

Women and Equalities Committee: Representation and Inclusivity

Dr Maryyum Mehmood (23rd April 2020)

On 2nd March 2020, the **Women and Equalities Select Committee** appointed its new members. Following the circulation of a tweet by the Committee's official social media page, there has been much **controversy surrounding the composition of the Committee's membership**. Roughly 20 percent of the UK population is BAME. The Committee, however, fails to reflect this reality, and as such, is **neither inclusive nor representative, so is likely unaware of the intersectional challenges BAME people face**. This failure is especially disturbing amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, in which a disproportionately high number of BAME people have lost their lives; overall, **27 percent of Covid-19 deaths have been BAME, as have 72 percent of Covid-19 deaths amongst carers and NHS staff**.

In the case of the Women and Equalities Committee, the **lack of BAME representation** is very disappointing and gives an air of dismissiveness regarding ethnic minority, and intersectional identities. Even worse, this is nothing new; of all its **past members in the entirety of its five-year history, only one member has been BAME** (Tulip Siddiq MP). The Committee's **lack of support for transgender rights** has also previously invited much criticism. Many of the recommendations made by the Committee's 2016 inquiry on transgender rights were deemed too meek by certain rights activists; furthermore, they were not effectively followed up by government.

The Women and Equalities Committee was established by the House of Commons in 2015 to **oversee the Government's performance on all equalities related issues**, including: sex; age; race; religion or belief; sexual orientation; disability; gender identity; pregnancy and maternity; marriage and civil partnership. Given the scope of its task, one would **expect appropriate representation of members with direct experience and involvement** in challenging a variety of issues and inequalities.

Instead, **controversies have marred the Committee**. The current head, Caroline Nokes MP, has been heavily criticised for her **lack of support for LGBT+** rights; in 2013 she was at the centre of fury for **voting against the legalisation of same-sex marriage**. In 2019, however, Nokes voted in favour of same-sex marriage, but that was only in Northern Ireland. She has abstained from voting on the matter otherwise. The current Committee members comprise of 6 Conservative, 4 Labour, and one Scottish National Party MP. In contrast, the SNP member, Angela Crawley, and Labour's Rosie Duffield both have **track records supporting equality and human rights**.

The Committee's past reports show little sign of intersectional issues being given their rightful platform; for instance, the Committee had never conducted an inquiry to investigate obstacles for **BAME women in accessing healthcare and education**. However, in light of circumstance caused by Covid-19, the Committee has now launched its first **inquiry into the unequal impact of the virus on people with protected characteristics**. Surely, **membership of the committee should reflect this**.

Moving forward, it is necessary that the Women and Equalities Committee further broadens its outlook. In order to spearhead this, it is imperative that it **includes BAME people who are at the forefront of challenging multi-layered inequalities** in their day-to-day lives, not just in evidence-giving, but also agenda-setting. We urge the Committee to seek input from a variety of **intersectional voices** to help foster a **more inclusive space** in their reports, and to also establish a **more representative environment in their decision-making processes**.

Visit our website for further briefings (<https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cop/>). If you would like a personal briefing or clarification on any of the issues raised here, please contact Dr Mehmood mm167@soas.ac.uk. Do contact Professor Alison Scott-Baumann and her team for further briefings and access to other experts as150@soas.ac.uk