

Selected Parliamentary Speeches of Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh

UK House of Commons Hansard • 2015–2017

6 substantial spoken contributions reproduced from the official Hansard record.

Editorial note: The UK Parliament member profile lists 237 spoken-contribution records across 12 result pages. This collection selects six substantial entries identified as speeches or extended debate contributions. Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh's own words are presented consecutively. Where another Member intervened, the intervening Member's words are generally omitted while Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh's response is retained, so that the document remains focused on her speech text. Each section links to the complete official Hansard debate for context.

Contents

- 1. World Hijab Day — 1 February 2017**
- 2. International Women's Day — 2 March 2017**
- 3. UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination — 21 March 2017**
- 4. The Good Parliament Report — 2 November 2016**
- 5. International Men's Day — 17 November 2016**
- 6. International Women's Day 2016 — 8 March 2016**

1. World Hijab Day

1 February 2017 | Commons Chamber – Adjournment Debate

[Official Hansard source](#)

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)

Thank you very much for granting this Adjournment debate on the subject of World Hijab Day, Mr Speaker.

Hijab is an Arabic word meaning barrier or partition. In Islam, however, it has a broader meaning. The most visible form of hijab is the head covering that many Muslim women wear. I should say now that I feel that Muslim women should wear it only if they want to wear it; it absolutely should be a matter of choice.

Although Hijab Day was started in New York by Nazma Khan, the movement has been organised almost solely over social media networking sites.

For many people, the hijab is a symbol of oppression and divisiveness. It is a visible target that often bears the brunt of a larger debate about Islam in the west. Although Hijab Day is designed to counteract such controversies, it encourages non-Muslim women or even Muslim women like me who do not ordinarily wear a hijab to don one and experience what it is like to do so as part of a bid to foster better understanding.

My hon. Friend makes an important point. As I said earlier this week in the Chamber, we must not be afraid to stand up to racism and xenophobia where it exists, but I fear that, sometimes, we lose our ability to do that when we see who the proponent is. We must never do that.

The Hijab Day founder said: “Growing up in the Bronx, in New York City, I experienced a great deal of discrimination due to my hijab. I figured the only way to end discrimination is if we ask our fellow sisters to experience hijab themselves.”

In middle school, she was known as Batman or Ninja. She said: “When I moved on to college, it was just after 9/11, so they would call me Osama Bin-Laden or terrorist. It was awful. I figured the only way to end discrimination is if we ask our fellow sisters to experience hijab themselves.”

A report, which was published by the Scottish Government social research team in 2011, discussed the experience of Scottish Muslim women wearing the hijab. This was one case study—a personal story: “You get looks...It makes you feel very uncomfortable. It makes you feel very unwelcome as well. By a few people I will add. Yeah, the majority of people are quite nice and respect you. ...I think some people still have in their minds that we’re Muslims and we’re not meant to be here, but...that’s what I feel. Probably some don’t feel that way. Probably they just think that’s the way we’re dressed.”

The story went on: “I agree with that. Especially...that is why I wear a hijab and I do, like, feel kind of...if you’re walking with someone who’s not, you can see the way you’re treated differently, and I’ve felt that quite a lot.”

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, some of which I agree with and, as he will understand, some of which I do not. This idea of what it means to be British is very much under question. However, I do know what it means to be a human being and to stand up for human rights and for what is right. I do not think that that is defined by where someone comes from in the world, which is why I say again that, wherever there are things going on in this world, we must not be afraid to stand up to them.

Today is an opportunity to combat the prejudice that exists. Hate crime remains a serious issue. Civic groups in England and Wales have been monitoring the rise in hate crime. The Muslim Council of Britain’s group of mosques said that it had compiled a dossier of 100 hate crimes over the weekend of the EU referendum. Dr Shafi, the secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain said: “As the results of the referendum became known, I called for our politicians to come together and heal the divisions that have emerged as a result of the campaign. Now we are witnessing the shocking extent of this with reports around the country of hate

speech and minorities being targeted. Our country is experiencing a political crisis which, I fear threatens the social peace.”

I do believe that we are making progress in this area. One extremely positive move has been the recent adoption of the hijab as part of the police uniform in Scotland. In 2006, Police Scotland announced that women from Muslim communities may now wear the hijab as part of their uniform. Speaking on behalf of Police Scotland, a spokesperson said: “I hope that this addition to our uniform options will contribute to making our staff mix more...and add to the life skills, experiences and personal qualities that our officers and staff bring to policing the communities of Scotland.”

That is something that I absolutely support.

However, challenges remain when it comes to combating prejudice. It would be remiss of me not to mention the well-documented situation that arose between the journalist, Fatima Manji, and Kelvin MacKenzie. Channel 4 news presenter, Fatima Manji, was criticised in July 2016 by former editor of The Sun, Kelvin MacKenzie, for wearing a hijab while reporting on the Nice truck attack. MacKenzie said in his column in The Sun: “I could hardly believe my eyes...Was it appropriate for her to be on camera when there had been yet another shocking slaughter by a Muslim? Was it done to stick one in the eye of the ordinary viewer who looks at the hijab as a sign of the slavery of Muslim women by a male-dominated and clearly violent religion?”

It was reported that 1,400 complaints were sent to the Independent Press Standards Organisation about that column. Fatima Manji responded to MacKenzie in an article, saying: “He has attempted to smear half of them further by suggesting they are helpless slaves. And he has attempted to smear me by suggesting I would sympathise with a terrorist.”

A YouGov poll following the events found that 44% thought that MacKenzie’s remarks were wrong and should not have been printed. The right of women to wear a hijab if they so wish is a right, like any other, for women to wear what they want when they want.

The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. Yes, too many crimes are committed whereby women—even young women and girls—have their hijabs pulled off. I agree with her point that, as Muslim women, we stand by those whose choice it is not to wear the hijab and whose choice it is not to do what they may be told by male counterparts in their family. Islam is about equality. Anyone who suggests otherwise does not know or understand that religion.

We will continue to stand up against those who try to paint our religion in a negative light. We ask people not to expect us to apologise for everything that is done wrong in society by a Muslim. We are not responsible for all of them. We are each, as individuals, responsible for our own actions and for speaking up when we think that wrong is taking place.

It is the right of women to wear what they want where they want, including in this Chamber and beyond, without any fear of what people might suggest the repercussions may be. That brings me to another case in point. In 2016, Nicola Thorp, who was working as receptionist at City firm PwC, was sent home without pay for refusing to wear high heels. She was required to wear a heel of two to four inches.

She went on to launch a petition asking to make it illegal for a company to require female employees to wear high heels at work. The petition garnered 152,420 signatures and will be debated in Westminster Hall on 6 March. I cannot wait. The Government’s initial response to the petition stated: “Company dress codes must be reasonable and must make equivalent requirements for men and women. This is the law and employers must abide by it.”

The Petitions Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee published the “High heels and workplace dress codes” report on 26 January, recommending that the Government take urgent action to improve the effectiveness of the Equality Act 2010. It recommends that “the Government...review this area of the law”, and, if necessary, “ask Parliament to amend it”. It calls for “more effective remedies” such as

increased financial penalties “for employment tribunals to award against employers who breach the law” in order to provide an effective deterrent.

I agree with the Committees’ inquiry findings, as the report also states: “We heard from hundreds of women who told us about the pain and long-term damage caused by wearing high heels for long periods in the workplace”—perhaps I should not be the one giving this speech, because I am currently wearing heels, by choice of course—“as well as from women who had been required to dye their hair blonde, to wear revealing outfits and to constantly reapply make-up. The Government has said that the existing law is clear, and that the dress code that prompted this petition is already unlawful. Nevertheless, discriminatory dress codes remain widespread. It is therefore clear that the existing law is not yet fully effective in protecting employees from discrimination at work.”

There is much to do.

I reiterate that women—I know that everyone in the Chamber will agree with me; I dare them to say otherwise—should have the right to wear what they want without fear of discrimination. No one, but no one, has the right to discriminate against someone on the basis of their religious beliefs, whatever those beliefs may be or if they hold none at all. We are living in a world where women are feeling more threatened and more vulnerable.

Telling women what they can and cannot wear, or how they should and should not look, is detrimental not only to women but to society as a whole. We need to work together to create a safer society where everyone can feel free to express religious beliefs without fear of discrimination, and everyone can feel comfortable to wear what they want, whenever they want.

2. International Women's Day

2 March 2017 | Commons Chamber

[Official Hansard source](#)

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)

It is an absolute pleasure to wind up this debate on behalf of the SNP. As I often say, this Chamber always feels like a different place when there are mainly women in it, not least because we do not hear funny noises or sounds that are unrecognisable to most of us. This certainly feels like a period of reflection.

I pay tribute to the many women MPs who have spoken out in the past year with great bravery, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson), who spoke here a while ago about her rape. Many across the Chamber have spoken of the domestic violence and assault that they have faced. I salute them all, and I am sure that everyone watching does, too. It takes tremendous courage to speak about such personal issues in such a public forum. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), who spoke about mothers. We should remember those who have lost mothers over the past year, as well as how much mothers contribute to what we have to offer our children and the rest of society.

As I said, this Chamber can often feel like a different place. Our levels of tolerance often have to increase depending on who is speaking and what they are saying. I pay particular tribute to our Tory colleagues who, on certain occasions, need to have much higher levels of tolerance than the rest of us, but achieve that with such grace. I am grateful for the many brilliant contributions that they have made today.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who always speaks with great eloquence, passion and knowledge about victims of domestic violence, started the debate with another awe-inspiring speech. The right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) spoke about Yazidi women and brought home the terrible plight that they have to endure, which we really must do something about. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) spoke eloquently about women in the armed forces, to whom we pay continual tribute.

The hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) spoke about social media. I had the pleasure of being on a programme with her and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley about how social media abuse can affect women disproportionately. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) reminded us about the important—perhaps the most important—job of men and women in bringing up their families.

What can seem like small triumphs at the beginning of the day in getting children to do minor things are actually major triumphs, and we should never forget any of them. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who spoke about her husband, George, whom I have met—a wonderful individual. If he is not a feminist through choice, he is certainly one through submission.

We have heard about the main theme of International Women's Day—and, indeed, that of the UN's International Women's Day. We support both excellent themes. I would like to reflect briefly on the achievements of women in the past year. Since the last time we gathered for this debate, Taiwan, in May 2016, elected its first ever female President, with 56% of the vote. Last year, Afghanistan's first lady, Rula Ghani, officially inaugurated the first ever women-only university in Kabul.

Here in the UK, we saw women taking up positions of leadership, not least the Prime Minister.

Progress is being made, but there is much more to do, particularly in the professions. Women remain significantly under-represented, given that they are 51% or 52% of the UK population. Research shows that we have more female lawyers than ever before, but that does not mean that our legal system has a real gender balance. We also see many more female journalists. I pay tribute to Sophy Ridge, with her new programme on Sundays, and Emma Barnett, with her programme on Radio 5.

I have no doubt that they face a very different level of scrutiny from that of their male counterparts. I hope that Members will join me in saying that we are with them as they try to deal with all the stereotypes while producing excellent programmes. Again, however, having more women in journalism does not necessarily mean that our reporting of politics is more gender balanced.

I would like to mention some experiences of women in the Chamber. My hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), as usual, made an excellent speech about equality. She mentioned Winnie Ewing, the first female SNP MP, who, after she came down to Westminster, talked about being stalked at night.

It is not about fighting for equality for equality's sake—it never is—but making sure that this Parliament is more a place of representative democracy. Having a female Prime Minister does not mean that we have a Parliament built on equality, because in 2017, as we have heard, only 30% of the MPs sitting on these Benches are women. However, we have made progress, and we should celebrate that where it occurs.

I would like to speak briefly about violence against women. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on her excellent work on her private Member's Bill to ratify the Istanbul convention. She has demonstrated how working across this Chamber can really make a difference. The debate on that Bill was one of the brighter days of my time down here at Westminster. Around the world, more than 35% of women have experienced either physical or sexual violence.

Intimate partners are responsible for 38% of women's murders. The Honour Based Violence Awareness Network believes that there are 5,000 honour killings internationally per year. Of those, there are thought to be about 12 honour killings in the UK each year. UNICEF claims that at least 200 million girls and women alive today, living in 30 different countries, have undergone female genital mutilation. The World Health Organisation estimates that 3 million girls a year become at risk of this procedure.

These are shocking statistics.

Of course 2016 was a difficult year, with our solidarity being put to the test by Trump's election. It is now more important than ever for women to stick together, as we know how to do so well. On next week's agenda for Westminster Hall, we see a debate to which I am very much looking forward on an e-petition relating to high heels and workplace dress codes.

I am really interested in whether there can possibly be a contrary opinion to women being able to wear what they want, when they want, whatever that may be, but I have no doubt that one will surface from somewhere.

We can and must continue our work to achieve a gender balance in Parliament, in journalism and in civil society. We need women in all parts of public life, not because that is good for women but because it is good for all society. While we do not agree on everything—of course we do not—and there is not a singular female view, there are opportunities for those of us from across the political spectrum in all parties, and those who belong to none, to come together about the things that really matter most.

3. UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

21 March 2017 | Westminster Hall

[Official Hansard source](#)

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on securing the debate and on setting the scene so beautifully and eloquently, as always, and so passionately as we observe this day. It is of course important to mark this day. She said that we should be united together with one voice. In turbulent political times, it is wonderful to find any kind of platform where we can join together in one voice, so we should embrace that.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) rightly spoke about education being key, as it can widen horizons, but there is an increasing propensity for discrimination online. We should be concerned about young people's exposure to that.

The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) spoke about black, Asian and minority ethnic representation in public life. It is absolutely clear that we need to address that face on. She also gave some shocking statistics on employment. My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) gave an international perspective and said that we clearly are not an equal society. We are not, unless women are given their due and rightful place, are paid accordingly and have equal representation across society.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) always speaks out on these issues. She faced abuse when she spoke out for people suffering racial abuse. Unfortunately, that is what happens when we raise our voices—we find ourselves also the subject of abuse. She rightly expressed concern for her children, but she also spoke, rightly, of the need to help those in need, wherever they may be. She also spoke of the late Bashir Ahmad, who was my friend and a friend of my family. He is greatly missed, and his words ring true today, just as they did so many years ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), while stealing some of my time—I am always happy to give it to her—gave her personal insight, as usual. She has fought for equality all her life and has never been afraid to speak out. I say to all those who speak out that it means so very much to us as members of the BAME community that people are prepared to do so. I make that point as a BAME MP. I am proud to be standing here with my fellow parliamentarians from the Scottish National party, who are all non-BAME parliamentarians but are happy to raise their voices and speak up for what is right.

I often face the question, “Where do you come from, Tasmina?”, which is followed up with the question, “No, but where do you really come from?” I want to take a couple of minutes to speak about the impact of racism on young people and children, because it endures and lasts a lifetime.

You may not have considered this to be so, Mr Streeter, but as a child in Edinburgh—I was one of the first children of mixed marriage, which started to take place a number of years ago—I faced an awful lot of racial discrimination. I was called many names: golliwog, black Sambo, Paki—you name it, I got all of it. I was bullied at school, beaten up and so on, and I did my very best to keep it from my parents.

My late father was from Pakistan, and the last thing I wanted as a young child was for him to feel guilty that it was because of him that I was facing that abuse. There are young children who feel the same way today.

What is of even greater concern in relation to my children and those of Members in the Chamber and those listening in to the debate is that, as well as that racial discrimination based on where someone comes from or the country someone's parents are thought to come from, there is religion discrimination, too, which is of great concern to us all. Discrimination makes people feel inferior.

What is the impact on later life? Women spend their whole lives working doubly hard to show they are good enough—triple hard if they are from the BAME community. They feel they have to do so much more than anyone else to earn their stripes. That is certainly something that I feel.

Women who have chosen to wear the hijab have experienced much discrimination, which is unacceptable. As we have heard from Members from all parties, it is a woman's right to wear what she wants, when she wants, whatever that might be. We should always stand up for women in that respect. Racial discrimination and racial profiling do exist. I have been on international trips with fellow MPs, and it might horrify you to learn, Mr Streeter, that the only person who gets stopped at immigration is me.

I get taken away for questioning, and it is embarrassing. Let us be honest about what exists. My colleagues, including one who is sitting with us in Westminster Hall, have watched it happen.

In her conference speech at the weekend, our First Minister asked: "What kind of country do we want to be?"

She has asked that on many an occasion, and a Member here today asked that. We should continually ask ourselves that question: what do we want our country to look like? What kind of impression do we want people to have of us, whether that is us in the UK or from our perspective in Scotland? I hope that we want to be an outward-looking country. We in Scotland pride ourselves on that.

At our conference at the weekend, we had a fantastic session where we highlighted and profiled our BAME candidates who are standing in the forthcoming council elections. That was not a sideshow or a fringe event; it was main stage, because that is where BAME people should be in public life. I hope and trust that they found it as fulfilling as I did to watch. I am sure those in the audience enjoyed their contribution, as well.

The UK Government have allowed an obsession on immigration, targets and toxic rhetoric to develop. The phrases have become all too common. Those with power have tremendous platforms, and they should use their words to impact positively on people's lives. If they do not do that, they impact negatively. They have to talk about being an inclusive, welcoming society on all the stages and at every opportunity they have.

If they fail to do so, it is the people from BAME communities who face the consequences—our children, their children, refugees and people who are fleeing conflict and war to make this country their home—not them. We are so much better than that.

If we are in a society where people are questioning whether we should be taking in refugees, we have to take a good look at ourselves and wonder, "What kind of platform have we created? What kind of society have we created that people even think they can say such things?"

There is much work to do, and I hope we can work together across the House on that. I ask the Minister to implore his colleagues in Government to use every platform they have to engage positively on the importance of immigration and how people from different backgrounds contribute not only to the economy, but to tradition, culture and all the things that should be making Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom great.

4. The Good Parliament Report

2 November 2016 | Westminster Hall

[Official Hansard source](#)

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Moon, and to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing the debate, and I welcome the report, which is an important addition to an ongoing debate about the representation of women in politics.

Many of us female parliamentarians—including all the women on the SNP Benches in this Chamber today—are new, serving our constituents in Parliament after being elected for the first time in 2015. A number of shocking experiences, some of which were reflected in the report—comments about how we speak, dress and so on—and all of which were entirely unwelcome, made the difficult situation of entering Parliament as a new MP even more difficult to deal with. The report highlights a number of issues.

The question for us is: are we prepared to accept that this is the way it is? That is what we were told when we entered Parliament: this is the way of Westminster. Well, we are not prepared to accept that. We have an opportunity to change and we have to seize that opportunity with both hands.

Women have been fighting for a long time. Mention has been made of women who have achieved great things in Parliament, and yes, they have, but let us never forget that every opportunity that has come to women in every walk of life has come not by accident, but after having had to fight for every single opportunity. We have to continue that fight, and the fight is clearly continuing today in this debate.

Why is it important that Parliament should reflect society? Because we are making decisions about all the people in society every single day of our working lives, whether the members of society are men, women, LGBTI—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex—black, Asian, from a minority ethnic community, or disabled. That is important, and no one knows better about how to make decisions than those people themselves. That is why we have to work hard to increase their representation.

We do so in the knowledge of what we are encouraging people to come into, which is not good enough. We know that we need to make a difference. With the help of colleagues on the SNP Benches, in the Scottish Parliament and in the wider SNP, I am pleased with what we have done to encourage women to come into politics. We have a women's academy in the SNP; we have worked to give training or opportunities to practise debating skills, or have just encouraged women to come forward.

For almost every woman who has come forward in any political party, someone has asked her whether she has ever considered standing for election. It is never something we put ourselves forward for; it is always something that is suggested to us.

As we hold debates in this Chamber or the main House of Commons Chamber, we should remember that people are looking in at us—at how we conduct ourselves, how our colleagues of the opposite sex reflect what Parliament is like, and how they demonstrate respect for us or otherwise, as is sometimes the case. That should always be at the forefront of what we do.

In the short time I have remaining, I will address the issue of quotas, which raises its head so often. If we had a level playing field, we would have a Parliament that represented society. It is a matter of fact that we do not have a level playing field—or is anyone here today brave enough to stand up to intervene on me and say that women are not as good as men in any of the jobs we do throughout Parliament? That is of course not the case.

Absolutely, I will give way.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. Other comments have been made from a sedentary position, but I am happy to accept interventions on that point or any other. It is worthy of note, however, that many men in this Parliament and beyond very much support the work being done on equal representation. That is something that should be commended, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work.

I mentioned the elections and our representation in Parliament. The SNP has gone from having one female Member of Parliament to having 20. At the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections we increased women's representation in the SNP group at Holyrood from the 25% of 2011 to 43% by adopting positive mechanisms to ensure that women are properly reflected in Parliament, which is the right thing to do.

It is also worthy of note that it is a matter of political will. In any political party, candidates go through a vetting process, and men and women all go through the same process, and at the end of the day it is up to the political party to decide whether it wants representation to be equal, because people have already passed the test—the bar of being effective and capable. I accept no argument that selection is on merit, because if it were we would see more women in Parliament than we have today.

Indeed—I am sure many will agree—we women also set ourselves a very high bar to begin with, before we even enter any race or competition, so quality is guaranteed and is never an issue.

We have a lot of work to do, and the fight continues. We all know that nothing will come to us because people gift it to us. Before us, however, is a set of recommendations and, to replicate some of the positive change discussed and certainly seen in my political party—we have also heard from the Labour party over a number of years—we must commit ourselves to implementing them, and now.

5. International Men's Day

17 November 2016 | Commons Chamber

[Official Hansard source](#)

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)

Equality, of course, benefits everyone, so I welcome today's debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on bringing it to the House. I am grateful for the work carried out by many people in my constituency and across the country to address the serious issues of inequality faced by men in many areas of their lives.

Men, of course, are a minority of our population. They live shorter lives, experience high levels of homelessness and suicide, and are less likely to seek help for issues relating to mental health and substance abuse. It is important that we seriously address those issues. For example, it is important to recognise the ways in which patriarchy hurts men. Toxic masculinity hurts men as well as women.

I am grateful for the work carried out by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who is in his place and who spoke to The Huffington Post earlier this month for its #BoysDoCry campaign, examining the way many men find it hard even to talk about crying and the pressures on men not to seem vulnerable.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his timely intervention, especially given today's release of information about that issue. I support that campaign wholeheartedly. Like the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), I was in the Chamber for International Women's Day, just as I am for International Men's Day today—although arguably 365 days of the year are international men's days.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) touched in great detail and with much effect on the issues of suicide, educational attainment and homelessness, as have many other Members from across the Chamber. I seek simply to support all that has been said about that.

In every community in the country, volunteers and organisations are doing a fantastic and valuable job in addressing the issues that affect men. I am talking about organisations such as the Wee County Men's Shed in my constituency. Men's sheds have already been mentioned this afternoon. I know that there are plans to establish a similar group in Kinross.

I have also had the pleasure of supporting the Man Up group in Hawkhill in Alloa, which is made up of local men who meet in a supportive, welcoming and encouraging environment to discuss issues that are important to them.

For equality to be achieved, we all have to be involved in the process of change—women and men alike. Although it is important to address the problems that men face, we must not attack work done to address institutional bias against women. We are in a situation where society has left us with institutional sexism—it is a matter of fact. There are more male Members of this House right now than there have ever been women Members.

We cannot make a better, more equal world by saying that there are no ways in which our institutions hurt men, as that of course is not true, but what hurts men and women alike more than all the issues International Men's Day exists to fight is the insistence that there is no sexism in society and that work to promote equality is an attack by one gender on another.

That is why we need to look at the findings of the Good Parliament report, which addresses the ways that this House can become more inclusive for all.

The Scottish National party Government in Scotland have, since 2014, had a gender-balanced Cabinet and we have taken steps to increase representation, but this is not sexism; this is working on balance, because

women face glass ceilings every day of their lives. Let us just say it how it is: there are some things we face equally as men and women in society, but so often women face additional challenges—misogyny, sexism and threats of sexual violence—and there is no level playing field.

Men are very well represented in this Chamber, and I am very proud of the SNP's women's representation, which increased from one to 20 in last year's elections; we are 36% women but 100% feminists on these Benches.

As women parliamentarians, we often face “mansplaining”—a term I have spoken of before. It was in evidence again in the exchange between the hon. Member for Shipley and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) when it was suggested that she had not read her brief. Any hon. Member will know that my hon. and learned Friend is perhaps the most briefed person who sits in this Chamber and she should be respected for being so.

The volume and variety of farmyard-type noises tends to increase when women are on their feet in this Chamber, as do references to appearances and whether or not we have borne children—these things appear so often in the media.

I welcome the debate today and the thoughtful contributions that have been made so far. Addressing inequality wherever it lies, benefits us all, and we must not be hypocritical in that regard. If we believe in equality, it must be equality for everybody. So I do take issue with the hon. Member for Shipley, who voted consistently against equal gay rights and against laws to promote equality and human rights. I note that today he has watered down his comments from last year somewhat.

He said today, “I want to be very clear that I do not believe there is actually an issue between men and women and that people try to be politically correct.” Last year, he said: “I do not believe there is actually an issue between men and women. Often, problems are stirred up by those who might be described as militant feminists and the politically correct males who sometimes pander to them.”

He added: “One of the most depressing things to happen recently was the introduction of the Select Committee on Women and Equalities.”

What a disservice to this Parliament. As if that was not enough, on Second Reading of the Equality and Diversity (Reform) Bill in 2011, he said: “It is a massive step towards inequality for men, and the poor souls just let the women walk all over them. They do not appear to care what will happen to them.”

At the international conference on men's issues in 2016, he talked about “equality but only when it suits”. In that respect, I say to him, “Right back at you.”

This is an important debate. Respecting rights and equality for all has to be at the top of all that we do in this Chamber.

I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Although I accept some of the points about discrimination against working-class men, I have to say that coming from those on the Tory Benches, the comment absolutely beggars belief. Those of us who actually believe in equality prefer to use the term “positive action”. The reason why we need positive action is that there is not equality in our society. We are 52% women, but we cannot even be properly represented in this Chamber.

I would welcome any efforts that he might wish to make, working with me and with others from the Conservative party and across the Chamber, to achieve gender equality, because gender equality will mean a better society for all.

I welcome another excellent intervention from the youngest male Member of Parliament. Let the youngest male Member of Parliament be an example to us all, to show us that we can indeed fill these Benches with men like my hon. Friend who believe in equality and accept the fact that we do not have a level playing field.

I welcome the fact that many important issues have been discussed in today's debate, but let us not allow that to overshadow or overtake the very real and accepted work that has to be done in this Chamber and across society to achieve equality for all—equality without hypocrisy—because equality is better for society and for everybody.

6. International Women's Day 2016

8 March 2016 | Commons Chamber

[Official Hansard source](#)

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)

I am delighted to speak in this important debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies)—before this debate started, she chaired an excellent cross-party panel with young women about International Women's Day—and, indeed, to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for her excellent contribution to the debate.

There is no doubt that huge progress has been made for women around the world in the 97 years that have passed since Nancy Astor took her seat on the green Benches. Many hon. Members will recall the story of how, when the first female MP tried to reach her usual place in the middle of a row, other MPs moved closer together to leave no space for her to get through, and then laughed and jeered as she forced past them.

The braying some of us still hear in the Chamber seems a tired relic of those distant days—it is time to move on. Perhaps we should move on from the outdated “Hear, hear” to modern applause. That would be a welcome change, but it is probably best described as work in progress.

I should say that while 17 of us on the SNP Benches are women, the 54 of us are 100% feminists. I am very glad that my party has led the way, with Nicola Sturgeon's gender-balanced Cabinet. More than two thirds of our new candidates in the elections to the Scottish Parliament are women.

Absolutely. We stand on the broad shoulders of the giants who came before us and had to deal with so much in this Chamber and beyond. Huge strides have been made to improve the representation of women in Parliament at Westminster and Holyrood, but there is much more to do. I pay particular tribute to the significant work of the Women 50:50 campaign in Scotland.

I agree with my hon. Friend, and until we believe that there is a level playing field in how people are chosen, positive action is welcome.

It is as important to seek to modernise practices and attitudes towards women in public and political life now as it was 100 years ago. We cannot stand still. It is vital for democracy that those who make laws across the world are representative of their countries at large, and that is important in the fight against Daesh and in the debate on our continuing membership of the European Union. Last year, I was privileged to chair an event that aimed to give a platform to the female perspective in Syria.

Women are so often the forgotten victims of conflicts, and the forms of terrorism that we see today greatly impact on them.

Women have been at the forefront of action in Syria to combat child recruitment to armed groups, and they have led and co-ordinated the disarmament of men in public places in some refugee camps so that children do not have to walk around and see armed men. Those initiatives also disguise the names of their community projects to keep their work hidden from Daesh networks. Only by taking such action can we prepare Syrian society for a future beyond the current conflict.

Women have so much to offer, and to date the debate on the European Union seems largely to have been led by men in grey suits jockeying for position. It is time for women's voices to be heard. We must not underestimate the part that the EU has played in protecting and promoting equality and the rights of women across our continent.

I wonder what the world might look like if more women were at the top table, heading campaigns in EU institutions, peace talks and diplomacy. I respectfully suggest that it would be a more equal world, and a better place for us all. The Scottish Government are committed to working towards gender equality, and I

look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), who will speak further on that matter.

Everybody appears to believe in gender equality, but simply believing in it is not enough. The WASPI women, the female workforce and victims of domestic violence are waiting. We must get on with the job.

Here is to those women who championed equality before us, against greater odds and much higher obstacles. To all the girls who will follow us, we are here to support you; to the men who support us, we welcome you. Women and girls hold the key to change and progress, so let us not waste a minute in unlocking these doors and creating opportunities across the world. Equality is a fundamental human right.

Source Note

Primary source: UK Parliament Hansard and the UK Parliament member profile for Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh. Hansard links are provided at the beginning of each speech. The text has been formatted for readability; no substantive rewriting has been intended.

[Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh – Spoken contributions profile](#)