

# Despite #MeToo, tackling sexual harassment of women in Parliament remains a challenge



**Christina Julios** discusses the scale of the sexual harassment problem in the UK Parliament. She writes that consistent with Hollywood's film industry and innumerable institutions worldwide, sexual misconduct in Parliament was to prove endemic and cut across the entire political spectrum – from the Conservative Party's so-called sex pest dossier of 36 offending MPs, to the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats.

In October 2017, two award-winning exposés by [The New York Times](#) and [The New Yorker](#) uncovered the biggest sex scandal to hit Hollywood's film industry in modern times. Their unveiling of the systematic sexual harassment and abuse of women by influential movie tycoon [Harvey Weinstein](#) sent shockwaves across Tinseltown. It also became a catalyst for the rise of the global [#MeToo](#) movement, as millions of individuals took to social media to share their personal experiences of sexual transgressions. #MeToo's countless voices laid bare the extent of institutionalised gender inequality in workplaces everywhere, which disproportionately affects women and leaves them vulnerable to abuse. From the world of entertainment to the business sector, broadcasting and the political realm, no area of social life proved immune to the practice. Unsurprisingly, the UK Parliament was no exception.

## The Palace of 'Sextminster'

During the Autumn of 2017, the momentum gathered by #MeToo witnessed numerous MPs across the political spectrum standing accused of sexual offences against women. In a replay of the Weinstein debacle, the flood of sordid news headlines about their alleged wrongdoings found the British political establishment at the centre of its biggest '[sleaze scandal](#)' in recent times. The well-documented catalogue of offences included a so-called '[dirty dossier](#)' alleging misconduct by 36 Conservative MPs, together with numerous disclosures by victims and media accounts of infringements by parliamentarians of all political persuasions.

Behind the walls of the now dubbed Palace of 'Sextminster', elected representatives seemed to have violated women's rights and wellbeing by indulging in unsolicited acts such as: groping, inappropriate touching, making unwanted passes, initiating sexual chatter, making misogynistic comments, sending improper text messages, using sexual overtones and pressurising women into unwelcomed sexual behaviour; with more serious allegations of sexual assault also coming to light. The lengthy list of alleged perpetrators featured some high-profile names in the Conservative government's benches as well as Labour MPs. Third political parties and devolved institutions didn't fare any better.

## The Gender Power Gap

At the time, the glaring contrast in the balance of power between the offending MPs and their alleged victims spoke volumes about the entrenched *status quo* in Westminster. Typically, the MPs involved were middle-aged men in positions of authority, working in an overwhelmingly [male-dominated parliament](#). With only 220 women MPs (34% of the total) and 223 female Peers (28%), the legislature still continues to afford an ample presence to men that inevitably privileges them and disadvantages women. Within this context, any of the MPs accused of misconduct could reasonably expect to get away with their 'lapse of judgment' or 'misreading of the situation' by either issuing a public apology, being duly reprimanded or temporarily suspended from their party. Only in the most serious or 'embarrassing' of cases would an MP step down. Sir Michael Fallon provides a case in point. The married father-of-two resigned his post after historical allegations surfaced of his repeatedly touching the knee of a female radio host, Julia Hartley-Brewer, at a past Conservative conference.

In contrast, many of the MPs' alleged victims were often young women either working for them, hoping to be employed by them, or in the early stages of their careers. Regardless of their level of experience, Westminster female staffers frequently occupied subordinate or far less powerful positions than the men accused of sexually harassing them. In seeking redress, these women were left with limited options, while facing rather stark choices. As Dame Laura Cox's (2018) independent review into [The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff](#) illustrates, being at the wrong end of the gender power gap often prevents victims from reporting incidents.

Their plight is further compounded by factors such as fear of not being believed, fear of losing their jobs, fear of potential damage to their reputations, fear of jeopardising their future careers, as well as a lack of access to effective organisational and legal support mechanisms. Those who dare to speak up and seek justice usually face an uphill struggle peppered with more hard choices. They can either engage in often protracted internal complaint procedures, pursue their grievances through the courts or settle their disputes via [non-disclosure agreements](#), which effectively silence them.

So far, evidence of successful outcomes is not on their side. As the Fawcett Society's (2018) [Sex Discrimination Law Review](#) points out, although women are consistently over-represented among victims of workplace sexual harassment, the vast majority of them do not make a complaint. To put this in a wider context, such long established patterns at work are reinforced by persistently low conviction rates for sexual assault-related offences among the general population. The [Crime Survey for England and Wales](#) (2021), for example, shows that while there are almost four times as many female victims of sexual assault as male, fewer than one in six (16%) report it to the police.

### After #MeToo

Back in late 2017, as Westminster's sleaze scandal unravelled, the political elite sought to salvage parliament's reputation and vowed to address their shortcomings. Hence, the following months would see many politicians denouncing Westminster's patriarchal ethos and pledging to address the plight of its long suffering victims. As Prime Minister, [Theresa May](#) fittingly led calls for a 'new culture of respect'. Over time, such intentions would be followed by a whole raft of evidence-based inquiries, reports and public policy initiatives aimed at eradicating the problem, including: Dame Laura Cox's (2018) own independent review; the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee's (2018) [Sexual Harassment in The Workplace Report](#); Gemma White QC's (2019) [Bullying and Harassment of MPs' Parliamentary Staff](#) inquiry; and Naomi Ellenbogen QC's (2019) [An Independent Inquiry into Bullying and Harassment in the House of Lords](#). In addition, an [Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme](#) would be established, and its Helpline contacted by 388 people in the past year alone. Some progress was undoubtedly being made.

In examining the impact of #MeToo in the UK parliament, however, attention must be paid to the root causes of the sexual harassment problem, namely a persistent gender power gap and the inherent patriarchal attitudes that sustain it. To date, these unresolved issues underline the dynamics of Westminster's workplace. The '#MeToo effect' can be credited with bringing unprecedented attention to gender disparities at work, as well as much needed reform of the organisational cultures and structures that perpetuate it. But, unless meaningful change to the current *status quo* takes place, tackling sexual harassment of women in the Houses of Parliament will remain a challenge.

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### About the Author



**Christina Julios** is Honorary Associate and Assoc. Lecturer at the Open University. Her latest book, [Sexual Harassment in the UK Parliament: Lessons from the #MeToo Era](#), was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2022. Her previous titles include [Female Genital Mutilation and Social Media](#) (Routledge, 2019); [Forced Marriage and 'Honour' Killings in Britain](#) (Ashgate, 2015); and [Contemporary British Identity](#) (Ashgate, 2008).

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