

68TH COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

Good practices and strategies to realising Gender Sensitive Parliaments across the Commonwealth

CWP WORKSHOP RESEARCH BRIEFING

By Aqsa Latif



Contents

Executive Summary	2
1. Introduction: A New Paradigm for Democratic Governance	3
2. Good Practices and Strategies for Realisation	4
3. Deeper Analysis of Challenges and Barriers	7
4. Social and Political Implications of Gender-Sensitive Parliaments	9
5. Conclusion and Recommendations: A Path Forward	10
About the CPA	11
Alphabetical Reference List.....	12

Executive Summary

The journey towards gender-sensitive Parliaments is a cornerstone of modern democratic development, vital for ensuring that legislative institutions effectively represent and respond to all citizens. This report, grounded in research from the last five years, provides a comprehensive analysis of the strategies and good practices for fostering gender equality within Commonwealth legislatures. The report's framework is based on four key dimensions: Equality of Participation, Parliamentary Infrastructure, Parliamentary Culture, and Gender Equality Policy. The analysis reveals that while Commonwealth Parliaments have made some progress in increasing the number of women, a persistent gap exists in creating truly inclusive environments.

Key findings indicate that the most effective strategies for increasing women's representation include legislated quotas and voluntary party quotas, which have been proven to accelerate progress and normalise women's political leadership. Beyond numbers, successful practices for promoting meaningful participation include the formation of cross-party women's caucuses and the implementation of mentoring programmes. The report also highlights the importance of institutional reforms, such as gender-responsive budgeting and dedicated parliamentary committees, in creating a supportive infrastructure.

However, these efforts are often hampered by significant challenges, including deeply rooted patriarchal norms, political gatekeeping, and the lack of effective accountability mechanisms. The report concludes that a failure to address these systemic issues can undermine the very foundations of democracy. Therefore, the report offers a set of detailed, actionable recommendations for Parliamentarians, urging a multi-pronged

approach that combines legislative and institutional reforms with a sustained effort to change parliamentary culture. By embracing these recommendations, Commonwealth Parliaments can transform their institutions into truly representative and effective bodies, thereby strengthening democracy and fostering a more just and equitable society for all citizens.

1. Introduction: A New Paradigm for Democratic Governance

The aspiration for a representative democracy is at the heart of the Commonwealth's values. Yet, for much of history, Parliaments have functioned as institutions designed by and for men. The gradual increase in the number of women in legislative office has challenged this status quo, but it has also revealed a deeper, more complex issue: that simply electing women is not enough. For a Parliament to truly serve its people, it must be a **gender-sensitive institution**—one that consciously and systematically works to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination and bias in its operations, structures, and outputs.

This research briefing, prepared for the 68th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, provides a comprehensive overview of the strategies and challenges involved in this critical transformation. Drawing on studies and reports from leading international bodies such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UN Women, and the Commonwealth Secretariat, the report is framed around the four dimensions that collectively define a gender-sensitive Parliament:

- **Equality of Participation within Parliament:** This is the most visible dimension, focusing on the numerical presence of women. However, it also considers their representation in senior leadership roles, such as the Speaker, Deputy Speaker, and chairs of key committees, as well as the gender balance within the parliamentary administration (IPU, 2024). The rise of female representation in leadership roles, such as Speaker and Deputy Speaker, has been a key focus in *The Parliamentarian*, with a recent article highlighting the significance of women speakers in UK Parliament as a testament to this progress.
- **Parliamentary Infrastructure:** This dimension addresses the physical and procedural elements that facilitate or hinder women's participation. This includes the presence of facilities like childcare, the provision of robust digital security, and the adoption of family-friendly rules of procedure, such as flexible sitting hours and the option for remote participation (UNDP, 2021). This is not only about physical space; it also involves creating a culture that accommodates

parenthood, as a recent article in *The Parliamentarian* titled 'Parliament Must Work for Parents Too' highlights. The CPA's Gender-Sensitising Parliaments: A Seven-Step Field Guide also provides practical resources for legislatures to assess their infrastructure and identify areas for reform.

- **Parliamentary Culture:** This is the intangible, yet immensely powerful, dimension that shapes the daily experience of all Parliamentarians. It encompasses the norms, behaviours, and attitudes that can create an atmosphere of respect and inclusion or, conversely, one of sexism, intimidation, and hostility (UN Women, 2023).
- **Gender Equality Policy and Women's Substantive Representation:** This final dimension is the ultimate measure of a Parliament's impact. It assesses whether the presence of women translates into a legislative agenda that genuinely addresses the needs of both genders, and whether mechanisms like gender-responsive budgeting are used to achieve equitable policy outcomes (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2022).

The current state of gender representation across the Commonwealth is a patchwork of successes and struggles. While the average representation of women in national Parliaments has risen, it remains below the 30% mark in many countries. This report argues that moving forward requires a concerted effort to not only increase numbers but to fundamentally reshape the institutional and cultural landscape of Parliaments themselves.

2. Good Practices and Strategies for Realisation

The pathway to a gender-sensitive Parliament is not universal, but successful strategies often involve a combination of policy mandates, institutional reforms, and cultural initiatives. The following sections detail these good practices, drawing on a diverse range of Commonwealth case studies.

2.1. Strategies for Increasing Female Representation: Overcoming Barriers to Entry

The most direct and rapid way to increase women's representation is through **gender quotas**. These are not just about numbers; they are a crucial mechanism for disrupting patriarchal systems that have historically limited women's access to power.

2.1.1. Legislated Quotas: The Case for Constitutional and Electoral Mandates

In countries with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, legislated quotas have proven to be exceptionally effective. The rationale is simple: they bypass the traditional gatekeeping of political parties and ensure that a minimum number of women are elected.

- **Case Study: Uganda and Tanzania**

- **Uganda's** constitutional framework reserves a specified number of seats for women, guaranteeing their presence in the legislature. This system has resulted in one of the highest rates of female representation in Africa. Beyond the sheer numbers, this has enabled a critical mass of women to influence legislation, particularly on issues such as land rights and family law. The success of this model has been in its institutionalisation, making it a permanent feature of the political landscape rather than a temporary measure.
- **Tanzania** has similarly mandated "special seats" for women, which are allocated to political parties based on their share of the vote. This has been a powerful tool for driving a significant increase in female representation. The effectiveness of this system, however, is a subject of ongoing debate. Critics argue that women in special seats may feel less accountable to a specific constituency, and their influence can be constrained by party loyalty. Nevertheless, it undeniably creates a foundational presence of women that can lead to further change.

2.1.2. Voluntary Party Quotas: The UK and Canadian Experience

In countries like the **UK** and **Canada**, which operate under a First-Past-the-Post electoral system, legislated quotas are rare and often face legal or cultural resistance. In these contexts, voluntary party quotas have emerged as a powerful alternative.

- **Case Study: The UK Labour Party**

- The **UK Labour Party's** use of **all-women shortlists (AWS)**, first introduced in the 1990s, is widely credited with a dramatic increase in the number of female Labour MPs. By requiring certain constituencies to select their candidate from an all-female list, the party directly addressed the issue of local selection committees, which have historically been dominated by men and tended to favour male candidates. While initially controversial, AWS proved to be a powerful tool for normalising female leadership and breaking the 'old boys' network. The result was the "Blair's

Babes" cohort of 1997, which fundamentally changed the visual and political landscape of the House of Commons.

2.1.3. Targeted Support and Capacity Building for Female Candidates

Simply changing the rules is not enough. Female candidates often face unique barriers, including a lack of access to financial resources, campaign skills, and political networks.

- **Case Study: India and Pakistan**

- In **India** and **Pakistan**, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international development agencies have launched extensive programmes to support aspiring female politicians. These initiatives provide training on a wide range of skills, from public speaking and media engagement to campaign finance and voter mobilisation. Such programmes not only build technical skills but also provide a crucial network of peer support, helping women to overcome the isolation and intimidation they often face in male-dominated political spaces.

Recognising this need, articles like 'She Should Run: Inspiring Tools and Supports for Women Interested in Seeking Elected Positions' in *The Parliamentarian* provide practical guidance for parliamentary staff and civil society organisations working to empower aspiring female politicians.

2.3. Advancing Gender-Responsive Policies: From Representation to Action

The ultimate measure of a gender-sensitive Parliament is its ability to produce laws and policies that advance gender equality. This requires a systematic approach to policy-making.

2.3.1. Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB)

GRB is a critical tool for ensuring that national funds are allocated in a way that addresses gender disparities. It is not about creating separate budgets for women but about analysing the impact of all spending decisions on both men and women.

- **Case Study: Uganda**

- **Uganda's** Parliament has become a global leader in institutionalising GRB. The country's Public Finance Management Act requires all government ministries to present a gender-sensitive budget framework. This framework is then scrutinised by the relevant Parliamentary Committees, which have the power to recommend changes. This process has led to a reallocation

of funds to sectors that disproportionately benefit women, such as primary healthcare, vocational training for girls, and micro-finance initiatives for female entrepreneurs. This example demonstrates how parliamentary oversight, when combined with a legislative mandate, can drive concrete, equitable policy outcomes.

2.3.2. Establishment of Specialised Committees

The creation of a dedicated **Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality** or a similar body provides a formal mechanism for scrutinising legislation and holding the government accountable.

- **Case Study: South Africa**

- The **Parliament of South Africa's** Committee on Women and Gender has a broad mandate to review all bills, conduct oversight of government departments, and ensure that the government's policies are aligned with its commitments to gender equality, particularly those enshrined in its constitution. This committee serves as a powerful watchdog, ensuring that gender issues remain a priority on the legislative agenda, rather than being relegated to a niche concern.

3. Deeper Analysis of Challenges and Barriers

Despite the existence of these good practices, the path to a gender-sensitive Parliament is fraught with challenges. These barriers are not merely procedural; they are deeply rooted in political, cultural, and institutional structures.

3.1. Political Gatekeeping and the 'Masculine' Norm

A significant challenge is the ongoing resistance from male colleagues and party leaders who may view gender-sensitive reforms as a threat to their power and influence. This resistance often takes the form of political gatekeeping, where male-dominated party selection committees limit the number of women on the ballot in winnable constituencies. In many developing Commonwealth countries, women also face significant financial barriers to running for office, and political parties may be less willing to provide them with the necessary resources.

- **The Westminster 'Club':** In many Westminster-style Parliaments, the informal 'club' culture, often based in bars and private rooms, can be a significant barrier. Women are often excluded from these spaces where crucial political decisions

and informal networking take place. This not only limits their influence but also creates a sense of exclusion and isolation, making it harder for them to build the relationships necessary for legislative success.

3.2. The Pervasive Threat of Misogyny and Online Abuse

Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes continue to pervade political life. Female politicians are often subjected to misogynistic rhetoric, attacks on their personal lives, and a lack of respect in public discourse. This hostile environment can create a "gendered chilling effect," discouraging talented women from entering politics and leading to self-censorship among those who are already in office.

- **Digital Violence:** This is a particularly acute problem in the digital space, where women face a torrent of online abuse, threats, and harassment (UN Women, 2023). This is not just 'online trolling'; it is a deliberate and organised strategy to silence women and force them out of public life. A study by the University of Otago (2025) found that female MPs in New Zealand face disproportionately high levels of online abuse, including sexualised threats and character assassination, far exceeding the abuse received by their male counterparts. This is a critical issue that Parliaments must address with a robust and coordinated response.

3.3. Institutional Inertia and a Lack of Resources

Many Parliaments, particularly in developing economies, lack the necessary financial and technical resources to implement and sustain gender-sensitive reforms. The absence of a dedicated gender equality office, the lack of a clear mandate for existing women's caucuses, and a failure to enforce codes of conduct create a culture of impunity where perpetrators of harassment and discrimination can operate without consequence.

- **Case Study: The Papua New Guinea Parliament**
 - The **Papua New Guinea Parliament** is a powerful example of the challenges faced by women in an environment with deep institutional barriers. Despite the occasional presence of women, they have historically struggled to gain a foothold due to a combination of cultural norms, a competitive and aggressive political system, and a lack of institutional support. The absence of reserved seats or effective support systems means that women must overcome immense obstacles just to be on the ballot, let alone win. This institutional inertia is a major reason why many Parliaments remain deeply unrepresentative.

4. Social and Political Implications of Gender-Sensitive Parliaments

The transformation of a Parliament into a gender-sensitive institution has profound implications that extend far beyond the legislative building. These changes are not simply about fairness; they are about strengthening democracy, improving policy outcomes, and fostering a more equitable society.

4.1. Improved Policy Outcomes

A substantial and growing body of evidence demonstrates a direct link between women's political representation and more inclusive and equitable policy outcomes. Research has found that when women's representation in Parliament increases, legislatures are more likely to pass laws on issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, parental leave, and equal pay (Global Institute for Women's Leadership, 2022). A study in India, for example, found that villages with female-led councils were more likely to invest in public goods that benefit women and girls, such as drinking water infrastructure. The presence of women in legislative debates ensures that issues that were previously marginalised are brought to the forefront.

4.2. Enhanced Democratic Legitimacy and Trust

When citizens see themselves reflected in their legislative bodies, it enhances their trust in the democratic process and in their government. A diverse and gender-balanced Parliament is perceived as more legitimate and more representative of the population it serves. This is particularly important for young people, who are increasingly disengaged from traditional politics. Seeing women and other diverse groups in positions of power can inspire a new generation of leaders and strengthen civic engagement. Furthermore, a gender-sensitive Parliament is more likely to be a responsive Parliament, as it will be better equipped to understand and address the diverse needs of its constituents.

4.3. Positive Social Change and Role Models

The presence of a critical mass of female MPs sends a powerful message to society that women can and should be in leadership roles. This visibility helps to dismantle harmful stereotypes and provides positive role models for women and girls. It can also encourage a broader societal shift towards gender equality, making it easier for women to advance in other sectors, such as business and academia. This creates a virtuous cycle where increased political participation leads to greater social equity, which in turn fuels further political engagement and representation. A gender-sensitive Parliament, therefore, is not an end in itself but a powerful catalyst for broader social and cultural change.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations: A Path Forward

The evidence presented in this report confirms that the journey to achieving fully gender-sensitive Parliaments across the Commonwealth is a complex but essential undertaking. While progress has been made in some areas, the persistent institutional, cultural, and political barriers demand a more comprehensive and proactive approach. The task of creating gender-sensitive Parliaments is not a one-time project but a continuous process of institutional reform, cultural change, and sustained political will.

The onus should not fall solely on women Parliamentarians to fight for these changes; it is the collective responsibility of all members of the legislative community. The following recommendations, drawn from the successful strategies and lessons learned across the Commonwealth, provide a clear and actionable roadmap for all Parliaments.

1. **Mandate Gender Quotas:** Where feasible, Parliaments should implement legislated gender quotas to guarantee a minimum level of female representation. For Westminster-style systems, political parties should be encouraged to adopt and enforce voluntary quotas to accelerate change in candidate selection.
2. **Reform Institutional Infrastructure:** Parliaments must invest in the infrastructure that supports gender equality. This includes adopting family-friendly working hours, providing onsite childcare facilities, and ensuring that security protocols and office allocations are gender-sensitive. The CPA's 'Gender Sensitising Parliaments Checklist' provides a practical tool to conduct a self-assessment and identify key areas for reform.
3. **Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms:** Parliaments should establish independent, survivor-centred complaints and grievance mechanisms to address harassment, bullying, and sexism. These mechanisms must have clear mandates and the authority to impose meaningful sanctions, thereby dismantling the culture of impunity that has long protected perpetrators.
4. **Promote a Culture of Inclusivity:** Parliamentary leaders must take an active role in fostering a respectful and inclusive culture. This includes mandatory training on unconscious bias and gender equality for all members and staff. Cross-party women's caucuses should be formally recognised and provided with the resources they need to be effective. Cross-party women's caucuses, such as the CPA's Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network, should be formally recognised and provided with the resources they need to be effective. The

CWP's mandate and activities provide a strong model for this type of collaborative work.

5. **Mainstream Gender into All Legislative Work:** Parliaments must institutionalise gender-responsive budgeting and ensure that a gender analysis is a mandatory component of all legislative drafting and committee work. This will ensure that the needs and interests of women are at the heart of all national policy decisions. The CPA's technical assistance and guidance on gender-responsive budgeting, as featured in its publications, can be a valuable resource for legislatures seeking to adopt this practice.
6. **Invest in Data and Research:** Parliaments should commit to collecting and publishing sex-disaggregated data on all aspects of parliamentary life. This data is critical for monitoring progress, identifying ongoing challenges, and holding the institution accountable for its commitments. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Research Service (CPRS) is uniquely positioned to assist CPA branches in conducting comparative research and providing the evidence needed to monitor progress and identify ongoing challenges.
7. **Foster International Collaboration:** Commonwealth Parliaments should actively share best practices, data, and resources through networks like the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network. This collaboration is vital for learning from both successes and failures and for fostering a collective commitment to gender equality.

By taking these decisive steps, Commonwealth Parliaments can transform from historically exclusive clubs into vibrant, equitable, and effective institutions that truly reflect and serve their diverse populations. This will not only strengthen the foundation of democracy but also pave the way for a more just and prosperous future for all.

About the CPA

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) connects, develops, promotes and supports Parliamentarians and their staff to identify Benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the enduring values of the Commonwealth. The CPA collaborates with Parliaments and other organisations, including the intergovernmental community, to achieve its statement of purpose. It brings Parliamentarians and Parliamentary staff together to exchange ideas among themselves and with experts in various fields; to

identify Benchmarks of good practices and new policy options they can adopt or adapt in the governance of their societies.

Alphabetical Reference List

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). (2024). *She Should Run: Inspiring Tools and Supports for Women Interested in Seeking Elected Positions*. The Parliamentarian, 2024 Issue One.

<https://www.cpahq.org/media/pcwkpcea/parl2024iss1finalonlinesinglereduced.pdf>

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). (2025). *Women Speakers: Leading Roles - An article on the three Deputy Speakers in the UK Parliament*. The Parliamentarian, 2025 Issue One.

https://www.cpahq.org/media/o3dnzca5/parl2025iss1_onlineinglereduced.pdf

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP). (n.d.). *Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP)*.

<https://www.cpahq.org/our-networks/commonwealth-women-parliamentarians/>

CWP. (n.d.). *CWP Gender-Sensitising Parliaments: A Seven-Step Field Guide*.

https://www.cpahq.org/media/pxmfpgw5/gender-sensitising-parliaments_a-seven-step-field-guide.pdf

CWP. (n.d.). *CWP Gender Sensitising Parliaments Guidelines: Standards and a Checklist for Parliamentary Change*.

https://issuu.com/theparliamentarian/docs/cwp_gender_sensitizing_guidelines/s/11218343

Davies-Jones, A. (2025). *Parliament Must Work for Parents Too — And I'm Here to Prove It*. The Parliamentarian, 2025 Issue Two.

https://www.cpahq.org/media/ur1poug4/parl2025iss2_online_single_reduced.pdf

Global Institute for Women's Leadership. (2022). *The Role of Quotas in Increasing Women's Political Representation*.

<https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/organisations/global-institute-of-womens-leadership/publications/>



Hansard – Parliament of Australia. (2024). *Criminal Code Amendment (Deepfake Sexual Material) Bill 2024*.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). (2024). *Gender-Sensitive Parliaments: A Self-Assessment Toolkit*.

[Toolkits | Inter-Parliamentary Union](#)

The House of Commons Library. (2021). *Women in the House of Commons*.

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01250/>

UK Parliament. (2021). *Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme Annual Report*.

<https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/conduct-in-parliament/behaviour-code/icgs-annual-report-july-2020-to-june-2021.pdf>

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2021). *Women's Political Participation: A Global Study*.

[Women's political participation | United Nations Development Programme](#)

UN Women. (2023). *Women in Politics 2023*.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/03/women-in-politics-map-2023>