

Malta, 6-8 March 2024

10th British Islands and Mediterranean Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians' Conference

Report



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Summary

The Maltese Parliament hosted the 10th CWP BIMR Conference on 7 and 8 March 2024, welcoming over 30 parliamentarians from 10 jurisdictions in the British Islands and Mediterranean Region. The theme chosen for the two-day programme was “Resilient Women: Moulding Girls into Strong Women”, looking at the challenges women face and the resilience and good practices these challenges require.

Delegates met in Valletta to discuss issues affecting women across the Commonwealth. These included the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, cultural and societal inequality and discrimination, alongside the challenges of being a female parliamentarian. To mark International Women’s Day on 8 March, the Parliament of Malta hosted a discussion among Maltese women with a range of political experience, as well as those aspiring to enter political life, for a conversation on how to build a successful political career and the challenges this may bring.

The conference was opened by the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Parliament of Malta, Hon. Angelo Farrugia MP, and parliamentarians were welcomed by BIMR CWP International Representative Rt Hon. Dame Maria Miller (UK) and the CWP Malta Branch Representative Hon. Naomi Cachia MP.



The theme was “Resilient Women: Moulding Girls into Strong Women”, looking at the challenges women face and the resilience and good practices this calls for.

Issues and Challenges Faced by Women Across the Commonwealth

This session looked to identify global challenges for women, such as violence against women and girls, a lack of representation, and the backlash against gender equality. The panel and participants considered international good practice in responding to these challenges.

Professor Carmen Sammut, of the University of Malta, drew on these challenges, explaining how a lack of representation leads to exclusion in decision-making. She pointed to the portrayal of female vulnerability in times of conflict, complicated by the presence of gender-based violence.

The progression of women's rights through activism and national initiatives was acknowledged, as well as the ongoing need to listen to people with a diverse range of lived experiences. Professor Sammut spoke of meaningful acknowledgement of women in parliament. She concluded with the importance of addressing intersectionality in decision-making.

In her address, Hon. Savia Orphanidou MP also referred to the challenges that women face in conflict, including an increase in gender-based violence and displacements. She referred to the conflict between Turkey and her home country of Cyprus. She emphasised the importance of education in empowering resilient women to be self-sufficient. Access to healthcare, economic independence, and participation in politics and decision-making were also highlighted as tools of empowerment. Hon. Orphanidou's conclusion referenced the "zero tolerance" policy introduced in Cyprus, applied to all sexist actions and behaviour.

Rt Hon. Dame Maria Miller (UK) noted the similar issues faced by women across the Commonwealth, stressing the need to share experiences and learn together. Her speech highlighted challenges such as the under-representation of women in leadership positions. Despite women's academic attainment, there were still not enough women in leading roles. The need for female collaboration and sustainable structural change was stressed.

Alongside cross-party colleagues in the UK Parliament, Dame Maria had called for stakeholders in the upcoming UK Election to pledge to run a clean electoral campaign by eliminating and/or not tolerating misogynistic language. She concluded by pointing to the importance of male allies, whilst ensuring women's voices were still heard.

Deputy Carolyn Labey (Jersey) spoke of the importance of sustainable development and peace. She highlighted the significance of changing the narrative whereby women are recognised as agents, and not as victims, particularly in the case of economic participation. Political participation was also highlighted; in Jersey, at the last election, almost 50% of the States Assembly members elected were women.

“ The presence of women in parliament can be undermined if they are not acknowledged meaningfully. ”

Delegates discussed how to safeguard what had been achieved while also looking forward to a cultural shift in Parliaments.

Hon. Claudette Buttigieg MP referred back to cross-party collaboration. The “gender mechanism” (gender quota) in Malta’s Parliament faced contention, but its introduction had increased women’s participation. Hon. Buttigieg highlighted how the inclusion of a diverse range of people’s lived experiences could be a catalyst for change. Delegates shared their experiences of becoming Members of Parliament as well as the challenges they encountered.

Professor Sammut cited a tradition of parliamentarians inheriting their father’s seat, but that some women had succeeded independently. She noted that political parties must bear some responsibility for female leadership opportunities and address the challenges of electoral competition. Hon. Orphanidou remarked that the first female President in Cyprus was elected two years ago, without familial ties. Delegates concluded that continued dialogue on addressing the under-representation of women was essential, including with male stakeholders.



Above, Prof. Carmen Sammut; Below, Rt Hon. Dame Maria Miller



Women Under Pressure

Women parliamentarians have a track record of scrutinising policy, legislation and budgets to identify the impact on women and girls. This plenary considered how women parliamentarians in the region had led on gender sensitive scrutiny and ensured women’s legal protection.

Hon Claudette Buttigieg MP opened the session by noting the timeliness of the Conference, as women continue to endure the impact of conflicts, climate change and global economic difficulties. High inflation disproportionately affected women who lacked financial independence. In Malta, one policy lever to tackle this was through subsidised energy bills.

Hon. Buttigieg spoke of the familial obligations of women in Malta, as they provided the lion's share of practical support for their families. There was a clear inequality, as most men starting a family did not have to put their careers on hold. Malta had introduced free childcare to help support the increased participation of women in the workforce. Hon. Buttigieg concluded that she was keen to learn from others and hoped that one day International Women's Day would not be necessary as true equality would exist.

Sarah Boyack MSP outlined the challenges in Scotland disproportionately affecting women, including housing, access to justice and dealing with the economic crisis. Reports showed women were the lowest paid workforce, with single parent households heavily impacted. Inequalities meant women were less resilient to the cost-of-living crisis and therefore more vulnerable to poverty and abusive situations.

Sarah Boyack had campaigned for increased women's representation through cross-party working groups. The Scottish Parliament now had an Equal Opportunities Committee and compulsory equal representation on non-Executive Boards. She highlighted the use of legislation to make positive changes for women, such as the Scottish bill enabling access to free period products. The importance of intentionality was stressed; by choosing to put women at the heart of legislation real impactful change was achieved.

Hon. Gemma Vasquez's contribution centred on working mothers. She recognised the difficulties of re-joining the workforce after being the primary carer of children. She stressed the importance of a supportive environment for women and mothers, through childcare provisions and defined parliamentary hours. Removing barriers for women to actively participate would create a more diverse landscape. Gibraltar now had four women parliamentarians, two of whom were serving Ministers. A Ministry of Equality had been established, demonstrating social progress through incremental change. Hon. Vasquez pointed to the introduction of unconscious bias training and changes in healthcare accessibility as further examples.

Julie Elliot (UK) focused on the application of gender-sensitive legislation. The cost-of-living crisis had exacerbated pay gaps, and highlighted the disproportionality of women in insecure and low-paid roles. Ms Elliot developed the topic of gendered economic insecurity, citing how some women remained in abusive relationships to protect their children's economic security. She concluded that legislation was essential but that cultural changes were also needed, including addressing workforce issues.

Discussion centred on the gendered expectations that restrict women's professional and economic independence. It was noted that legislative provisions often overlooked women's caring responsibilities, resulting in a loss of career and pay progression. Delegates discussed how to enable women to combine work and motherhood.

For gender stereotypes to be challenged, in employment and elsewhere, legislative changes were fundamental. The privilege of having a parliamentary platform was recognised, and that it should be leveraged to improve the lives of women.

The priority of financial education was also stressed. Delegates agreed that jobs should be evaluated to ensure fair pay and conditions, forcing the private sector to compete.

Challenges of being a Woman Member of Parliament

This was a key opportunity to discuss how parliaments are structured to meet, and safeguard, the needs of women parliamentarians. This plenary explored how to enhance opportunities for women parliamentarians to perform their roles, especially during unprecedented times.

Hon. Naomi Cachia MP (Malta) noted that she had experienced comments that women do not have the necessary skills for certain governmental roles. The panel, which included Michelle Thomson MSP (Scotland), Ann Corlett MHK and Daphne Caine MHK (both Isle of Man) acknowledged that they regularly received questions which would never be put to their male colleagues. The dismissal associated with women speaking about their personal experiences was raised.

The panel discussed the experience of being pregnant while being a Member of Parliament, including the policies and procedures involved, such as maternity leave and childcare, and the impacts on parliamentary business. Voters' concerns about the impact of parenthood on parliamentary work remained targeted at female parliamentarians. The necessity of female support networks within Parliaments was highlighted. Women needed to work together to combat barriers which prevented their entry into politics. The panel recognised that cultural shifts had to start with educating children about gender equality. Mentorship of young women could help develop their skills and self-belief to build future female parliamentarians.

The panel discussed barriers for women's political participation – noting discrimination in law and attitudes. Without the inclusion of women in politics, the system could not be deemed democratic, nor just. It was noted that male-dominated politics perpetuated low levels of female participation. Ensuring that men, as well as women, were fighting for gender equality was again highlighted as a key to change.

The panel discussed their personal experiences of harassment and abuse, and the scarcity of appropriate support. The need for personal resilience was recognised. The panel asked how women's confidence and self-belief could be improved, particularly faced with systematic abuse on social media. The panel agreed it was undeniable that the high level of threat and abuse towards MPs was impacting women's participation in politics.



It was noted that increasing women's representation in Parliament was key to improving female parliamentarians' experiences, including having more female leaders. Having access to other women parliamentarians, for example through the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians network, was acknowledged as helpful.

Delegates noted that women's contributions in meetings were sometimes ignored or that their contributions were repeated by male colleagues who received the credit. It was reiterated that women frequently received comments and criticism that male colleagues did not experience.

Delegates shared personal stories of being subject to threats and abuse as female parliamentarians. It was noted that as well as deterring participation, abusive experiences could sometimes make women more resolved to engage with politics. It was noted that in recent years, greater personal security measures had been necessary. Delegates discussed encouraging women to stand for election, reiterating the importance of a support network.

Delegates agreed that women parliamentarians should have more access to support, such as training on dealing with abuse. The Scottish Parliament had started a two-year trial on monitoring the social media accounts of its members for abusive messages and threats. Sharing what had worked in other parliaments was deemed essential.

The experience of balancing home life with the demands of parliamentary work was another area of discussion, acknowledging that having a good support network outside work did help.



International CWP Strategy Discussion

Chair of the British Islands and Mediterranean Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Steering Committee Rt Hon. Dame Maria Miller and Vice-Chair Rhianon Passmore MS discussed the benefits and opportunities of the wider CWP network. They explained how participating in activities with other women parliamentarians helped them in their roles, in recognising the common challenges, and in working collectively for gender equality.

Dame Maria set out the argument for parliaments to undertake an audit of gender equality (such as the CWP's Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit) to address structural and persistent inequalities in female participation. She noted that the CWP International Steering Committee had pushed for more content at annual conferences to help women parliamentarians to network.

Dame Maria and Ms Passmore stressed that the Committee was active in the region and would share information and resources with other women parliamentarians, as well as feeding back ideas and challenges to the international CWP Steering Committee.

Women In Conversation

Maltese women in institutional roles, including the former President of the Republic of Malta, were invited to share their stories and experiences. Young women interested in entering politics also took part. This discussion aimed to serve as a platform for all present to share their experiences, and to inspire the new generation.

Hon. Graziella Attard Previ MP (Malta) opened the session by highlighting the need to recognise different women and acknowledge their success. She pointed to the ongoing presence of traditional gender stereotypes.

EU commissioner Helena Dalli quoted UN Secretary-General António Guterres' estimate that it would take 100 years to achieve full gender equality in the EU. Helena Dalli spoke about the current challenges of the gender pay gap and gender-based violence, as well as the 8 million women who qualify for the EU labour market but are unable to enter it due to caring responsibilities. Putting structures in place which catered to women's needs would help achieve the balance between motherhood and participation in the workforce. She emphasised the need to reach a point where International Women's Day was being celebrated for citizenship alone.

Former President of Malta, H.E. Marie Louise Coleiro Preca commented that commemoration of International Women's Day remained necessary as it served as an opportunity to highlight inequalities and discrimination. Delegates noted that women in politics tended to face discrimination and violence, often directed at their appearance and age. The State's obligation to protect women in these instances was raised.

Mariah Zammit shared her experience as President of Malta's National Youth Council KNZ. She found that women tended to be more vigilant and resilient, while also receiving more online abuse. Ms Zammit emphasised the need to continue to empower women to enter politics.

Rt Hon. Dame Maria Miller shared her experience of why she decided to stand for election. She highlighted the need for all-age participation. She spoke of challenges in the UK, as the gender pay gap widened for women over the age of 40. Hon. Mifsud Bonnici MP (Malta) emphasised her belief that parliaments should fund young women's entry into political life and other supportive measures aimed at promoting gender diversity.

Delegates shared experiences of political involvement and becoming a parliamentarian. Hon. Gemma Vasquez MP (Gibraltar) shared her experience of her pregnancies and the challenges she encountered. She emphasised the need to help women in these circumstances, not only through legislation but through support with returning to the workplace after maternity leave.

Hon. Coleiro Preca spoke of the need to review education systems to ensure gender equality was on the curriculum. Hon. Coleiro Preca concluded the plenary with a reminder that gender equality was not about creating space for women, but was a human right which should be accessible to all.

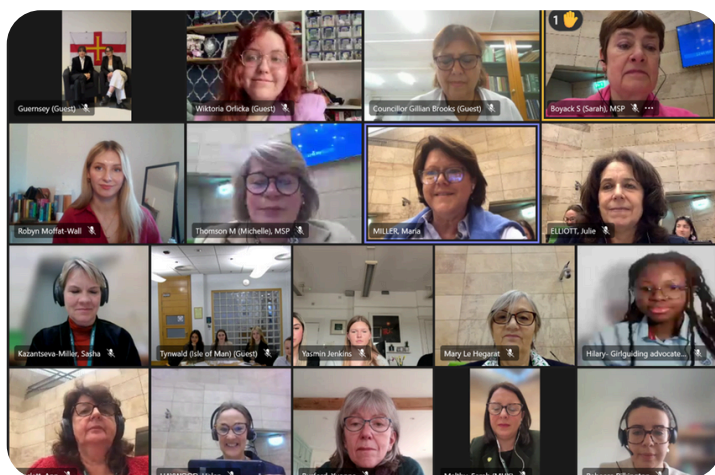
International Women's Day - Online Event

To mark International Women's Day, members of the British Islands and Mediterranean Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Steering Committee reconnected with young women from across the region to discuss their foremost issues of concern.

Key issues raised and discussed were:

- Patriarchy, institutional misogyny, and persistent inequality with girls continuing to be belittled and stereotyped.
- Violence against women and girls including on social media and lack of safe spaces resulting in self-imposed restrictions and behaviour change
- Sexism being tolerated, being sexualised in school and teachers policing girls' bodies
- Period poverty – particularly in the context of the ongoing cost of living crisis
- Sport – segregation and fewer opportunities for girls
- Pay inequality and having to make future choices about working or caring

They called for more opportunities for access to decision-makers to set out their concerns and those of their peers.



Conclusion

Conference delegates were grateful for the opportunity to engage with colleagues from across the region, to gain insight into the similarities in the challenges they face as women parliamentarians, and how women in society were still experiencing persistent inequality. There were several recurrent themes; delegates took away the necessity of addressing these inequalities through effective policy-making and legislation, and would monitor how gender equality manifests in their jurisdictions.

Key Themes Explored

Culture and Society

In most societies women experienced expectation that the care burden should fall to them. This impacted women's access to the labour market and career and pay progression.

Economy

Women were disproportionately affected by the cost of living crisis, as they held the majority of low paid, part-time and insecure jobs. The gender pay gap is persistent and worsens as women get older.

Representation of Women in Parliament

Malta had introduced an electoral mechanism to ensure more women were elected to Parliament. Maltese women parliamentarians recognised the advantage of more diverse representation, including different life experiences, but pointed to the need for a more fundamental societal shift to ensure women were being directly elected. Given the level of interest in the advantages and challenges of introducing such measures, BIMR CWP agreed to explore this further at a subsequent forum.

Threats and Abuse to People in Public Life

It was recognised that levels of threat and abuse were increasing, and better security measures were needed to protect those targeted, in public life. This threatened to deter women considering a political career.

Gender Sensitive Scrutiny

Women parliamentarians have traditionally provided an additional level of scrutiny to consider how political decisions impacted women and men differently.

Women and men tackling gender inequality together

Finding solidarity with women parliamentarians at local level and beyond was lauded and recognised for its benefits. Several contributors underlined that achieving gender equality was the responsibility of all, and it was essential that male parliamentarians were more than just advocates and allies, and proactively worked with female colleagues to address the issues.

Listening to and working with young people

Teaching gender equality from a young age was seen as essential. Giving young people more access to decision-makers was a recommendation from young women joining the call on International Women's Day. This would give them exposure to role models, and give parliamentarians key insights into the issues affecting the young people they represent.

International Women's Day

Delegates looked forward to a time when International Women's Day was celebratory, rather than to spotlight gender inequality. It was considered to be an essential annual milestone to shine a light on how gender equality improves society and the economy.

The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Network

Delegates found strength in coming together and would look for opportunities to leverage and strengthen the network.

Delegates



Cyprus

Hon. Savia Orphanidou MP
Marianna Kaisis (Delegation Secretary)



Gibraltar

Hon. Gemma Arias-Vasquez MP
Hon. Atrish Sanchez MP
John Reyes (Delegation Secretary)



Guernsey

Deputy Sue Aldwell
Deputy Sasha Kazantseva-Miller
Eliot Gallienne (Delegation Secretary)



Isle of Man

Daphne Caine MHK
Ann Corlett MHK
Sarah Maltby MHK
Joann Corkish (Delegation Secretary)



Jersey

Deputy Carolyn Labey
Deputy Barbara Ward
Deputy Mary Le Hegarat
Lisa Hart (Greffier)



Malta

Hon. Naomi Cachia MP
Hon. Claudette Buttigieg MP
Hon. Graziella Attard-Previ MP
Numerous other Maltese MPs participated



Northern Ireland

Michelle McIlveen MLA
Nicola Crawford (Delegation Secretary)



Scotland

Sarah Boyack MSP
Michelle Thomson MSP
Charlotta Craig (Delegation Secretary)



UK

Rt Hon. Dame Maria Miller MP
Julie Elliott MP
Sarah Dickson (BIM Regional Secretary)
Helen Haywood (Delegation Secretary)



Wales

Janet Elizabeth Finch-Saunders MS
Rhianon Passmore MS
Elin Sutton (Delegation Secretary)

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