just want to say that it is not about all-women shortlists. We take the twinning approach.

Tess White: You have twinning. Do you also have zipping?

Sarah Boyack: Yes. I will get back to you on that. It was just how you framed the question.

Tess White: You can just get back to the committee.

Sarah Boyack: That is what I meant.

The Convener: That brings us to the close of this session. If members are content that they have asked everything that they wished to, and witnesses are content that they have said everything that they would like to say, I thank you for coming along.

We move into private session to consider the rest of the business on our agenda.

12:41

Meeting continued in private until 13:08.

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