

Exploring the reproduction of gender in the House of Commons



Conceiving of Parliament as a workplace as well as a representative arena, [Cherry Miller](#) explores the everyday consequences for gendered power relations that this unique environment entails, as parliamentary actors perform their careers, citizenship, and public service.

The government is slowly lifting restrictions on movement and social interaction. Likewise, there has slowly been a [gradual](#) return to Westminster. Although 'politics as usual' was suspended in the early stages of the pandemic and 'constructive opposition' was proposed, it didn't take long for personal attacks, finger-pointing, and spectacle to return. Indeed, the Speaker's call to 'Order' that disciplines unruly behaviour and often gendered insults from the parliamentary benches has become a familiar sight internationally. But how is gender shaped beneath these public exchanges?

Parliamentary ethnography – beneath the spectacle

Following Shirin Rai's [cue](#) that Parliaments are not undifferentiated institutions, but are historically marked with deep divisions of class, race, gender, (dis)ability and sexuality, [my book uses ethnographic methodology](#) in the 2010-2015 parliament to explore how gender is 'done' everyday. Ethnography involves immersion, spending time, and speaking with gendered actors who work in the capillaries of institutional settings. As a result, I explore three 'working worlds' – a phrase used by a participant: MPs, the House Service, and parliamentary researchers. I was interested in how these parliamentary actors saw gender, gender relations and gender hierarchies at play in the UK House of Commons.

I present multiple stories and experiences, with all the thorniness, balancing acts, and risks of representing such situated understandings that this entails. I argue, perhaps rather intuitively, that minimally, whoever the parliamentary actor is, when they walk into the Commons, they are pushed and pulled by demands made by the career cycle, citizenship, and public service. These larger meaning structures are hung together by institutional rules and everyday performances of gender.

In terms of the career cycle, the [Wright Reforms](#) provided a backdrop as a democratic innovation implemented in the 2010-2015 parliament. A rule change was that select chairs would be elected by the whole House by secret ballot, weakening the power of the party Whips. These reforms were widely praised – and did bring about some changes. However, in the midst of this praise, it was also interesting to inquire how these changes played out. Chair elections were hotly contested and included, as one participant described, 'a row of blokes in rosettes' on the day of the election for the Defence Committee in 2014, and chairs' newly-empowered mandate created knock-on effects for staff. Furthermore, the Wright reforms could not be a panacea for other practices that impeded the work and sense of teamwork on the committee, such as discussions of shooting injuries in private deliberations; a committee language still haunted by class and 'Radio 4' speak – a power structure which permeates the book in its everyday manifestations; and many examples of gendered practices, besides.

In terms of citizenship, I explore how this was performed by members of newly-formed critical actors, the Workplace Equality Networks (WENs). WENs were beneficial for breaking parliamentary workplace silos, allowing parliamentary actors to use their skills to advocate for change, and consciousness-raising. Post-pandemic, it will be interesting to see how these retain their momentum; confront new issues in working life surrounding the pandemic; remain independent from the House management; and pull in a variety of voices and sustained engagement.

Finally, the book breaks new ground by exploring how parliamentary researchers are constrained in their performance of public service. In particular, I home in to speaking out on relations of gender, violence, and power. Parliamentary researchers are constrained discursively by strong meritocracy arguments that circulate around ending someone's political career, even if the perpetrator has affected a victim's career; and affective management strategies from those in leadership positions that mask inaction and render complaint inaudible, just as it is articulated. Post-pandemic, it would be interesting to follow up on how remote working affected these dynamics.

Considering possibilities for change at different levels, I argue that change is identity-contingent as well as resources contingent. This means that some actors are accepted as more legitimate to push for change. This matters for feminist projects to re-future parliamentary democracy.

Putting the Commons in its place

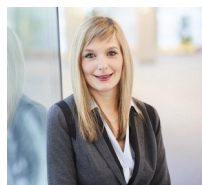
Two unsettled questions strike at the heart of the book that surround the place of the Commons. These concern its role in reproducing gendered relations in society, and the very idiosyncrasies of the Commons that make the reproduction of gender there specific.

Firstly, the reproduction of gender within parliaments is not a 'merely cultural' matter but has serious opportunities for democratic work and may be crucial for how constituents' own engagements with bureaucracies and their working lives are understood and represented. This connects parliament up with questions around democracy, gendered working lives, and society. Does 'leading' or 'responding' to gender inequalities in the workplace necessarily amount to change elsewhere? Or are changes in the Commons derived from changes elsewhere – and where? Social movements, popular culture, sport, third sector organisations, unions, business, sub-national or international organisations?

Secondly, the Commons has its own idiosyncrasies, not just the arresting vertical limestone façade, the green benches, and its own parliamentary procedure. It also has contextual structural dimensions, such as the fused government, largely stable majorities, strong party leaderships, and the committee system used for scrutiny and accountability, rather than law-making. All of these dimensions generate very specific gendered working conditions for situated parliamentary actors.

Note: the above draws on the author's book [Gendering the Everyday in the UK House of Commons: Beneath the Spectacle](#). You can [join the book launch](#) on 3 June at 11.00 BST.

About the Author



Cherry Miller is a Post-Doctoral Researcher on the European Research Council-Funded Project [EUGENDEM](#) at Tampere University, Finland.

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