

Selecting committee witnesses: experts back the call for a more even gender balance

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By Democratic Audit UK

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Democratic Audit recently published a new [report](#) which analysed the identity of select committee witnesses in view of their increasing prominence and influence. Our research found that there was a substantial gender imbalance between those who speak in front of committees. We asked a number of democracy experts to give their views on the research, the reasons for this disparity, the consequences for women's role in public life and what, if anything, can be done to address the problem.

Georgina Waylen, Professor of Politics, University of Manchester

Given that select committees are relatively more gender balanced than Parliament as a whole (around 35% women on the Public Accounts and Transport committees), some may be surprised that so few expert witnesses are women. Notwithstanding the male dominance of the existing pool of 'experts', there are other factors at work here. For example it reflects the long-standing association of 'sex with skill' – expertise is more likely to be attributed to men. Committees may not even question the gender balance of their witness selection. And even 'expert' women, are less likely to be in the networks from which witnesses are typically drawn; the somewhat informal processes whereby they are selected also facilitates the choice of the 'usual suspects'.



Research shows that presentations by women at academic conferences increase if women are part of the selection/organizing process, but women are also more likely to turn down speaker invitations than men. Now the problem has been recognized, as well as greater awareness, more formal rules and procedures around witness selection, including monitoring, are needed.

Jessica Crowe, Executive Director, [Centre for Public Scrutiny \(CfPS\)](#)

At one level the appalling gender bias in the selection of witnesses for select committees reflects wider issues of power and inequality: 'experts' tend to be senior people, who still tend to be men – as the damning [Sex and Power](#) report illustrated.



However, this is no excuse. It means that select committees – whose power to change government policy relies on the quality and breadth of evidence behind their recommendations – are less effective. Their evidence is missing a range of expert views but also different kinds of experiences. Without understanding how policies impact on different groups in society, committees cannot fully evaluate those policies.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny's [2008 research](#) found a key difference between select committees and their local government counterparts: the latter did more public engagement, including witnesses with direct experience of services and policies. While services are mostly experienced locally, women

(greater users of public services) are impacted directly by public policy decisions. They have distinctive experiences to contribute to national discussions on those policies.

The Communities and Local Government Committee is leading the way in getting out of Westminster to gather evidence from different witnesses, but all select committees must do more to hear the greatest range of perspectives. Initiatives like thewomensroom.org.uk make it easier to find women experts, and CfPS's own work with parliamentary clerks is helping national and local scrutiny learn more from each other. There really is no excuse.

Adrian Bailey MP, Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, and Member of Parliament for West Bromwich East

When the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee invites witnesses to give evidence we invite representative organisations and interests groups with a particular awareness of the topic, rather than any individuals themselves. Generally we hear evidence from Managing Directors, who, as our own research has shown, are overwhelmingly male. As a committee, this is something that we were concerned about because I believe that the gender disparity that exists in witnesses to committees is symptomatic of wider issues within society.



The BIS committee published a report in June 2013 looking at 'Women in the workplace' which tackled the issue of the lack of women in senior positions. Women comprise of over half the population, so ensuring that they reach their full potential is as much an economic argument as it is about equality. I believe that at the heart of the matter is a need for cultural change, without this we can only address symptoms rather than causes.

Sarah Veale, Head of the Equality and Employment Rights Department, Trade Union Congress (TUC)

It is no surprise that the majority of witnesses to parliamentary select committees are men. Men still occupy the majority of senior positions in most walks of life. Select committees usually insist on senior people appearing as witnesses, hence few women appearing.



This is difficult to rectify, as it reflects existing gender bias in society. It is also the case that the majority of MPs or peers on the Committees are men. There is still a huge gender bias among parliamentarians. Only one major UK political Party has used positive action to ensure better representation of women – the Labour Party. Their policy seems to be succeeding as they have proportionately more women MPs.

No doubt many of the women MPs and peers do consider gender representation when choosing witnesses, so increasing their number should improve matters. Ultimately significant change is only likely when there are more women at the top in all walks of life.

Alex Runswick, Director, Unlock Democracy

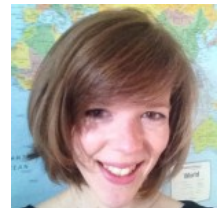
Women are a majority (51 percent) of the population, but as Counting Women In's [Sex and Power report](#) showed, power continues to be concentrated in the hands of the minority. Only 22.5 percent of MPs, 15.6 percent of High Court Judges, 10 percent of bank CEOs and 5 percent of newspaper editors are women. So while it is not surprising that women are also underrepresented in giving evidence to select committees, it is disappointing.



Who is called to give evidence matters because it reflects on the skills and experience we as a society are seen to value. Research carried out by the [Hansard Society](#) found that women bring issues to the table which may not otherwise be debated, or which might wrongly be considered to be of less significance. Excluding women therefore not only makes select committees less representative but limits the diversity of policy options that can be considered.

Helen Undy, Charity campaigner, [East London Fawcett Society](#) Board member and former parliamentary researcher for Phil Willis MP, (then) Chair of the Science and Technology Select Committee

While the gender disparity of select committee witnesses is deeply concerning, I think few would say that these results are surprising. Women make up just 17.5% of the cabinet, 13.6% of the senior judiciary, 5% of editors of national daily newspapers and 11.1% of Bank Chief Executive positions, with no women at all on the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee. In fact, the MPC lacks diversity on so many fronts that their head shots look like [the same man](#) in nine different suits. Select Committees need to take witnesses from specific roles in public life, roles that are dominated by men.



However, while those figures make the gender disparity in witnesses more understandable, they by no means excuse it, particularly as committees can choose their 'independent experts' from a much wider pool. If anything, these figures make it all the more important that our policy making processes represent the interests, views and perspectives of women whose voices are otherwise largely missing from the senior ranks of powerful professions that shape our country.

Initiatives like [The Women's Room](#) make it easy to find female experts and it's time that select committee chairs (and their staff) take responsibility for ensuring that their witnesses represent the full diversity of society, in terms of gender, but also ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability and class. And we can't just expect the female select committee chairs to drive this change, not least because there's only five of them, but also because that undervalues the important role that men can play as feminists too. I'd like to see all select committees report each year on the diversity of their witnesses, to help us move away from policy making processes run by, informed by and primarily benefiting white, middle class, straight men.

Dr Heather Savigny, Senior Lecturer in Politics, The Media School, Bournemouth University

This important report provides us with a shocking reminder of the way in which women's voices and interests are still marginalised in our society today. The recent [Counting Women In](#) report has highlighted the way in which women are under represented (or men are over represented) in public life. The findings from this Democratic Audit report reinforce the existence of a wider societal problem, where women are disadvantaged and men disproportionately over represented.



In respect of the select committees we might also ask questions about the makeup of the committees. If those committees comprise predominantly men, is it unsurprising that witnesses are also men, given that people often select candidates in their own likeness? One way in which this may be redressed is through the use of quotas, both in the composition of committees and in the selection of witnesses. Not only would this ensure the increased representation of women, but it would also tackle the problem of the over representation of men, and male interests.

Dr Louise Thompson, Lecturer in Politics, University of Surrey

The evidence on the huge gender disparity among witnesses to select committees last week may suggest to many that Parliament should be making more of an effort to boost the appearance of women among those giving evidence. There is no doubt that parliamentary procedure is often archaic and behind the times. But this is one occasion where it would be wrong to pin the blame on these procedures. Select committees calling witnesses to give oral evidence are seeking those in particular roles and positions. Excluding those working within Parliament or Government, we are looking primarily at two groups of professionals: members of executive boards and academics.



Considering the gender disparities present within these institutions allows us to put the select committee statistics into context. Lord Davies' Report of April 2013 found that only [17% of FTSE 100 boards](#) had female members whilst among FTSE 350 companies there are [only 14 female](#) chief executives. Academic institutions fare only slightly better, with around [one in five professors](#) being female. In reality then, the gender balance of select committee witnesses is in line with these figures. It is not Parliament that needs to change its procedures, it is the professions themselves which need to be doing more to improve the promotion of women into senior positions.

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