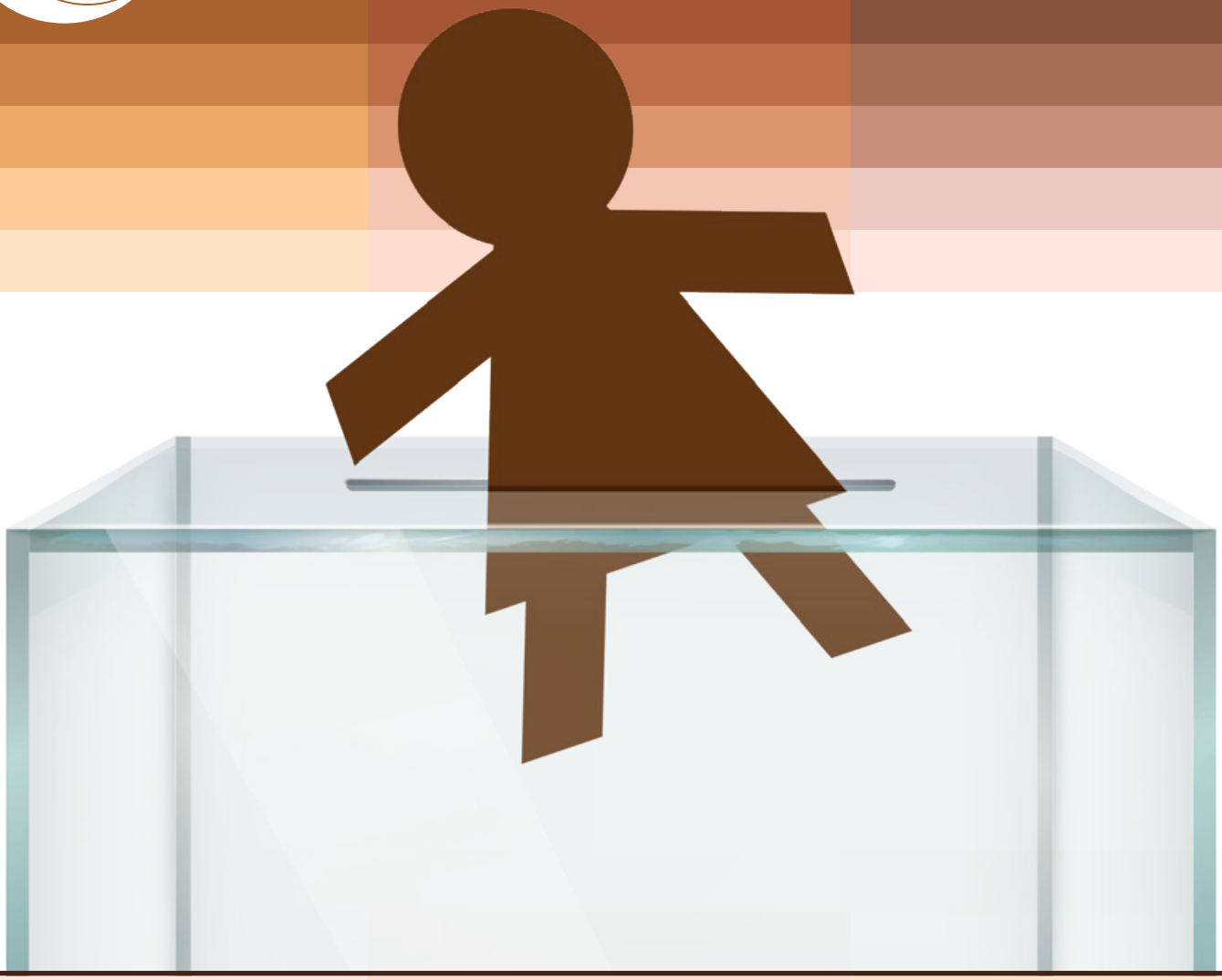
MWNUK
Muslim Women's Network UK



# Increasing the representation of women from racially minoritised communities in UK local politics

Professor Khursheed Wadia
(University of Warwick)
December 2024

# CONTENTS

# FOREWORDS

**In addressing the pressing need for greater equity, this report reveals a significant underrepresentation of racially minoritised women in local politics.**

Although racially minoritised communities constitute 18% of the population, only 3% of local council seats are held by women from these backgrounds - falling far short of the 9% needed for proportional representation. This imbalance calls for immediate action to create a democracy that truly reflects all voices. Their perspectives are vital in every space where decisions are made.

This report highlights the diverse challenges that minoritised women encounter, both within their communities and within political party systems. I commend all the women who have overcome these obstacles and thank those who shared their experiences to help illuminate the barriers that need dismantling. This report, therefore, serves as a roadmap for transformative change. By fostering collaboration across all levels of government, civil society, and community organisations, we can finally dismantle the systemic obstacles that have hindered representation for far too long.

**Baroness Shaista Gohir OBE**
**Chief Executive Officer**
**Muslim Women's Network UK**

**We need more diverse perspectives at the tables of power, in all realms, but particularly in our democracy.**

This report is so timely, providing meaningful insights and actionable recommendations for how we make systematic changes to diversify democracy and target support for racially minoritised women. Pathways into politics are unique, layered and complex - this report's deep listening helps us understand what truly matters. But as this report reveals this isn't just about the route into elected office, once in office there are specific institutional barriers, in part because of the gendered division of councillor duties.

Tangible change that challenges the status quo is critical at a time when we are seeing reversals, locally, in the democratic gains women and minorities have made in elected office. And yet this is where life changing decisions are made. Collective effort - in political parties, within institutions, and through processes - can drive the reform that will mean democracy works as it should, for all those it should.

**Hannah Stevens**
**Chief Executive Officer**
**Elect Her**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A sincere thank you is extended first and foremost to the participants in this project who gave so generously of their time, to share their personal experiences and understandings of the barriers facing racially minoritised women who engage in local electoral politics in the UK. Thank you also to Professor Khursheed Wadia of University of Warwick for conducting the research and writing the report.

We are also very grateful to the trustees and staff of Muslim Women's Network UK. Particular thanks go to Baroness Shaista Gohir OBE for her invaluable input in shaping the contours of this research, for sharing contacts during the process of recruiting participants, feedback and edits on the report's content and her all-round passion and support for the project. A special thank you is also due to Rizwana Bi for helping with the participant recruitment part of the research, and to Faeeza Vaid for her interest and care.

We would also like to also thank our Equal Power project partners who shared our request to find women to participate in the research: Citizens UK, Centenary Action Group, Elect Her and 50:50 Parliament.

Finally, this research was made possible through funding provided by Comic Relief and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Thank you to both funders for your backing of this important research.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

### Why this research?

This research project 'Increasing the representation of women from racially minoritised communities in UK local politics' explores the barriers which keep minoritised women out of electoral politics at local level or prevent them from staying in politics once elected.

While the number of women councillors has steadily increased in the UK since 2006 (LGA 2022: 21), the same cannot be said for councillors from racially minoritised communities. Although the representation of minoritised councillors has increased to reach 8.3 per cent in 2022, it is far from proportionate given that racially minoritised people make up 18.3 per cent of the general population (ONS 2022). Furthermore, a study of UK ethnic minority councillors undertaken by Sobolewska and Begum at the University of Manchester, indicates that women constitute 37 per cent of racially minoritised councillors (2020: 6). From this data it can be concluded that racially minoritised women account for a mere three per cent of all UK councillors and that an immense increase of 200 per cent in their numbers is required for them to reflect the proportion of minoritised women in the UK population.

### Objectives of Research

The research aims to inform political parties and leaders, relevant statutory agencies and civil society organisations about how minoritised women may be supported to achieve greater representation and voice in local government and political decision making. To achieve these aims, we ask a number of questions:

- What motivates women from racially minoritised communities to run for local elections?
- What barriers do they face in party selection processes and as incumbent councillors?
- How might barriers be eliminated in order to increase the representation of minoritised women in local government?

### Terminology

In this report the term racially minoritised women, communities and councillors refers to people whose family origins normally lie in Global South countries and whose families settled in the UK as a result of post-Second World War labour immigration processes; more recent wars in the Middle East and Africa; and persecution by authoritarian regimes in the late 20th Century and early part of the 21st Century. We use the term local politics and municipal politics interchangeably to distinguish it from political action and activity that occurs at national and regional level. We also use local government, local councils and town halls to refer to the structures in which elected local or municipal representatives work.

# Methodology

## Research Approach

A mixed methods approach was adopted for this research, including archival research, an online survey questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews:

- A search of empirical and theoretical literature on the experiences of women councillors in the UK was undertaken to identify and understand the types of barriers women face in attaining local councillorships and remaining in office. This includes scholarly work, research reports published by relevant civil society organisations, government and intergovernmental agencies, independent think tanks and parties, and press reports.
- An online survey (using Survey Monkey) was sent to 125 aspiring, incumbent and former local councillors to gather feedback on their experiences. However, due to very limited responses and concerns over quality of responses, this data was only used to extract relevant quotations.
- Twenty-seven in-depth interviews (see participant profiles) were carried out among racially minoritised women - incumbent, aspiring and former local councillors - to understand their experiences of party selection and incumbency.
- The gathered data was analysed using qualitative methods to identify and understand the barriers faced in selection processes and in office; and the impacts of such barriers on the under-representation of racially minoritised women.

## Profile of participants

A full profile of the 27 participants is available in the main report. The participants were from a range of ethnic, religious and political party backgrounds as follows:

**Ethnicity / Race**

Asian (59%),
Black (26%),
Other Asian (4%),
Middle Eastern (7%)
Chinese (4%)

**Religion**

Christianity (22%),
Islam (56%),
Hinduism (4%),
Sikhism (11%)
Agnostic / no faith (7%)

**Age**

30-39 (26%),
40-49 (37%),
50-59 (26%)
60-69 (11%)

**Education level**

GSCE / equivalent (11%),
A Levels / diploma (15%),
First degree (26%)
Postgraduate degree (48%)

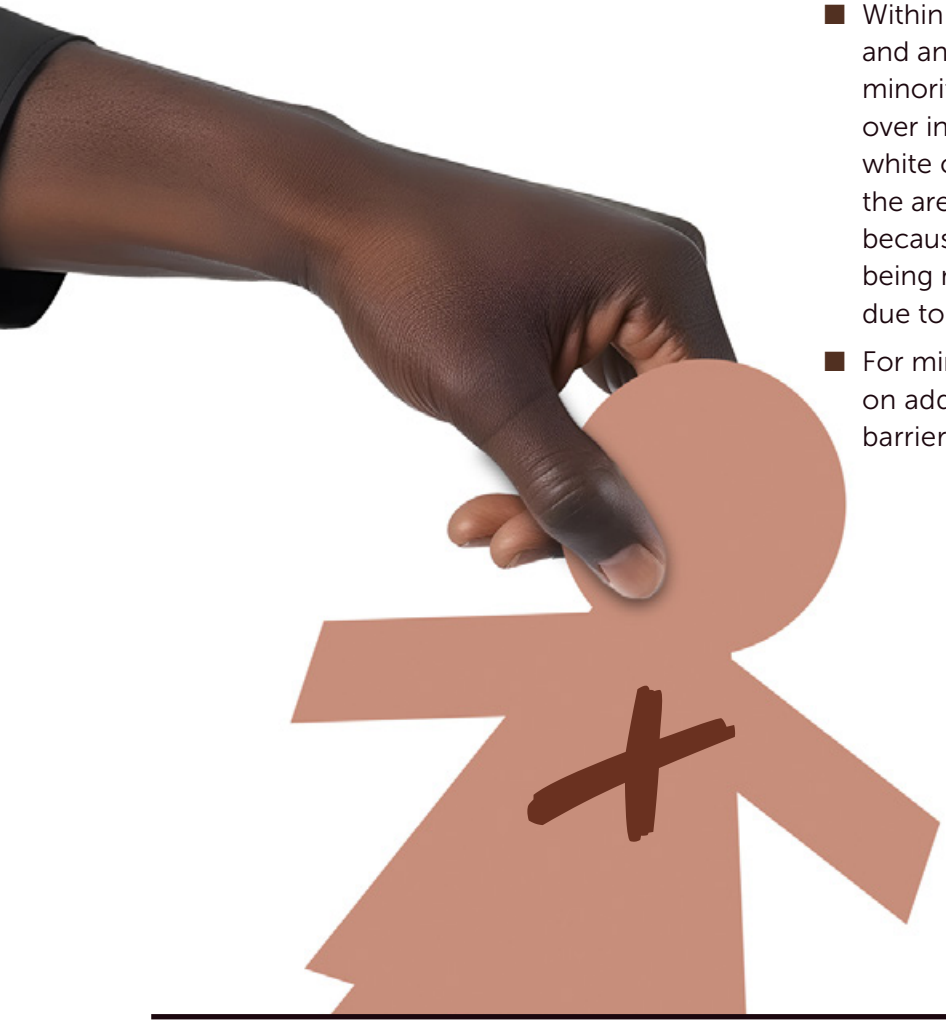
**Political party**

Conservative (22%),
Green Party (4%),
Labour (52%),
Liberal Democrat (11%),
Scottish Labour (4%)
SNP (7%)

# Key findings

## Barriers in selection processes

- While political party leaderships and strategists have recognised the importance of increasing women's representation in UK elected assemblies, including that of minoritised women, that recognition has not always successfully translated to local party level.
- Where local parties yield to pressures from national party leaderships, minoritised women are too often selected as paper candidates for unwinnable seats and generally serve long political apprenticeships before being considered for marginal or winnable seats.
- The recruitment of potential women candidates is ad hoc, so that minoritised women are recruited through personal contacts, or chance conversations with party activists or officials or, more recently, via contacts in party-affiliated organisations or organisations supporting the increased representation of women in elected assemblies. Very few apply for selection as a result of having served lengthily as a party activist.
- The presence of male kinship or biradari networks in Muslim communities acts as a barrier to the selection of Muslim women.
- Within selection processes, gendered and anti-Muslim racism results either in minoritised women being openly passed over in favour of less suitable or deserving white candidates parachuted from outside the area; or in women being Othered because of their race and/or religion and being made to feel like outsiders tolerated due to diversity imperatives.
- For minoritised women facing discrimination on additional grounds (e.g. disability), the barriers are multiplied.



## Barriers in elected office

- The complexity of the councillor role has led to an unacknowledged gendered division of councillor duties and associated gendered pressures so that minoritised women councillors in particular carry a burden of intensive public-facing responsibilities (case work for constituents included), as opposed to being involved in the hard business of governance, and strategic management of local services, taxation and allocation of resources.
- The traditional conception of the councillor role as voluntary means that it does not offer a basic salary with associated entitlements (pension, maternity leave etc.), but instead pays an allowance. The risk of being deselected or not elected at the end of a councillorship term makes the role all the more precarious. This precarity places an intense burden on minoritised women councillors from disadvantaged communities with family and caring responsibilities. It demands that they choose between continuing as a councillor or leaving to earn a proper salary or wage to maintain themselves and their family.
- Barriers arising from a hostile masculine political culture and environment (underpropped by gendered, racist and anti-Muslim attitudes) can be conceptualised in terms of violence against women in politics (VAWP). VAWP (including physical, psychological, sexual, economic and semiotic violence) operates in two ways against minoritised women councillors:
  - It may be used calculatingly and cumulatively to target women deemed disruptive.
  - It may be used routinely, in less intense ways to undermine women.
- Older white (mainly) male councillors, with support from minoritised male councillors in local authorities with large minoritised populations, are key promoters of the worldview that minoritised women are not credible players in local politics.

# Recommendations

## Expanding available data on women's representation in UK local councils

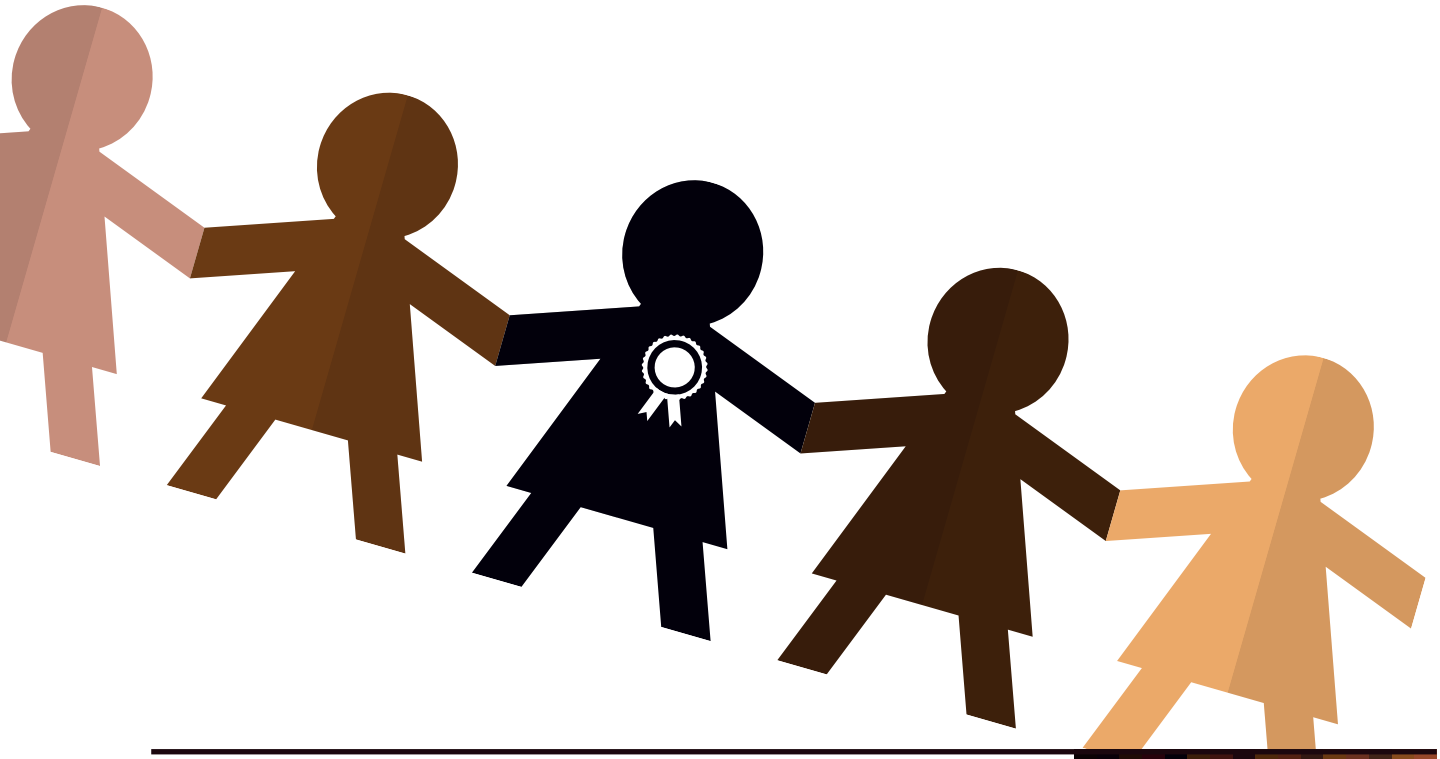
### Recommendation 1

Legally oblige the LGA, Welsh Local Government Association, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities/Improvement Service and Northern Ireland Local Government Association, through an amendment of Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, to undertake census-type audits of local authority councillors in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively so that a comprehensive UK picture is available to interested stakeholders. These audits must adopt an intersectional approach to data disaggregation, supported by appropriate data collection tools.

## Providing data on party memberships, applications for candidate selection, candidates and office holders

### Recommendation 2

Legally oblige political parties (through an amendment of Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010) to provide annual data on party membership, applicants for candidate selection, selected candidates and holders of elected office, disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and other protected characteristics.



# Political recruitment and identification of potential local candidates

## Recommendation 3

Outreach work should be considered an important tool in building a pipeline of talent from which potential candidates may be selected. Political parties should develop outreach work in collaboration with their women's sections and organisations such as Elect Her, Centenary Action Group etc. which have built up a track record in successfully recruiting and supporting minoritised women on their journey to councillorship. Outreach programmes should target for example, civil society organisations supporting racially minoritised women, schools, university women's groups, Black and women's trade union sections, places of worship which welcome women congregations. Outreach programmes should be supported by funds and endorsement of party leaders at national level.

# Respecting selection rules

## Recommendation 4

Initial and regular refresher training on fair and equitable interview processes (including application of the 2010 Equality Act) should be mandatory for all selection panel members.

## Recommendation 5

Selection candidates should hold party membership for the length of time stipulated in party rules, barring exemption in exceptional cases which should be scrutinised by regional officials.

## Recommendation 6

Member selection meeting attendance should be checked to ensure that only party members resident in the ward concerned are present and voting for selected candidates.

## Recommendation 7

Regional party officials should ensure that party selection rules are respected by selection candidates, interview panel members and those attending member selection meetings.

# Breaking down structural-institutional barriers to the councillor role

## Recommendation 8

Councillor allowances should be replaced by a formal annual salary (as in the case of MPs) and should be set and annually reviewed by an independent local government standing authority through legislation. Such a body could also review councillors' special responsibility allowances.

## Recommendation 9

The question of paid maternity leave should not be left at the discretion of individual councils but should be made mandatory through measures taken by the UK and devolved governments.

## Recommendation 10

Access to a pension scheme (such as the local government one which existed between 2001 and 2014) should be reconsidered by the UK and devolved governments and made available to councillors.

## Recommendation 11

In order to break down the gendered division of duties within local councils, council leaders should be encouraged through annual target-setting, to involve more minoritised women into chairing council committees, and build their skills and knowledge to the level required for cabinet posts. Target-setting models should be provided by political parties at national level while monitoring should be delegated to political parties at regional level.

## Recommendation 12

To avoid politically motivated and subjective deselection decisions, every councillor reaching the end of their term should undergo an evaluation process, created by the national party in consultation with councillors. Councillors deemed to have under-performed, should be given the opportunity to present mitigating circumstances and an improvement plan.

# Protecting women from gendered and anti-Muslim racism and discrimination based on protected characteristics

## Recommendation 13

Every UK local authority should be legally required to adopt a code of conduct with clear reference to the Equality Act 2010 and clear definitions of (sexist and racist) bullying, harassment and misconduct. Council codes of conduct should also refer to online bullying and harassment.

## Recommendation 14

The adoption of such a code of conduct should be paired with a structure responsible for monitoring and upholding standards of decent behaviour in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. Such a structure would be composed of councillors in proportionate numbers to their party's representation in the council and should be given powers to investigate complaints and apply appropriate sanctions. The aforesaid measures would require a change in legislation which is in the remit of UK government.

## Recommendation 15

Political parties should establish transparent and accessible complaints systems including an offline structure to receive complaints. The ultimate sanction of deselection should be imposed on any councillor found guilty of sexist and racist behaviour and discrimination, following an investigation in the council.

# FULL REPORT

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Overview

This research project *'Increasing the representation of women from racially minoritised communities in UK local politics'* explores the barriers which keep minoritised women out of electoral politics at local level or prevent them from staying in politics once elected.

The project was commissioned by Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) under the umbrella campaign 'Equal Power' organised by a coalition of national women's organisations (see **https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/fawcett-leads-ground-breaking-campaign-to-transform-womens-representation**). The campaign ran over three years with the aim of encouraging more women to stand for political office and take on civic roles. As a coalition partner, MWNUK's brief was to focus on the under-representation in public life of women from racially minoritised communities and to encourage political participation in elected assemblies, particularly at local level. During the campaign's first two years, MWNUK organised workshops designed to provide minoritised women with the knowledge and skills required to become involved in political and civic life, and particularly in electoral politics (see **https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/training-workshops**). Year three was devoted to an in-depth exploration of the barriers keeping minoritised women out of electoral politics at local level in order to reach an understanding of how such barriers may be removed.

This focus on the specific barriers facing minoritised women in local electoral politics was also a way of developing the investigation MWNUK had initiated in 2016, of Muslim women confronting patriarchal resistance within their communities when wanting to stand for local elections (MWNUK 2016). MWNUK had gathered testimonies from several Muslim women and had written letters of complaint to the then Labour and Conservative party leaderships which were picked up and reported by BBC's Newsnight programme (2016).

## 1.2 Terminology

We are aware that language around race is contentious and continually evolving and that the use of terms and acronyms changes depending on context. We also recognise the potential negative consequences of using any umbrella-type term which refers to population groups whose life experiences are differently shaped by social, economic and political structures and processes. In this report the term racially minoritised women, communities and councillors refers to people whose family origins normally lie in Global South countries and whose families settled in the UK as a result of post-Second World War labour immigration processes; more recent wars in the Middle East and Africa; and persecution by authoritarian regimes in the late 20th Century and early part of the 21st Century.

The use of this term is preferred for two main reasons: first, it acknowledges that people are actively minoritised by others through structures and processes of power and domination; second, it recognises the reality of people being marked out as minorities (and hence not considered the norm) whereas they constitute majorities globally. That is not to deny the limitations of this term; for instance, that not everyone is minoritised in the same way. Hence in using this term we maintain an awareness that racially minoritised people will not have the same experiences. Alternative terms (people / women / communities of colour, BAME, ethnic minorities etc.) are used when referring to work in which such terms arise or when citing participants in this project. We also use the term minority women / minoritised women councillors as a shorthand.

Another area in which terminology is worth an explanation is that of local politics. We use the term local politics and municipal politics interchangeably to distinguish it from political action and activity that occurs at national and regional level. We also use local government, local councils and town halls to refer to the structures in which elected local or municipal representatives work. Local government or local councils are composed of an elected assembly in which all councillors sit; and the executive or cabinet which is constituted by the party with an absolute majority of council seats unless a party coalition agreement emerges due to local elections resulting in a hung council.

## 1.3 Research aims, questions and objectives

### Aim

The main aim of this research is to understand the barriers to representation of minoritised women in local politics and government. Through interviews, the research gathers the experiences of incumbent, aspiring and former women local councillors.

The research also aims to inform political parties and leaders, relevant statutory agencies and civil society organisations about how minoritised women may be supported to achieve greater representation and voice in local government and political decision making.

### Questions

To achieve the above aims, the following questions are posed:

**What motivates women from racially minoritised communities to run for local elections?**

**What barriers do minoritised women face in local party selection processes and in elected office?**

**How do minoritised women surmount the barriers encountered, if at all?**

**What can be done to eliminate barriers and increase the representation of minoritised women in local politics and government**

## Objectives

The research objectives were to undertake the following:

- A search and selected review of empirical and theoretical literature on the experiences of women councillors in the UK, in order to identify and understand the types of barriers women face in attaining local councillorships and remaining in office. The literature would include scholarly work and research reports published by relevant civil society organisations, government and intergovernmental agencies, independent think tanks and parties.
- A survey and in-depth interviews among racially minoritised women - incumbent, aspiring and former local councillors - to understand their experiences of party selection and incumbency.
- An analysis of the data gathered to identify and understand the barriers faced during the journey to councillorship and while in office; and the impacts of such barriers on the under-representation of racially minoritised women.
- The writing of a report which
  - provides relevant stakeholders (e.g. political parties, civil society organisations interested in increasing the representation of marginalised groups) with an understanding of the specific barriers women from racially minoritised communities face in local politics and how these impact minoritised women's representation.
  - informs relevant stakeholders about policy and practice designed to boost the representation of minoritised women in local politics and government.

## 1.4 Why this research?

While research on women's political participation and representation at national level in the UK has flourished in the 2000s, similar attention has not been afforded to the local level, with local government being seen somehow as the poor cousin of Westminster politics. And yet what happens at local government level has a profound impact on people's day-to-day living as billions of pounds are spent on key services such as education, social care, transport, waste and recycling among others.[1] Political decisions which determine the level and efficiency of service provision should therefore be made by representatives drawn from all communities (and all sections of any particular community) residing within a local authority area. It is also crucial that this political representation is studied, understood and critiqued in a bid to increase democracy.

In the 2000s, a number of significant studies on women in local government have asked why more women do not get selected and elected (Boschel and Boschel 2008; Borisyuk et al 2007; Bazeley et al 2017; Institute for Policy Research 2018); or what explains the gender balance of local councils in a specific UK region (Farrell and Titcombe 2016; Siebert 2009); or why more women councillors do not become council leaders and MPs (Allen 2013); or why they step down within a relatively short time (Allen 2012).

1. In England alone, the net expenditure (as at 22 June 2023) on services budgeted by local authorities was set to be £117.6 billion in 2023-24 (DLUHC 2023).

A few studies examining the challenges faced by all local councillors incorporate a focus on gender and women, such as those by the EHRC on diversity and barriers to participation (2019); Thrasher et al (2015) on the impact of place on local councillors; Rallings et al (2010) on party modernisation and its impact on the ethnic and gender make up of local councillors; and Bochel and Bochel (2000) on the careers of councillors.

None of the above studies bar one (Bazeley et al 2017) talk about gender and race, or gender and religion (where religion can be a proxy for race). The latter, a significant study on women in local government, commissioned by the Fawcett Society devotes some discussion to the under-representation of racially minoritised women.

Adding to the aforementioned works, a couple of studies take an intersectional approach in their presentation of under-represented groups in local government: that by Begum and Sobolewska (2024) which extensively focuses on the representation in local government of women from racially minoritised communities[2]; and Takhar's study (2014), based on her work as a member of the Black and Minority Ethnic Women Taskforce launched in 2008 by the then Labour government. The latter focuses on the under-representation of South Asian women in UK local government. The majority of studies on minoritised representation in local government, for example that by Purdam (2008) on the political identities of Muslim councillors, do not address the participation and representation of women.

Hence, what a survey of the literature, over the past 24 years, on local political engagement and representation shows is that racially minoritised women have largely fallen through the gap between white women and minoritised men. The majority of studies on political engagement and representation at local level are based on the implicit presumption that women councillors are white and that councillors from minoritised communities are men. The motivation for and uniqueness of this study is that it lifts minoritised women out of that gap to reveal the specific barriers and challenges they face in the journey to becoming a councillor and staying in office. It also allows the women to speak directly to the reader by focusing on their voices. The importance of doing so cannot be stressed enough; minoritised women cannot continue to be overlooked as potential political representatives, nor can they be prevented from shaping local public policy agendas by bringing their singular local knowledge, standpoints and solutions to the table.

Women from racially minoritised communities in the UK will come up against some of the same structural, institutional and socio-cultural barriers as their white British counterparts. For example, women's position and role within the patriarchal family, as a support to the traditional bread-winning man, obliges them to put the care of home, children and elderly dependents before any social, political and economic activity outside the family. Among some racially minoritised communities struggling to find a place in a hostile environment, the enduring observance of traditional socio-cultural norms can mean that women are more strongly obligated to fulfil expected gender roles and hence face even more insurmountable hurdles in terms of building a public life.

There are also systemic barriers at play. For instance, it is well-evidenced that the first-past-the post (FPTP) electoral system (which operates for UK general and local elections) will lead parties to favour publicly well-known candidates, including incumbent office holders who more often tend to be white men, then white women, then minoritised men and lastly minoritised women. In the FPTP system women candidates, those from other marginalised groups and small parties are often seen as weak candidates, unlikely to win seats in what boils down to a two-horse race. Conversely, candidates from marginalised groups and smaller parties fare better in systems based on proportionality (Childs 2008; Darcy et al 1987; Lovenduski and Norris 1993).

2. **This study was published just as this report was about to be submitted and therefore has not been read and reviewed with the attention it deserves.**

Other barriers include access to kinship and professional networks which are most commonly male dominated. Aspiring and incumbent male councillors will have ample opportunity to call on (often influential) friends, colleagues, family to build support groups at local level which can provide them with invaluable resources of material and human character and which underpin the most successful politicians' journeys at local level. In minoritised communities, the embeddedness of men's social, economic and political activity is particularly deep and gives rise to 'community leaders' and candidates who are able to rely on male relatives, friends, employees, customers, business and religious associates when bidding for political office. On the other hand, women whose lives are more tied to the domestic sphere will lack opportunities to do the same.

Although 72.3 per cent of women in the UK are in employment (Buchanan, Pratt and Francis-Devine 2023:4), it is still the case that for many, employment will create a double burden of paid and unpaid labour rather than a platform for building networks. For women from racially minoritised communities, the picture is worse, with 31.6 per cent not looking for work mostly due to family and domestic obligations. While 62.3 per cent are in employment or looking for work, the fact remains that minoritised women are more likely to be unemployed than any other group (Buchanan et al 2023: 16-17). Minoritised women are therefore in the least favourable position to be able to network and accumulate the resources required for successful political candidacies and hence ambitions are dampened.

Finally, among barriers which stop women from entering electoral politics is the knowledge or experience of violence encountered in this arena, whether physical, psychological or sexual. While such types of violence against women in politics is experienced across the board, evidence from the UK shows that women from minoritised communities are more intensely subjected to such violence through social media in particular. For example, Amnesty International's Troll Patrol study found that racially minoritised women were 34 per cent more likely than white women to be abused while Black women were 84 per cent more likely than white women to be mentioned in abusive or problematic Tweets (Amnesty International 2017); this finding was further illustrated by the example of Diane Abbott who received almost half (45.14 per cent) of all abusive Tweets against women MPs in the run up to the June 2017 General Election (Dhrodia 2017).

What makes this study necessary and of interest at this juncture is not only exploring the experiences of women from minoritised communities, in local politics, and ascertaining the extent to which they are impacted more intensely by some of the abovementioned barriers (due to the intersecting disadvantages they face on grounds of gender, race and faith), but also to consider certain other modifying factors which hold the possibility of bringing more women from minoritised communities into local politics. For instance, increasing numbers of women from minoritised communities are now born or brought up from a young age in the UK. Unlike the women of their parents' and grandparents' generations, these women have roots in their local neighbourhood and community, complemented by a knowledge of the latter; hence they have the capacity to develop greater confidence to critique and challenge existing local political masculine cultures and leaders responsible for what they may see as poor decisions which fail to serve the needs of their community. Second, they are also more likely to be in employment or doing voluntary public service than their mothers and grandmothers and therefore should more easily be able to build support networks and resources.

At the same time as racially minoritised women have become aware of their capacity to voice the concerns of their community, political parties are under increasing pressure to diversify political candidacies and particularly so at local level. The coincidence of all these factors provides an ideal moment for this study.

# 1.5 Local government in the UK

Local government in the UK is complex in structure and varies between areas. In England local authorities largely conform to the following types:[3]

## Two-tier model

This model encompasses an upper-tier county council and a number of lower-tier district councils (sometimes referred to as boroughs or city councils) where service provision is shared between the two tiers. This model is found in most areas of England and in this set up, county councils take responsibility for large infrastructure services such as transport, waste disposal, education and social care, while district councils provide local services such as recycling and refuse collection, the running of leisure facilities or council tax collections.

There are 21 English county councils, e.g. Warwickshire or Leicestershire; and 164 district councils, e.g. Cambridge City Council or Burnley Borough Council (LGiU 2024).

## Single-tier model

This model of local government structure is responsible for all local services, and includes (LGiU 2024):

- **63** unitary authorities (e.g. Leicester City Council or Buckinghamshire Council)
- **36** metropolitan districts (such as Birmingham or Manchester)
- **32** London boroughs
- **2** unique authorities, namely the City of London and the Isles of Scilly

In the devolved nations of the UK all local authorities are unitary in structure, with 32 in Scotland, 22 in Wales and 11 in Northern Ireland. The development of local social, economic and cultural policy and political decision-making lie with elected local councillors who represent an electoral unit or ward within a local council area. There are estimated to be just under 20,000 locally electable council seats in the UK (Ministry of Housing, Local and Community n.d.)[4] although not all are occupied at all times.

Although the two-tier model has been dominant in most areas of England, successive governments since the 1970s have sided with proponents of unitarisation in England and the trend has accelerated since the mid 1990s. Supporters of unitarisation have argued that 'bigger is better', that it is more efficient to have services operated by a single authority and that the inevitably reduced number of elected representatives results in substantial financial savings and less bureaucracy.

However, critics point out that as local authorities become unitary, the control of services by a single entity damages local service provision and has a deleterious effect on democracy, as ambitious elected or aspiring councillors will jostle aggressively for ever decreasing numbers of seats.

3. Not included in this simplified local government model are town and parish councils (or community councils in Wales and Scotland) which may be considered a third tier of local government but which cover the smallest of towns, villages and neighbourhoods and are responsible for micro- issues such as litter prevention. Also left out are combined regional authorities (introduced in 2009) covering large conurbations and headed by elected mayors. These groupings of local authorities receive their powers and funding directly from central government and are tasked with improving a region's economy and other resources. It should be noted that the Greater London Assembly is a unique entity and not a combined authority.
4. There are 17001 council seats in England (LGA 2022: 1), 1234 in Wales (BBC News 2022), 1277 in Scotland (Scottish Government n.d.) and 462 in Northern Ireland (Electoral Commission 2023).

In such a scenario, despite calls for increasing diversity in representation, those who are under-represented in the first place (women, racialised minorities and so on) will face ever-growing unfair competition against established and powerful local elites and will continue to lose out of gaining a voice in local politics. Thus, the structures of local government can have a bearing on political processes including local elections and candidate selection and this point is worth bearing in mind when considering factors playing against the participation of minoritised women in local politics and government. It is also worth mentioning that almost all the participants in this research - incumbent, aspiring and former councillors - are located in unitary local authority areas in England, Wales and Scotland. Many have faced stiff, sometimes destructive, competition in seeking party selection, election and voter commitment.

## 1.6 Counting women councillors

Despite the fact that local politics and assemblies are in principle more geographically accessible than regional or national level parliaments, and that local government policies impact people's daily life more directly, very few countries have achieved over 45 per cent representation of women in local assemblies (Berevoescu and Ballington 2021: 6). In a UN league table of gender balance in local assembles, the UK stands 32nd out of the 133 countries for which data is available, with women holding 34.25 per cent of elected seats. More recent data from the *National census of local authority councillors* undertaken by the Local Government Association, but only in England (LGA 2022: 13) suggests a figure of 39.1 per cent but the LGA acknowledges that the figure may be lower and notes that data collection methods and timing, and councillor response rates inevitably lead to variations.[5]

While the number of women councillors has steadily increased in the UK since 2006 (LGA 2022: 21), the same cannot be said for councillors from racially minoritised communities. The LGA census figures between 2006 and 2022 show that councillors in the UK are overwhelmingly white and that the representation of the latter decreased by only a few percentage points between 2006 (95.9 per cent) and 2022 (91.7 per cent) (LGA 2022: 22) which meant, conversely, that although the representation of minoritised councillors increased during the same period to reach 8.3 per cent in 2022, it is far from proportionate with the part of racially minoritised people (18.3 per cent) in the general population (ONS 2022). As the LGA does not carry out an intersectional analysis of their data, it is not possible to ascertain the proportion of minoritised women councillors in England. However, intersectional data about the number of UK councillors, their socio-demographic characteristics, political party, leadership positions occupied and so on would enhance our understanding of factors which discourage or prevent under-represented groups from engaging at various stages of the electoral cycle. This information would also support the development of policies to address the under-representation of racially minoritised women.

However, a study of UK ethnic minority councillors undertaken by Sobolewska and Begum at the University of Manchester, indicates that women constitute 37 per cent of racially minoritised councillors (2020: 6), who in turn comprise only eight per cent of all UK councillors. Using the figures provided by Sobolewska and Begum would mean that racially minoritised women account for a mere three per cent of all UK councillors and that an immense increase of 200 per cent in their numbers is required for them to reflect the proportion of minoritised women in the UK population.

5. For example, Oscar (public sector live data intelligence agency) puts the 2022 figure at 36.18 per cent for England and Wales only – see (Oscar 2022)

The same report also points out variations in the gender breakdown of minoritised councillors among different minority populations, so that among South Asian councillors, the vast majority are men, while women are far better represented than men among Black (African and African Caribbean) councillors.

## 1.7 Why do we need more racially minoritised women councillors?

Diversity has been on the political agenda for over 15 years. During this time, much public debate and discussion about whether increased diversity in public life can promote equality in policy and practice has led to agreement among political decision makers, leaders and civil society organisations that indeed it can. Within the sphere of political representation numerous public awareness programmes and political candidate recruitment campaigns have promoted diversity in political institutions as a driver for equal or proportionate representation on grounds of gender, race, faith, class, age, sexuality, ability. The case for increased diversity, and more specifically increased gender representation in political life has been made[6] on three counts.

First, in terms of equality being a socially just position, it is argued that descriptively our elected representatives should reflect the society they are part of and moreover, that as women make up half the population, elected bodies should achieve gender parity and that male majorities should not be able to make decisions disproportionately implicating women. In other words, the (ideally numerically equal) presence of women in elected assemblies is a democratic good in itself (Hassim 2006). It is also argued that women's inclusion in political decision making is a human right as enshrined in a number of UN conventions (Bunch 1990).

Second, the case for having more women - particularly racially minoritised women and other marginalised identities - in political decision making follows arguments which have been accepted in the employment sector for over a longer period; that diversity unlocks productivity, innovation, creativity and growth. The USA's largest annual study of women in 333 corporate firms found that 'women of color are more ambitious despite getting less support' and that 'companies that have a better representation of women, especially women of color, are going further' (Lean In and McKinsey 2022: 21, 44). Those arguing for greater diversity of elected representatives similarly argue that councillors with intersecting marginalised identities are more likely to critique established thinking and practices and call for alternatives which would not otherwise get onto the political agenda, and which would more likely result in political decisions which take account of a wider constituency.

Finally, increasing diversity is seen as a way of enhancing democracy. In other words, the more elected representatives reflect the social make up of their constituents, the more they are able to connect with different groups of people, voice their concerns and acquire legitimacy; hence the more they contribute to democratic local government. Of course, diversity is not seen as a fix by all and it is the case that the practice of diversity doesn't always or even often offer the empowering possibilities with which it is linked.

6. **Most notably the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the UN in 1979, whose Article 7 calls on state parties to eliminate discrimination against women so that they may hold public office and participate in policy making and implementation, among other types of participation.**

# 2 Research Design and Methodology

## 2.1 Research setting and limitations

As there is no existing dataset comparable to that which has been gathered here, from the very early stages of project design, it was planned that the research field should include the UK as a whole and that data would be gathered from participants in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The field of research was then narrowed down to focus on those local authorities with the most diverse populations in which minoritised women were most likely to stand and become councillors or consider doing so. Hence the data collected covers the experiences of minoritised women councillors from a number of London boroughs, Birmingham, Leicester, Blackburn, Coventry, Cardiff, Glasgow and Aberdeen. These were also places where we had contacts who could help recruit potential interviewees.

Northern Ireland does not feature in the field of research. A review in autumn 2022 of councillors in Northern Ireland's 11 councils (encompassing 80 district electoral areas) revealed not a single councillor from racially minoritised communities. The local elections of May 2023 did herald a historic win for SDLP candidate Lilian Seenoi-Barr elected as the first minority councillor in Northern Ireland to represent the Foyleside district electoral area of Derry and Strabane City Council (McClements 2023). Although the Northern Ireland context is unique and a single woman's political journey cannot be generalizable, it would have been instructive to hear Councillor Seenoi-Barr's story of selection, election and councillorship in a place dominated historically by sectarian and ethno-nationalist conflict and which has only a small population of racially minoritised people those whose family origins are in the Global South.[7] However, it was not possible to secure an interview with Councillor Seenoi-Barr.

7. For example, Oscar (public sector live data intelligence agency) puts the 2022 figure at 36.18 per cent for England and Wales only – see (Oscar 2022)

# 2.2 Data collection

## Documentary sources

The documentary research, based on an initial scoping review to ascertain existing data sources, focused on identifying relatively recent empirical and theoretical studies of women's participation in local politics (in the UK and elsewhere to enable useful comparisons). The most frequently covered topics within this literature included the descriptive representation (counting) of women in local politics; barriers to their participation and how such barriers impact on the participation and representation of women; how barriers are overcome; ways in which to women's participation may be increased.

Data sources reviewed included scholarly journals (mainly covering UK politics, women and politics, race and ethnicity, urban spaces), monographs and edited collections, research reports and other grey literature published by civil society organisations, government departments, political parties and think tanks. Among the grey literature, most was published by government agencies (House of Commons Library, Government departments, the Local Government Association, Census agencies) and civil society organisations (Fawcett Society, Elect Her, Amnesty International, Operation Black Vote, Muslim Women's Network UK, Centenary Action Group among others). The grey literature reviewed provided political and social context in addition to material on the relevant themes. Sources were identified through the use of appropriate combined key terms entered into Google and Google Scholar and several more specialist databases such as the Applied Social Sciences Index, Worldwide Political Sciences Abstracts IPU's Women in Politics Bibliographic Database, Oscar's Local Government Database among others. In addition, quality press sources (The Guardian, The Irish Times, The Independent, The Times) and local press also provided important contextual information.

## Online questionnaire

An online survey was included in the fieldwork to gather views from aspiring, incumbent and former local councillors. Survey Monkey was the platform of choice and the target number of participants was 125. The survey had three purposes. The first was to capture the experiences of a large enough group to gain indicators of the barriers faced by women in local politics. Its second purpose was to generate reliable enough rather than statistically valid results to allow triangulation with interviews and data gathered from archival research. Finally, it was intended that the survey should provide a pool of respondents from which potential interviewees could be drawn. The survey questionnaire was publicised and distributed widely via MWNUK's networks and partners in the Equal Power project. It was also sent to individual local councillors known to us who circulated them via their party and local government networks.

Despite the wide circulation and incentives offered,[8] it proved difficult to reach the target number and only 50 questionnaires were submitted. Of these a significant number presented as highly suspect and hence unreliable, displaying far too many similarities (in responses and email addresses provided) between apparently different respondents; eliciting unlikely answers; or including Chinese script in a number of responses.[9]

8. An incentive was offered given that the lengthy questionnaire (36 MCQs with text box comment option for 27 questions) would take at least 15 minutes to complete. The opportunity to be entered into a prize draw and win one of three £100 vouchers was offered.
9. For example, an unlikely number of respondents (eight) claimed membership of the Women's Equality Party (WEP); of these 5 stated they were sitting councillors in various parts of the UK, two were apparently aspiring councillors while one said they were a former councillor. We know that a) the WEP has fielded very few local election candidates in the past (see WEP n.d.(a)); b) since May 2023 there are only two white WEP councillors, elected in Congleton, Cheshire (see WEP n.d.(b)); c) the overwhelming majority of WEP local election candidates have been white women. Moreover, the email addresses left by the eight survey respondents contained male first names. Two respondents stated they were members of the DUP, one a former councillor and the other aspiring to be one. Their email addresses also contained male first names.

Unfortunately, the survey responses could not be used to provide meaningful quantitative analysis or triangulation in the way it was intended. Ultimately it was used only to extract relevant quotations where verified respondents had left comments in text boxes and to identify potential interviewees where email addresses were known or verifiable. It was originally intended that the survey questionnaire should run between November 2022 and January 2023 but the period was extended while more women were being encouraged to respond.

## Interviews

Participants were recruited through personal contacts, via the online questionnaire where participants indicated they were happy to be contacted and left an email address, and through a trawl of local council websites. In all we contacted 120 women, considering geographical location, political party membership, ethnic background and faith in order to achieve a stratified rather than representative sample. Participants were contacted via email with telephone follow-up. However, the majority of those contacted did not respond while many others agreed and arranged a meeting but then either cancelled or failed to show up online, at the pre-arranged time. Hence the eventual sample of 27 is constituted as a result of both purposive and convenience sampling. We called a halt after 27 interviews because it was felt that data saturation had been reached by this point.

In total 27 interviews, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes,[10] were carried out between November 2022 and July 2023. All interviews took place via video-call except for one where the participant preferred a face-to-face meeting; and all were recorded except for one where the participant in question preferred that notes were taken during the interview. Of the 27 participants interviewed, only 2 waived their right to anonymity. However, for the sake of consistency all participants have been given pseudonyms and the testimonies of those who did not wish to be identified have been anonymised and filed securely in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the University of Warwick and MWNUK.

An interview guide was used and divided into four main parts with questions grouped under the following headings:

**About the participant (socio-demographic profile)**

**Barriers faced during selection, election and in office**

**Support received during candidate selection and election processes, and while in office**

**Overcoming barriers, personal and professional gains and losses, and strategies to increase minoritised women's representation**

10. A couple of interviews lasted longer than 90 minutes as in both cases, the participants felt compelled to recount distressing experiences in greater detail.

The interview guide was designed to collect the in-depth data required to answer the research questions and keep the interview conversation alive for 60 minutes at least. However, it also allowed scope for participants to talk about their individual experiences and for the researcher to probe further, or to follow up interesting leads within a relaxed conversation. A number of participants described the interview as a therapeutic experience.

The semi-structured interviews were used to capture the experiences of aspiring, incumbent and former women councillors; develop an understanding of the barriers to entry and continuation in municipal politics; and gain insights about how to increase minoritised women's participation in local politics. The vast majority of participants were incumbent councillors as they are the most visible and so easiest to search out and contact. Both purposive and convenience sampling methods were applied in the recruitment of participants in order to cover areas of the country with significantly large enough racially minoritised populations within which aspiring, incumbent or former racially minoritised women councillors were present.

## 2.3 Profile of the research participants

| Ethnicity | No participants | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| Black, Black British, Caribbean, African | 7 | 26% |
| Asian, British Asian | 16 | 59% |
| Other Asian | 1 | 4% |
| Middle Eastern | 2 | 7% |
| Chinese | 1 | 4% |

| Religion | No participants | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| Christianity | 6 | 22% |
| Islam | 15 | 56% |
| Hinduism | 1 | 4% |
| Sikhism | 3 | 11% |
| Agnostic / does not practice any faith | 2 | 7% |

| Age | No participants | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| 20-29 | 0 | 0% |
| 30-39 | 7 | 26% |
| 40-49 | 10 | 37% |
| 50-59 | 7 | 26% |
| 60-69 | 3 | 11% |
| 70+ | 0 | 0% |

| Educational level | No participants | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| GCSE / equivalent | 3 | 11% |
| A Levels / Diploma | 4 | 15% |
| First degree | 7 | 26% |
| Postgraduate degree (Masters / PhD) | 13 | 48% |

| Marital status / Caring responsibilities | No participants | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| Single (2 had caring responsibilities) | 8 | 30% |
| Married (7 had caring responsibilities) | 17 | 63% |
| Divorced (1 had caring responsibilities) | 2 | 7% |

| Employment status | No participants | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| Employed | 17 | 63% |
| Self employed | 2 | 7% |
| Voluntay work | 3 | 11% |
| Other (Councillor only or no longer councilor, now employed) | 5 | 19% |

| Party | No participants | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| Labour | 14 | 52% |
| Conservative | 6 | 22% |
| Liberal Democrat | 3 | 11% |
| SNP | 2 | 7% |
| Scottish Labour | 1 | 4% |
| Green Party | 1 | 4% |

| Terms served [11] | No participants | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| Currently in first term | 8 | 32% |
| Only one term completed [12] | 3 | 12% |
| One term completed + currently in second term | 7 | 28% |
| Two terms only completed [13] | 2 | 8% |
| Two terms completed + currently in third term | 3 | 12% |
| Three or more terms completed + currently not in office [14] | 1 | 4% |
| Three or more terms completed + currently in office | 1 | 4% |

## Age

Twenty-seven participants between the ages of 33 and 65 were interviewed, making the average age of the interview sample 49.5 years; or 10 years lower than the average age of all councillors across England in 2022 (LGA 2022: 21). Of those interviewed, 10 were aged between 40 and 49, seven were 30 to 39 years old, another seven fell into the 50-59 age band while three were aged over 60. The LGA 2022 census of councillors placed the majority, that is 57.1 per cent, of councillors in the age bracket of 65+ years. However, because LGA does not take an intersectional approach to its data analysis, there is no way of knowing whether a gender-age difference exists, with women councillors constituting a younger age group nationally and if that is the case, whether our sample reflects that women councillors are generally younger than men councillors in England and other parts of the UK.

## Race / Ethnicity

As far as the race/ ethnic profile of participants in this study is concerned, the majority identified with British Asian/Asian ethnicities (Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi), representing almost 60 per cent of the sample. One participant identified with an 'other Asian' ethnicity (specified but not indicated to maintain anonymity) while two participants identified with ethnicities located in the Middle East (specified but not indicated to maintain anonymity), and one described herself as Chinese. Those who identified with Black/Black British, African or Caribbean identities constitute just over a quarter of the interview sample. The aforementioned figures may be considered alongside (rather than compared with) those revealed by the LGA 2022 census. The LGA census shows that there are 2.5 times as many 'Asian or Asian British' councillors (undifferentiated by gender) as there are 'Black, Black British, Caribbean or African' councillors in England (LGA 2022: 22). The relative absence of Black councillors is also borne out by an audit of councillors published by Operation Black Vote in 2019 which noted, 'There appears to be a gap in African/Caribbean representation within the broader BAME category; even in areas with significant Black populations, the number of African/ Caribbean councillors is relatively low (OBV 2019: 5). Although, according to the OBV audit, among African and Caribbean councillors women represent the majority - 64 per cent (Ibid: 5).

11. The number of councillors in this block adds up to 25; one participant had applied for selection a couple of times but was not successful while the other was selected once but not elected.
12. Two councilors in this category were deselected for the May 2023 elections while one was expelled from her party.
13. Of the two councillors in this category, one stepped down to pursue other avenues while the other was deselected.
14. This councilor stepped down to enter national politics

## Religion

Neither the OBV audit of 2019 nor the LGA 2022 census asks a religion question. However, it is important to ask about religious identity (not belief) because the racialisation of religion, and Islam in particular over more than 20 years, influences the way in which racially minoritised Muslims are perceived, approached and treated in public arenas. Also, identification with a religion will inevitably guide individual values and can explain the motivation behind becoming a councillor and staying in office.[15] Where Muslim women are concerned, Islam may also be interpreted and used within their family and community circles to stop their entry into public life. Of the sample of women interviewed, 15 identified as Muslim (South Asian and Black African), 6 as Christian, 3 as Sikh and 1 as Hindu. One woman said she was agnostic while another said she did not practice the religion of her family background. The preponderance of Muslim women in the sample can be explained in two ways. First, the use of convenience sampling and snowballing methods led to a higher number of Muslim women being contacted and of these more were willing to be interviewed. Second, the sample reflects the reality that Pakistani and Bangladeshi councillors alone, of whom the overwhelming majority may be counted as Muslim, account for a higher proportion (1.7 per cent) of councillors than from other ethnic groups in the LGA 2022 census (LGA 2022: 22).

## Other Identities

In terms of claimed identities, only one identified as having a disability although a number of participants said they had long term health problems which they worked around and did not consider a disability. Prior to undertaking the interviews, a number of aspiring, incumbent and former councillors known to us were asked about the inclusion of a gender and sexuality question. All said that they would find such a question intrusive and uncomfortable and that they preferred it to be excluded.

## Political Party Affiliations

The interview sample includes a far higher proportion of Labour councillors (70.4 per cent) than from any other political party. Although we took great care to contact incumbent councillors from political parties other than Labour, we received relatively few positive responses. Where Conservative Party councillors were concerned, a number who had initially agreed to be interviewed, pulled out before the interview, some without informing us that they would not be present on the scheduled day and time. Subsequent emails or phone calls were either unanswered or revealed that they had agreed to be interviewed in haste and that on further reflection they had decided to withdraw. Only two Labour councillors who had agreed to be interviewed withdrew before the interview while candidates from other parties (Liberal Democrats, SNP and Greens) attended the interview once it was agreed. Notwithstanding recruitment pitfalls, our interview sample reflects the results of OBV's local representation audit which found that 84.2 per cent of BAME councillors represented the Labour Party (OBV 2019: 12).

15. The connection between religious identity and politics is borne out in previous ONS surveys, see for example ONS (2020) 'Religion and participation in England and Wales: February 2020', **https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/**

## Political Status

Our interview sample is composed mainly of incumbent councillors, along with two aspiring and four former councillors, because it is far easier to identify and contact incumbent councillors given their public profile. The two aspiring councillors included in the sample were recruited through personal contacts, whereas the former councillors were either known to us personally or known because they had aired grievances in the media against the party which they had represented. One councillor had been deselected in the ward she represented at the time of interview and was waiting to find out whether she stood a chance to stand for another ward or would be blocked from selection in other wards also.

The majority of the councillors interviewed held office at the time of interview and had completed one or more terms. Councillors who had completed only one or two terms and not returned to office had either been deselected, expelled or had stepped down to pursue other interests.

# 2.4 Data analysis

The research was driven by thematic concerns and questions reflected in the interview guide. Interview data was collected directly from participants by the researcher and report author and while the main aim was to capture and interpret the meanings that participants attached to their experiences, attention was also paid to the specific political and social context in which participants' experiences took place, in which the research was conducted and to the researcher's own position and role in interpreting data. Within these parameters, the data analysis has followed a synthetic approach where 'bigger pictures' may be painted from participants' experiences while at the same time being able to identify and explain commonalities and differences.

The interviews were video-recorded except for one which was audio-recorded in the participant's office and another which was not recorded, in line with the respective participants' wishes. Interview transcripts of the video-recorded interviews were generated live within Microsoft Teams (the prescribed video-call platform) for the purpose of data analysis. Because the live-generated transcripts contained numerous inaccuracies of the recorded speech, the recordings had to be replayed and compared with transcripts so that all inaccuracies could be corrected. The audio-recorded interview was transcribed by a human transcriber, while in the case of the unrecorded interview extensive notes were made by the researcher during and immediately after the interview. All the data was subjected to a thematic analysis.

## 2.5 Ethics and data protection

This research project adhered to the University of Warwick's ethical research guidance and was approved by the University's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. In addition, it was subject to MWNUK's guidelines on data protection and privacy.

### Survey questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was completed by participants online. The capture of information did not automatically include participants' email or IP address and participants provided their email address voluntarily only if they wished to be entered into the prize draw for £100 Love2Shop voucher, or receive the final report from this research, or wished to be followed up for interview. Otherwise, all information provided was anonymous.

### Interviews

Interviews took place with the written informed consent of participants who were sent clear, detailed information in a participation information leaflet explaining data collection methods, processing, storage, dissemination and retention. They were also reassured of the fact that they could withdraw from the interview at any time and request (after the interview but only until data anonymisation) that their data be withdrawn from the research project. Interview participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality and hence interview recordings and transcripts were fully anonymised with each participant being given a pseudonym. Any data which allowed a connection to be made with the participant (e.g. a council ward) was also anonymised. Moreover, the voice files containing recorded interviews and document files containing interview transcripts were ascribed a file name unconnected with individual participants. Recordings, transcripts and the master key of participants' names were stored securely in password-protected folders in line with the existing information security arrangements of the University of Warwick and Muslim Women's Network UK.

# 3 Contributing Factors to Standing for Election

## 3.1 Motivation linked to personal aspirations

For most of the research participants the key the driving force to pursue their councillorship journey (with the support of family, friends, colleagues, fellow party members) was to reach individual aspirations in a role where they could maintain their values. This type of motivation was also important to develop resilience:

- To deal with intense competition within and between parties, potentially problematic working relationships and lack of resources.
- To look outwards, tap into support networks, build alliances and acquire more knowledge and skills to bolster their political autonomy and bounce back when knocked down.

In turn, resilience would have also fed back into increased motivation and the determination to carry on despite obstacles. Ultimately, motivation linked to personal development (which extends beyond purely material and status gains) should be considered as a crucial factor in seeking elected office, retaining it and performing effectively as a local councillor. None of the women interviewed spoke in terms of material or status gain, unless it was to disapprove of such goals:

> *When you look at these people, you think, oh, they're senior politicians, they take this stuff seriously. What I came to find out later is no, actually some people are just in it for the pay cheque that comes every month. That's a top up to their salary, that some people just want it because ... the community looks up to councillors or, you know, and that they respect that more of the name, the title, whatever it is.*
>
> **(Qadira)**

## 3.2 Motivation linked to representation and service

Key contributing reasons for the women becoming a local councillor also included representation and service. They stated that they wanted to:

- Advocate for a/(their) particular group
- Serve the community in which they lived
- Champion a specific social issue

These motivating factors were often connected with their religious beliefs and values. All of these motivations speak to the achievement of wider societal goals and values based on the collective good, rather than individual gain. There is no reason why one should doubt them because most participants had been engaged in some aspect of public service or community life, on a paid or voluntary basis, before ever thinking about becoming a councillor. Thus, **Deepa**, a Conservative councillor, spoke of her family as always wanting to help people around them:

> *It's always about being of service. We've come from a background of what it means to be of service ... how can God use me to the best of my abilities ... that's what I'm about, of being of service.*[16]
>
> **(Deepa)**

For **Sayeeda**, who came from a family of political activists, becoming a local councillor was important for a number of reasons although paramount among these was to represent and advocate for refugee communities in the UK who increasingly live in fear as dominant political discourses around 'illegal migrants' have become ever more hostile. She explained:

> *As a child, I felt like I had a duty to my community as well. I wanted to be involved. I didn't want to just have a normal job and just, you know, blend in. I could have had a normal much maybe easier life, but I feel like I want to do something like different even when I was 15 years old, like I wanted to do something like get involved in politics, talk about how people have been treated, asylum seekers and refugees, how we experience the system of the immigration system. And I just, I just wanted to really help asylum seekers to be accepted as human beings.*
>
> **(Sayeeda)**

16. The concept of service or *seva* as selfless actions for the good of others/society, and without expectation of any benefit to those who perform it, is deeply lodged within Hinduism and Sikhism and motivated Deepa and her family.

Among other participants were those who were interested in tackling specific issues which at some point had impacted negatively on their family or community. **Bereni** decided to stand as a councillor to spotlight and resist racism, after her three-year old daughter was told by her nursery school teacher that she could not be English because she was Black.

> *I got involved because I started to wonder how I could influence and change things after my daughter had an experience at school where she was told by a teacher ... that she couldn't be English because she was Black ... And then, she said, is there something wrong with being Black and that just, you know, when you just get so incensed. I was so angry because I just thought I have never heard such foolishness in my life, and in any case, I'm just thinking, how can my child be going through the same thing that I have encountered in so many forms? It should be easier for her because she was born here. This is home to her. ... And then there were just, you know, little things that went on. And then I started to, you know, ask a lot more questions. And in the workplace, things got really difficult, and the more I tried to rise by reason of my skill and my ability, the harder it became.*
>
> **(Bereni)**

For **Bereni** a first step towards making change was to research UK political parties and find one which would align with her values and enable her to fight against race discrimination and bring about a more equal and just society, that is:

> *A kind of modern Black Britain, if you like in quotes, that's I want for my children ... And so, I joined the Labour Party 12 years ago and then you know started with helping candidates when they were campaigning, you know, going on the phone banks, door knocking, leafleting and all of that, and tried to make my very first attempt in 2015 to stand.*
>
> **(Bereni)**

**Qadira** was also drawn to elected office because housing emerged as an important issue for her - as a volunteer with a local charity helping single mothers who spoke little or no English, she experienced first-hand the inertia in her local council over housing some of the most vulnerable women in the community.

**Sarah*** who had experienced forced marriage became involved in politics locally, joined the Labour Party and spoke out against honour-based violence in her community and outside it and very quickly became involved in local Labour Party politics.

**Tala** was involved closely with her children's school, helping out as a Teaching Assistant and contributing to the school's safeguarding committee. However, it was the pandemic and the heavy toll it took on minoritised communities that made her want to do something. She was already a member of the Labour Party and got to a point where she felt that change could only be brought about from the top and decided that the only route was by seeking a councillorship.

*** This participant wished specifically to be named. The participant is Saima Afzal.**

## 3.3 Motivation linked to political duty

A sense of responsibility to perform civic duties also emerged as a motivating factor that resulted from:

- Valuing political participation rights
- Wanting to express loyalty to one's political party
- Wanting to seek a familiar arena of action as a result of growing up in a 'political family'
- Wanting to defy patriarchal 'community leaders' who dictated that women could not be involved in politics

Out of the participants interviewed, seven (**Leela, Shana, Sayeeda, Tala, Tasneem, Taryn** and **Perin**) were from political activist families. The parents of three participants had been party members and activists in their country of origin. For example, **Leela's** father-in-law had been active in a major party in a South Asian country and had forged strong links with the Conservative Party. His strong desire to 'pass the baton' to a family member led to **Leela** joining the Conservative Party and considering a councillorship.

Similarly, **Tasneem's** parents were politically active in a South Asian country and had included their children in political discussion and activities from an early age. Hence one of the first things that Tasneem did on arriving in the UK was to research the main parties, find one that she could relate to ideologically and policy-wise which led to her joining her local Conservative Party. She was also keen to exercise her political rights.

**Sayeeda's** political consciousness and activism was also inspired by her parents who were heavily involved in political causes in their country of origin which continued after their arrival in Scotland. However, she was also deeply frustrated and angered by what she saw as the misuse or wastage of power by elected politicians which could be used differently to improve people's lives. She reasoned:

> *Not everybody's privileged to have those positions. So, I feel like that kind of led me working for (name of MSP) for so many years. I was kind of like thought well, I should stand as well. And I saw so many politicians, I was like I'm more capable than these politicians. So, the more I saw, the more I was like, OK, I'm just gonna submit my application. So yeah, I submitted my application a few times.*
>
> (Sayeeda)

On the other hand, the parents / relatives of **Shana, Tala, Taryn** and **Perin** were politically active in the UK. **Shana** and **Perin** had both had a parent as local Labour councillor and so had acquired campaigning skills and detailed knowledge of party structures and processes from an early age which stood them in good stead when they decided to stand for councillorships. For them it was also a way of showing loyalty to a party they had known since their childhood.

**Perin** was also spurred on by the fact that the mostly male 'old guard' leading her council were 'not particularly able', were deeply involved in factional deals thus causing instability within the local party, and were not willing to open the door to leadership to anyone outside its clique.

**Taryn's** parents had been community activists and she developed awareness and knowledge about political events in the UK and abroad within what she called the 'outward facing, internationalist family'. As a youngster, **Tala's** mother and aunt also taught her the importance of contributing to the common good and collective wellbeing through political activism, using the political rights available to them in the UK; and more specifically the right to join a party and hold political office.

In the case of all these participants, motivation did not spring solely from their being part of highly politicised families. They too were interested in improving their respective communities, advocating on behalf of particular groups of people or highlighting certain issues. Only one participant explicitly stated that what tipped the balance for her, in favour of deciding to stand as a local councillor in 1999, was the fact that local Pakistani 'community leaders' were actively discouraging women from standing. **Sarah** had become a member of the Labour party in in her early twenties and was at a local branch meeting where someone raised the issue of there being no South Asian women councillors in an area with a large South Asian population and was told that this was because Islam did not allow it. **Sarah** decided to challenge this opinion, bolstered by the fact that nationally the Labour Party wanted more women candidates to be selected:

> *I put my hand up in the in the meeting and then I said I don't understand what you mean 'women can't stand'? They made some comments. I can't remember the exact words, or 'they don't want to stand, they want to stay at home, they don't ... it's not allowed in our religion' ... So, they did use religion, so they used those words and I said no, it is allowed. We have politicians in Pakistan, I'll stand. And they said, 'really'? I said 'yeah, why not,' I'm clever, I'm intelligent, you know, I can do it. I do community work and that's really when it started. I had no idea how naïve I was!*
>
> **(Sarah)**

**Sarah** was selected despite the hostility of local male members because the selection process had been overseen by regional officials who wanted to ensure that women were not being blocked. However, she was not elected in the subsequent local elections of 2000. Although **Sarah** was the only participant motivated to stand because of the opposition from the men in her community and party, her sentiments were echoed by some of the other participants.

For instance, when **Quentina** faced deselection in 2014, due to factional politics, she decided that if there was one thing that would make dig her feet in, it was fellow male party members and councillors harassing her into stepping down; she said,

> *'I had made my mind up that I was gonna plant my feet. I was not having anybody tell me I have to go and then I just go. No, it wasn't happening'.*
>
> **(Sarah)**

## 3.4 Being 'used' by political parites

Some participants suggested that some women who were selected as local election candidates were done so either to satisfy national party calls for more women councillors or because a particular local faction wanted more councillors under their control. This resulted in the women becoming councillors without sufficient political autonomy – they were afraid to advocate independently for their constituents or challenge poor political decisions. This  had led to some of them dropping out completely.

One participant spoke of her demoralising experiences as an aspiring councillor who twice tried to get selected. On the first occasion she was identified by a faction of local Labour Party men (in a ward densely populated by South Asian communities) as a suitable candidate for selection because she had worked locally in third sector organisations:

> *'an Asian girl, ... someone local, someone well known'*
>
> **(Salma)**

While she was selected, the local party had in fact picked her as a dummy (paper) candidate, to run against the favoured and expected-to-win candidate, in order to avoid accusations of stitching up the selection process:

> *Obviously, for me at that time I didn't really understand how the politics worked. I thought they want females and you know it's an opportunity, but what happened is I didn't realise at the time that they brought me in as an Asian face local - so they can turn round and if anyone questions*

> *them why did a certain person who was a girlfriend of [name of particular councillor] ... at the time ... so to get her in, so there's no favouritism they had to put someone locally in.*
>
> **(Salma)**

The next time that **Salma** applied for selection was because she wanted to; aware of selection rules and procedures and unwilling to be manipulated. Considered a difficult candidate this time because she had demonstrated political autonomy, she was blocked on the grounds that skeletons in her family cupboard could bring the local party into disrepute. She appealed without success and consequently left the party:

> *'I thought it was pointless, it's a waste of time, I was disheartened and then I pulled away from the Labour Party ... not just the Labour Party but generally from wanting to stand ever'.*
>
> **(Salma)**

Another participant also voiced concern about the co-optation of 'controllable' women into selection processes:

> *'I do worry about Muslim women because they really, they're very much under the cosh, with dependence on who's the men that you know'.*
>
> **(Quentina)**

## 3.5 Being asked to stand

Some studies categorise 'being asked to stand' as motivation in itself (see Elcock 1994; Leach et al 1994). However, by categorising it in this way, most women's motivations are masked while the knowledge and competences that they can bring to elected office are effectively undermined. Moreover, because of the various hurdles they face (discussed further on), the reality is that the overwhelming majority of women are asked or encouraged to stand even when they are motivated in other ways.

Even the women (**Zelda, Quentina, Laksha**) who said they would never have become a councillor but for being pushed into it by others, were actually strongly connected in community networks and had considerable and useful local knowledge to offer. Such was the case of **Zelda** who had worked for 17 years for the Supplementary School Movement[17] since she had left school as well as being an active member-organiser of her church. Her first contact with an elected public figure came about when her church required an empty piece of land behind it. She approached one of the very few African Caribbean woman councillors in her city (and indeed England) to ask if she could help with commandeering the land. While talking about the land the councillor suggested to **Zelda** that she would make a very good councillor. Zelda was astonished, as she explained:

> *I wasn't particularly interested. But anyway, she said to me 'I'd like you to go for an interview', and she was very kind and I thought this will help us with getting that land at the back of the church. 'I'd like you to go for an interview, apply to become a councillor', she said. 'Were you a member of the Labour Party?' she said; 'Yeah, but the Labour Party wasn't particularly doing anything for anyone I said to her. She said 'oh no, no, no, re-join and ... put in an application for ... (name of ward). And I remember getting a call to go for the [selection] interview for (name of ward). ... I was very, very relaxed. Didn't think that they would give it to me, spoke and left. ... And that was that. ... I was shocked when I got the telephone call saying that I've got (name of ward).*
>
> **(Zelda)**

17. Saturday Schools (or Supplementary School Movement) were established in the 1960s when African-Caribbean parents of children routinely labelled 'Educationally Sub-Normal' created safe collective spaces of learning. Although today the number of Saturday Schools is much smaller, they still provide learning spaces for children let down by the school system.

Similarly, **Laksha** who had long experience of working with local communities in which she had roots, as well as deep knowledge and understanding of the issues which concerned them, was pushed by a friend and collaborator to join the Labour Party and stand as councillor. Despite previous misgivings about the Labour Party's record on representing minoritised communities, she was persuaded in the hope she might influence change locally. She said:

> *I've always been a Labour Party supporter, I've never voted anywhere else. But it's (name of friend / collaborator) who really, you know, made me think about it ... And so, it was ... her encouragement. She knew what to do. Like she said you have to get on the panel, you have to be doing this that and the other.*
>
> **(Laksha)**

The reluctance of women to push themselves forward is reflected in the findings of a study conducted between 2006 and 2009 which found that fewer than one in four women applied of their own volition (Rallings et al 2010), while in our study only four women (**Sayeeda, Sarah, Taiwo** and **Perin**) indicated that when the opportunity arose, they had put themselves forward for candidate selection without being asked or needing encouragement. Moreover, the motivations expressed by participants in this study are also reflected also in other studies (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Rallings et al 2010), but generally there is a real lack of literature on the motivations of women who consider standing for elected office in the UK.[18]

In seeking to understand the motivations behind wanting to become a councillor it is important to consider the following:

**That almost all participants expressed multiple motivations even though one may have been paramount in shaping their desire to hold local elected office, as expressed in the interview, at that point in time.**

**That even where participants gave entire credit to colleagues, friends or other persons for their becoming a councillor, they normally had some background of civic engagement and public service through which they had accumulated knowledge, skills and agency.**

**That context matters; that is, family politics and ideology, migration histories, participants' location and experiences in the UK and their social networks all played a part in developing motivation.**

**That all the participants decided to embark on the journey to councillorship knowing they had the support and commitment of their family who often gave support to the idea that it was important to undertake public service and because they were proud that someone in their family was capable of assuming this role.**

18. There is a significant body of work undertaken on the subject in the USA, including small pockets of research on what sets women from minoritised communities apart in terms of why they run for office. For example Lawless (2012) and Lawless and Fox (2005) studied the political ambitions (or motivation) of women but without a focus on minoritised women. Frederick (2013) and Moore (2005) have studied the motivations of racially minoritised women in the USA. Some of the findings of USA studies are useful in their generalizability.

# Barriers Encountered in Candidate Selection

## 4.1 Background context

As mentioned earlier in this report, women from racialised minorities face many of the same types of barriers to political participation and representation as do white women but even more intensely because they will face gendered racism, gendered anti-Muslim racism / Islamophobia and other complex discriminations and prejudices generated by the variously intersecting factors of gender, race / ethnicity, class, faith, disability, age, sexuality. In discussing these barriers, it can be useful to categorise explanatory factors in terms of those relating to the 'supply side' and those which may be grouped on the 'demand side' (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Lovenduski 2016).

'Supply side' refers to factors which enable and motivate individuals to pursue a political career; such as having access to resources necessary for participation including time, money, support networks, political experience, ambition and relevant skills. Demand side explanations are to do with obstacles which individuals face which may block or restrict their access to political positions; for example, the candidate selection processes of political parties and the broader masculine culture in which party structures and political institutions operate.

This explanatory framework permits the highlighting of the serious impact that demand-side factors can have on women's participation and representation in politics even when supply side factors are moderated as in the case of the women who were interviewed for this research. Additionally, consideration of demand-side factors means that the blame for women's under-participation and under-representation in politics is not attributed entirely to women and their apparent lack of knowledge, interest, ambition, competence and so on. Instead, it is shifted so that any attempt to change the existing state of affairs must consider the nature and role of political institutions - that is of parties which are the gatekeepers to elected office in all four constituent nations of the UK - and of institutional political cultures which are overwhelmingly masculine.

While applying this framework here, we will consider barriers which appear at the stages of party candidate selection (and also de-selection and post-selection where relevant) and incumbency and which have the effect of deterring women from running for office and / or remaining in office once elected. In considering demand-side barriers, the following section focuses on local institutions, political actors and their cultures.

# 4.2 Institutional barriers: local party selection processes

## Overview

Political parties constitute the biggest institutional barrier to the eventual election of councillors, through processes of selection, in all UK nations. Party selection processes reveal the 'kingmakers'. They act as the 'waiting room' for those who will eventually end up in local elected councils up and down the country. Importantly for this study, they help us understand why some groups are under-represented. In 2022, 88.7 per cent of councillors in England were elected via the party-political route while a meagre 11.3 per cent won as independent candidates or representatives of resident associations (LGA 2022: 19). The figures for England, Wales and Scotland combined reveal an even more acute picture in that only 0.2 per cent of councillors won their seats as independent candidates or representatives of other groups (Open Council Data UK 2023).[19]

Moreover each party in the different UK nations uses varying, and in practice often opaque, methods of identifying candidates to be selected thus creating a problem for local constituents who feel that while their proximity and trust in relation to local government is higher than it is to central government, they are not always served well by their local political parties.[20] This trust gap arises from the perception that many local political parties (particularly those with majorities in city and town halls) practice some or all forms of favouritism, including nepotism,[21] patronage[22] and cronyism[23] in the recruitment and promotion of councillors; or clientelism[24] in seeking and keeping votes.

While the aforesaid practices are named discretely, they often overlap in real life, and create conflicts of interest leading to poor and unjust management of local resources and ultimately poor quality services for local people. They are also seen to undermine democracy because the most motivated and suitably qualified candidates, especially those from under-represented groups such as racially minoritised women, are actively put off or prevented from entering elected office. The effects of such practices combined with selection rules, tensions around increasing candidate diversity, gendered and anti-Muslim racism (intersecting with other biases and discrimination), and particular patriarchal networks within minoritised communities create strong barriers in the recruitment of women councillors from racially minoritised communities.

19. The Open Council Data initiative is undertaken by Lawson Data Services, a private limited company providing data on local councils and elections.
20. In the UK 42 per cent of people feel that they trust local government and that their voice will be heard in consultations over local issues. However, only 20 per cent said they had trust in political parties (ONS 2022b).
21. For our purposes, nepotism occurs when those in public elected office use the authority of their office (and / or local party ) to confer undue advantage on their family member(s) (adapted from Fisman and Goldman 2017).
22. Patronage here is a form of favouritism whereby a person is selected or promoted to a certain position by virtue of their connection and political allyship with publicly elected office holders / leaders or party (adapted from Kopecky et al 2012).
23. Cronyism is defined here as preference being given by an elected public office holder and or political party officials to their friends and acquaintances (adapted from Zudenkova 2015).
24. Here clientelism is defined as a form of corruption where favours and / or resources are exchanged between a more powerful 'patron' (public elected office holders / leaders, political parties) and a weaker 'client' seeking political office or promotion once elected. In other words it can serve as an electoral strategy (adapted from Stokes 2013).

# Selection rules

While it is reasonable to assume that a perfect candidate selection system does not exist anywhere in the world, it is equally reasonable to expect that such selection systems will deliver candidates - and ultimately councils - which reflect the social composition of the local communities they serve; candidates with the required knowledge of local government and skills for the position of councillor; transparent and consistent procedures; and hence encouragement to local populations to become more engaged politically so that the pool of potential candidates may continually be replenished with motivated and skilled people. To ensure a basic common starting point, since 2009, all councillors in England are required to go through an approval procedure. In Scotland and Wales this is recommended rather than mandatory. Consequently, all the main UK political parties, in common with the LGA, publish rules and fairly wide-ranging information for prospective candidates on being nominated and seeking approval as a candidate, and on facing selection by their local party members.

With some variations, approvals and selection procedures across the parties require a prospective candidate to complete a nomination form which is assessed by party officers (e.g. for the Labour Party it is the Campaigns Forum; the Approval Committee for the Conservatives; and the Approvals Coordination for the Liberal Democrats) who check on candidate eligibility and general suitability before deciding whether a particular candidate may go forward for selection by a three to five member interview panel. If shortlisted at interview the prospective candidate is called to a selection meeting where local party members are given the opportunity to question and select candidates for their ward. Throughout this process, those who assess and approve nominations and interview panellists alike are supposed to be aware of and apply equality, diversity and inclusion rules and ask prospective candidates questions which may be prepared by the parties at national level but adapted to elicit local knowledge. Prospective candidates have the right to appeal if they fail to be approved or selected and they disagree with the justification provided by the approvers or interview panel.

While established selection procedures are based on the application of fairness and the principle of selection on merit rather than factors unrelated to candidates' knowledge and skills, the practice is rather different and many candidates are selected without rigorous approval or attendance before a properly-constituted interview panel and selection meetings, as political patronage and practices of nepotism, cronyism and clientelism creep into the process; while others may be excluded on the basis of social identity and characteristics rather than the benefits they would bring to the political party and local community. This breaching of rules may take place in a number of different circumstances, as explicated below, and impacts negatively on prospective candidates from under-represented groups, including minoritised women.

# Party imperatives to increase candidate diversity

In addition to selection rules, local political parties have also been directed by their respective central party leaderships to increase the numbers of women and racially minoritised candidates running for local election. While over the past 20 years or so the main political parties had focused efforts on increasing diversity among parliamentary candidates, it is only more recently that attention has shifted to the composition of local councillors across the UK. This shift has been prompted by some noteworthy factors. First, a number of women's organisations (among them Elect Her, Fawcett Society, Muslim Women's Network UK) under the umbrella of the Centenary Action Group[25] have been pressuring parties since 2018 to advance candidate diversity not just at national but also local level. Second, the General Election of 2019 which saw the most diverse body of MPs - in terms of gender and race - enter Parliament (Uberoi and Mansfield 2023: 11-14), forced sharp comparisons to be drawn with the abysmal picture at local level.

The diversity of parliamentary candidates, and eventually of elected MPs, in 2019 had resulted from a concerted push by all main political parties for a more gender and race-diverse Parliament. Third, There has been mounting pressure from women's, disability rights and race equality practitioners, academics and politicians for a) an enactment of Section 106 of the 2010 Equality Act[26] which would legally oblige political parties to publish data on the protected characteristics of all candidates standing in national and devolved assembly elections in order to take positive action to increase candidacies from under-represented groups; b) to extend the provisions of Section 106 to cover local election candidates and also those who fail to get selected (see Centenary Action Group 2020; EHRC 2018; Electoral Reform Society 2018). These stakeholders have generally emphasised that political parties have a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 (Section 104) to address the under-representation of groups with protected characteristics in their structures and particularly in the selection of candidates for elections.

Eight participants (**Charifa, Ghazala, Gulshan, Parveen, Qadira, Sarah, Taiwo** and **Tasneem**) in this study stated explicitly that they were approached and urged by their local party branch or association to enter a selection process because of national party imperatives to recruit more women from racialised minorities, while four mentioned or implied that their respective local branches / associations were actively recruiting from under-represented groups, including minoritised women (**Deepa, Jalna, Salma, Tanvi**).

25. The Centenary Action Group was formed in 2018, marking the 100th year anniversary of women over the age of 30 winning the right to vote if they met a property qualification (The Representation of the People Act of 1918) and to be elected to Parliament (the Qualification of Women Act 1918). The group's aim was to use the 100th anniversary as a launch pad for delivering gender parity in Parliament by 2028.

26. Equality Act 2010, Section 106 'Information about diversity in range of candidates, etc.', **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/106/2012-01-16#:~:text=(2)If%20the%20party%20had,accordance%20with%20subsection%20(3)**

**Tasneem** explained:

> *CCHQ [Conservative Central Campaign HQ] has an objective of getting more women on board because, as Conservatives, I'm sure you know, as in you know Conservatives are not very good at getting women to stand; I think Labour's doing pretty well that way. Coming from an ethnic minority background, they were keen to have me on board so they had a lot of conversations with me and then asked if I was interested to stand.*
>
> **(Tasneem)**

Similarly **Taiwo** was told:

> *'We need more women, if you come to the meeting you will see that it's all men' ... She [Conservative Party local association agent] kept going on about it and said 'you've got to do this', so I thought OK what do I need to do?*
>
> **(Taiwo)**

On the other hand, **Tanvi** confirmed that the Conservative Women's Organisation had been working hard to persuade suitable women (identified because of the community work they did) to run for selection as local election candidates, while **Parveen** suggested she had been approached as a potential candidate due to her South Asian background and because she was seen as a candidate able to bring voters with her from the South Asian women's support group she ran. She was asked specifically her by local Conservative Party agents,

> *'How many women [voters] are you going to bring with you?'*
>
> **(Parveen)**

**Charifa** also felt that she 'ticked all the right boxes' for the Liberal Democrats (as a woman from a minoritised community who had been a party member since her student days), when she first applied for selection which was at the time the Liberal Democrats were suffering from a damaged reputation for their part in the austerity-promoting Coalition government of 2010-2015.

As a fresh face in a multi-ethnic Welsh city, she was selected three times although she failed to get elected on the first two occasions. On the third occasion, having proven herself to be a formidable political campaigner and become a known public face in the community, she was given

> *'Probably one of the safest, safest seats for the Lib Dems.'*
>
> **(Charifa)**

Participant responses suggest that after 2019, local Conservative Party associations were pushed hardest to recruit women and men from minoritised communities. As Tasneem suggested, the Labour Party had long been ahead in this respect as evidenced by a breakdown of women councillors in the UK by political party which, prior to the local elections of 2023, showed that 47 per cent of councillors in Britain were Labour compared with 29 per cent Conservative (Thomas 2023). Nevertheless, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and the Greens also acted more concertedly after 2019 to promote women's representation in local councils.

The imposition of two sets of seemingly contradictory instructions - i.e. to follow transparent and consistent selection procedures in which the most suitable candidates may be selected on the one hand and procedures which increased the diversity of candidates with protected characteristics on the other hand - has often caused resentment within predominantly white male 'selectorates' and has played out negatively for women from minority communities in that either they are repeatedly selected as paper candidates or selected as women of straw.

While embroiled in arguments about merit-based procedures versus those which discriminate positively to take account of historical disadvantage and under-representation of certain groups, local 'selectorates' fail to see or wilfully deny that merit-based procedures can be inclusive and that plenty of women from minority communities who are eligible and qualified would make very good local councillors on the basis of experience, skills and local political knowledge, as demonstrated in the cases below. Such ignorance or wilful denial finds expression in covert or overt gendered and anti-Muslim racism.

## Selecting paper candidates

Political parties often confront a shortage of prospective candidates in wards where there is little or no chance of a party winning seats or during years when whole council elections take place and higher numbers of councillors retire or prefer not to contest further elections.[27] In unwinnable wards, in whole election years parties struggle to persuade people to present themselves as dummy or 'paper' candidates. Paper candidates are put forward because parties are reluctant to allow seats to go uncontested, or they wish to give their supporters the opportunity to vote for their candidate or to maximise their vote nationally. In such cases, approvals and selection procedures operate minimally and may lead to racially minoritised women, among other under-represented groups, being identified as 'last resort' prospective candidates who may be persuaded to stand for election in the knowledge that there is no hope (or threat) of them actually gaining a seat and hence a position of responsibility and power in the local party.

27. The majority of councils in England, i.e. 67 per cent, run an election of all their councillors every four years while in 31 per cent of councils, councillors are elected by thirds three years out of every four. An exceptional two per cent elect their councillors by halves every two years (for further information see DLUHC 2023a).

Out of the 27 participants of this study, five were convinced by their respective parties to stand as paper candidates in unwinnable seats and told that they were not required to do much if anything, and indeed were not given the most basic of resources since they were not expected to fight a real campaign:

> *They finally managed to twist my arm and said why don't you stand in the ward that you live in, which at the time was [name of ward] um, in [name of town] and um, they said you can stand as a paper candidate because there's no way ... you know there was a sitting councillor there for 13 years.*
>
> **(Leela)**

> *It was suggested they needed a paper candidate for an unwinnable ward and said, would you just put your name in, so and then they invited me to stand for ... and again ... a difficult to win ward, you know, with no expectation that I'd win. But it's just they needed somebody. So, I said fine.*
>
> **(Shana)**

> *They told me it's a paper candidacy. You really don't have to do anything. You know, we just need a name on paper. Would you like to do it? ... And then they told me I don't have to campaign ...*
>
> **(Tasneem)**

In each of the above cases, approval and selection amounted to an expedient, rubber-stamping exercise and none of these paper candidates were given support by their party; if they became known locally, it was purely by their own efforts. While they all accepted that winning was not a consideration, they believed there were valuable skills to be learned even from paper candidacies or that they were serving an apprenticeship of kinds, and so none felt able to sit back and play the role of 'dummy candidate' as was expected of them. They decided that if they were going to stand, they had to take it seriously.

Consequently, **Tasneem** campaigned hard, adopting a two-pronged strategy of talking to people at every opportunity, while out shopping, in the streets covered by the ward, and getting herself known locally; and also, by campaigning online due to the lack of material support (e.g. campaigning leaflets, posters, helpers to door-knock) from the local Conservative association. She used her background in communications and marketing to launch an online election campaign and her experience of street campaigning with her activist parents to achieve her personal goal of reducing the gap between the Conservative opposition which she was representing and the incumbent Labour councillor:

> *You can't stop, not campaign. So I gave myself a goal ... you know what, It's a labour stronghold, they've put me in, obviously it's a very safe seat for them [Labour], so I thought to myself, I'm gonna bridge the gap because every year we were increasing the gap with them. I thought ok we're gonna bring it back.*
>
> **(Tasneem)**

**Tasneem's** solo campaigning was so effective that she lessened the Labour-Conservative gap, losing to her Labour opponent by only 180 votes.

**Qadira** also gathered friends in the party to help her campaign for an unwinnable seat:

> *I was supposed to be considered to be a paper candidate. But me and my colleagues took it really seriously and we campaigned really hard and we made that seat into our marginal. So we lost by nearly 200 votes, which is basically nothing in a local election. And I think people really appreciated the hard work, we knocked on so many doors and stuff.*
>
> **(Qadira)**

Recognition of **Qadira's** campaigning skills meant that she was given the position of Chair of the Local Campaigns Forum, the body responsible for prospective candidate approvals, although ironically she had to fight for her own approval, for a winnable ward for several years.

Both **Shana** and **Parveen** led vigorous campaigns as paper candidate and not just for themselves but on behalf of fellow Labour candidates in the same and other wards. Shana had grown up with a Labour activist father and had become a highly skilled campaigner by the time she was approved and selected by her local party. **Parveen** was new to party political activism but echoed the others in her approach:

> *... they asked me to be a paper candidate and I was like, what is the difference between a paper candidate and a candidate who would win an election? If I'm going to stand, I might as well do the whole thing.*
>
> **(Parveen)**

**Leela's** journey from paper candidate to councillor was extraordinary. She explained,

> *'they [local Conservative association] felt, you know, I'd be great as a paper candidate to learn the ropes; but I learnt the ropes so well that I won!'*
>
> **(Leela)**

As paper candidates all these women performed extraordinarily well. However, with the exception of **Leela** who won a seat considered unwinnable the very first time she stood for election, it took the others a good few years before they were considered seriously enough by their respective parties to be placed in winnable or even marginal wards. **Shana** contested three elections in unwinnable wards before being able to contest a safe seat. **Qadira** waited four years, despite being Local Campaigns Forum Chair, before she was given a winnable ward in which she was elected; while **Parveen**, like **Qadira**, was only elected in a winnable seat four years after first standing as a paper candidate. **Tasneem's** efforts were rewarded three years later despite the fact that her contribution to local election campaigns on behalf of fellow Conservative candidates had significantly increased the number of Conservative councillors in her local authority and that she had single-handedly established a thriving local branch of the Conservative Women's Organisation.

The barrier stopping these motivated, knowledgeable and politically-skilled women transitioning from paper candidate to a serious election-winning one is rooted in the inability and / or unwillingness of local political parties to reconcile racially minoritised women with their fixed model of political representation and leadership as white, male and preferably middle class; and this despite party political discourses suggesting the contrary was happening. For local 'selectorates', the women concerned served as no more than a convenient stopgap to be dispensed with when no longer required. However, these women's motivation and tenacity (supply side factors) kept them going until their respective parties were eventually compelled to look beyond traditionally favoured circles of friend, family and business contacts and to consider them as suitable candidates.

# Seeking 'paper tigresses': biradari networks and selection of women candidates in UK South Asian Muslim communities

Local 'selectorates' have also responded to national directives concerning fair selection and increasing diversity by seeking to recruit women seen as docile and unlikely to challenge the power of local elites. This kind of recruitment has been common in areas where large communities with roots in Pakistan, Kashmir region and to a lesser extent Bangladesh have formed since early South Asian labour migrations in the 1950s; in towns and cities of the West Midlands, Yorkshire, Lancashire, London and Luton which had called for workers in factories, cotton mills and metal foundries. These communities' aspirations, concerns and needs have been funnelled through male 'elders' who acquired 'community leader' status by means of their connections with religious, cultural, business and political actors in their country of origin and also new links with interest groups in the UK. These leadership networks which are also referred to as biradari built a special relationship with the Labour Party, through trade unions in the factories, mills and foundries in which they worked and provided the Labour Party with a ready-made electorate.

The biradari (brotherhood) represents the confluence of family and tribal (kinship) customs[28] which bound and protected their communities in the early days, in a largely unreceptive society, but which is also characteristically hierarchical and patriarchal. As such biradari networks have controlled women's mobility, career and life choices, limiting if not entirely blocking women's personal autonomy in the political, as in the social, economic and cultural spheres. So, in many families, women have not participated as individual voters in electing their favoured political candidate, but have followed the choice of the family, and ultimately that of the biradari. Historically, where South Asian Muslim women have emerged as political leaders (e.g. Benazir Bhutto, Khaleda Zia, Hasina Wazed)[29] it has been because of their position within prominent political families and consent from the biradari. Hence, historically the political environment has been experienced passively by South Asian Muslim women who largely internalised the idea that politics was not for them.

However, this view of women's relation within the political sphere is being challenged in the UK (and South Asia) by Muslim women who want to exercise autonomy and choice in politics. The biradari has been countering such challenges to its control over who participates politically by stigmatising and ostracising the women who challenge and sometimes by using abusive and violent means. Biradari politics in the UK has been explored in a number of political participation studies of Muslims in the UK (Akhtar 2013; Hussain 2021; Joly and Wadia 2017: 134-138; Peace and Akhtar 2015) and the term was used by some of the participants of this study.

For example, **Sarah** spoke of the persistent efforts of local elites, in a northern English town, to keep her out of local politics. **Sarah** was cast as a 'woman of stigma' and was unpopular with the Muslim men in her local party branch and community because she was unafraid of voicing her opinions and wore western clothes; all of which met with disapproval and which made her 'un-Muslim' in their estimation.

28. The Open Council Data initiative is undertaken by Lawson Data Services, a private limited company providing data on local councils and elections.

29. In the UK 42 per cent of people feel that they trust local government and that their voice will be heard in consultations over local issues. However, only 20 per cent said they had trust in political parties (ONS 2022b).

**Sarah** had held ambitions of standing for election previously but had been unsuccessful. However, in 2017, given her activist skills and knowledge of the local community, she felt bound to apply for selection after discussion with a regional Labour Party official who was deeply concerned that not a single woman had stepped forward as a prospective candidate for the 2018 local elections. **Sarah** applied, receiving assurances of strong support from the regional party. However, no sooner was her application lodged when, as she puts it, 'another game started':

> *Suddenly women came out of nowhere. There were women being coached by Councillor [name of local Muslim male councillor], who was also in the ward, all of them being coached to stand against me.*
>
> **(Sarah)**

Eventually, two women including **Sarah** were selected but not before local male elites had gone to great lengths to try and influence local party members (some hastily made to join) to vote against a woman they would not be able to control.

**Tamara** also recounted her experience of biradari politics. **Tamara** came from a Labour-voting family and had always harboured hopes of becoming a Labour councillor but said that she would never have been selected as she did not 'meet the biradari criteria'. She said she would have been blocked as she was from a caste[30] which was not accepted by the biradari in the city where she lived and that nepotism was widespread in local politics in places like Bradford and Birmingham with large Muslim communities. Another participant, **Salma**, echoed **Tamara's** experience of being from a background which was not easily accommodated by the biradari which was an important influence among Labour Party members in her local area.

**Salma** also gave examples of nepotism in the West Midlands, exhibited by biradari networks, in response to pressure from the Labour Party to increase the number of women candidates especially from minority communities:

> *You know ... when the law came out that you have to have a female so these males that were predominantly in the Asian areas that were the councillors, they needed to bring women in. Now they have to bring women because Labour Policy was that we need women. So now where are they going to get the women from?*

30. Note that Muslim representative organisations and individuals in the UK do not normally refer to 'caste' given the salience of the ummah as a universal grouping. However, caste alongside branch of Islam does have significance in private-life decisions about social relations (e.g. who to interact and ally with) and can form the basis upon which relations continue with people and organisations in countries of origin although less so as older generations die out.

*So, she was his daughter in law. She's never ever done anything related [to local politics], so, I don't know why she was brought in as a candidate. So you're looking at, you brought women in from the kitchen sink to stand as candidates because it was a system you wanted your girls in. And that's what you did. The same thing happened in [name of local area] with Councillor [name of Muslim male councillor], they brought his niece in [name of niece] who's doing well now Alhamdulillah. Then there was [name of prospective woman councillor], again a family member. So they're only bringing their family women in. They were not letting any other women in. [name of prospective woman candidate] was a young person who had no knowledge and would sit in [Labour party branch] meetings, she would be playing on her phone ... She was elected for quite a long time. She done two terms and then there was a big hoo-ha about the - you know when the councillors aren't doing anything, so they brought another girl in. ...*

*So, what I'm saying they're getting through family contacts, status of the family but they don't have any knowledge or experience of what to do and I do think it's unfair as well ... When the councillor here in [name of local area], when she stood, she went everywhere with her husband and her brother-in-law, they did all the work she didn't have to do all the work.*

**(Salma)**

Sometimes, in cases where women are not found within the biradari circles, the local party 'community leaders' were compelled to accept women who were not as well known to them but presumed controllable.

**Ghazala** who had served as councillor in a London borough was one such case. Her local party was thrilled to have found a young, enthusiastic South Asian woman interested in politics and who appeared biddable. She explained,

> *You know, at that stage I wasn't a known troublemaker. I was just this 21 year old girl basically that no one really knew, and so I wasn't a threat to anybody at that stage ... a little girl who would make up the numbers really. So, if we're talking about the local biradari leaders then that's how they saw me.*
>
> (Ghazala)

**Ghazala's** selection allowed her local Labour Party to claim it had heeded calls for diversity. Moreover, they placed her in a target seat[31] which she won.

Although biradari networks operate most evidently within British Pakistani and Kashmiri communities, local party activists and voters in other South Asian communities are not impervious to political influence exerted by their 'community leaders'.

**Shana,** not of Muslim background and not sought out by local biradari networks, argued that selection processes boil down to a game of numbers and of 'selecting for contacts' rather than 'selecting for capability' which ultimately works out firstly in favour of incumbent male councillors, followed by men considered next in line for council seats, followed by women family members or friends, and lastly the 'unknowns'. She said that the requirement to have more women means presenting candidates in a way which allow the numbers game to continue:

> *It doesn't matter, uh, capability wise, it's well, 'that's the one that we want' even if they can't string two sentences together, literacy is not a requirement. Communication skills is not a requirement. So, you can yeah, have people uh who cannot really understand the detail of, for example, a document or a report. But they fill a slot.*
>
> (Shana)

31. Target seats are those held by a political party with a small majority and hence are at risk of being targeted by opposition parties.

**Shana** was eventually selected for a safe seat in the West Midlands after running as a paper candidate three times, because the call for more women councillors to be elected became persistent and urgent and increasingly difficult to resist, and she was seen as someone who would be compliant:

> *I was a chip and I was put down and then I'm expected to be loyal and stand where I'm told to stand, so it's even - maybe I'm being harsh - but it's not about being a thinking person or being a discerning person or a having a independent view as such ... It's about ... that kind of an unquestioning loyalty.*
>
> **(Shana)**

**Shana**, **Ghazala** and **Sarah** were selected in council wards with large South Asian communities which had traditionally supplied their local Labour party branches with male political activists, those who saw themselves as community leaders. Not only did these women not conform to white male elite conceptualisations of the ideal local councillor, but faced the added burden of having to be approved by men within their own minority communities. When compelled to select more women to stand in local elections, these men brought in 'paper tigresses', women family members who were deemed safe, hence controllable. Such practices of nepotism, cronyism and other rule-bending such as the rigging of local members selection meetings were systematic in certain areas rather than isolated. They were mentioned by other participants (**Afiya, Bella, Bereni, Charifa, Jalna, Quentina, Qadira, Perin, Tanaz**) in this study.

Muslim women like **Salma** and **Tamara** who did not meet 'biradari criteria', were either not selected and abandoned party politics altogether (**Salma**) or were offered opportunities in other parties whose values aligned with their own **(Tamara**). Cases of women not being approved by biradari networks to stand for party selection have been raised in the past by Muslim women's organisations such as MWNUK, and reported in the media (BBC Newsnight 2016). For **Shana**, biradari politics and the selection of prospective Muslim/minority women candidates fits into a wider 'game of numbers' in local politics in which personal contacts count more than capability as a councillor and which therefore serve not only the biradari but also the party concerned.

It is worth noting at this point that that unlike women of South Asian heritage, Black women of African or African Caribbean heritage were not exposed to pressures imposed by an organised patriarchy in local politics based on kinship (such as the biradari). That is not to say that they did not face everyday sexism and misogyny within their own communities but it was not organised to keep Black women out of local politics.

## 4.3 Gendered and anti-Muslim racism in selection processes

Deviation from selection rules and tensions surrounding the imposition of diversity imperatives have been shown to throw up particular hurdles which halt or slow down women from minoritised communities wishing to be involved in local politics. However, participants in this study also reported on the discriminatory attitudes and behaviours of those running selection processes which they believe would have breached equality principles at least, if not also procedures, laid down in party rule books. Some participants were also of the view that such attitudes and behaviours are embedded institutionally; that is, in the procedures and cultures of political parties. Many experienced gendered and / or anti-Muslim racism in the run-up to interviews, at shortlisting interviews, at member selection meetings and post-selection simply because of who they were, and indicated that selection processes can constitute an unpleasant stage for prospective candidates like them.

Some experienced more than gendered and / or anti-Muslim racism as other intersecting identities came to bear upon their interactions with parties during the selection process. One participant, **Quentina**, described the selection process as nothing more than a 'bear pit' in which minoritised women applicants were the most likely targets to be caught in crossfires between local party elites and factions seeking to impose their particular interests and ways of thinking. The gendered racism and anti-Muslim sentiment displayed could be crude or subtle and ranged from being asked inappropriate personal questions during selection interviews, to reversing selection decisions, to being treated as an interloping outsider, to the negation of the knowledge, skills and experience possessed by selection candidates. This led to minoritised women feeling they were being disempowered or erased.

At her first selection interview, **Bella** was asked a number of personal questions including whether she intended having children in future. She was made to feel uncomfortable and although she was aware of the fact that equal treatment principles rendered such questions inadmissible, she felt obliged to assure the selectors that she was not interested in having a family. While **Bella** was eventually selected, she came to believe this was because she was engaged to be married at the time to a white man who was on friendly terms with white local Liberal Democrat councillors. The implicit message she received was that she had not been selected on merit and experienced the selection process as a deeply demeaning and disempowering event. At their first selection interview **Charifa** and **Taiwo** were also asked how they would manage the duties of a councillor while bringing up young children and being employed. Both **Charifa** and **Taiwo** reassured the respective sets of selection panellists that they were capable of juggling home, professional and council duties. In **Taiwo's** case the panellists pushed her to elaborate further while suggesting that she would find it particularly difficult because women's needs were overlooked in favour of men's priorities in African cultures. Both participants said they had been startled and irked by these questions but did not dare to suggest at the interview that the questions were inappropriate.

For **Bereni** the selection process was a painful and invisibilising affair. Her very first application for selection, across a number of wards, resulted in her being told, in the first instance, that she was selected, although not for her preferred ward. She noted:

> *it's not an easy journey, especially if you're a woman of colour wanting to stand for elected office because everything about you is questioned and everything about you is challenged and you have to justify why you feel, you know, able to stand.*
>
> **(Bereni)**

However, before her selection was confirmed, she was called aside by members of the selection panel:

> *I was called out and told that they decided they were not going to uphold the results because uh, there was another uh sitting councillor who didn't have a seat and they preferred to give her the preference and so I wasn't going to be allowed to go through; so that I found really painful because it felt like, even though, according to the party rules, I was the right, you know, I had been duly selected, but people uh just came together to decide that well, you know, it shouldn't be me and it should go to, you know, a counterpart, white counterpart and simply because she had been deselected everywhere else ... And that was painful to have to deal with, and to see how the rules, the rules are not the rules. So even though you know people say we abide by the rules, the rules are written by individuals to be manipulated by individuals and as and when they choose to, you know.*
>
> **(Bereni)**

In **Bereni's** case, selection rules were manipulated because party elites had a favoured a white woman candidate, seemingly more deserving due to having held a seat previously, while Bereni was easily dispensable as an unknown Black woman. **Bereni** was clear in her assessment of where she stood vis-à-vis her local party's selectorate:

> *You know, racism still plays and creeps up in people's minds and attitudes and thinking and so they forget the fact that I might have the passion, the drive and the ability and the willingness to serve. But somebody identifies me by my skin colour ... and so that then becomes the determining factor.*
>
> **(Bereni)**

**Bereni** felt erased but ultimately did not challenge the retraction of her selection or voice her disappointment and dissatisfaction for fear of jeopardising future selection opportunities. She concluded,

> *'I think ... it's just one of those things you just kind of take on the chin and just think well this is you know, this is a lesson'.*
>
> **(Bereni)**

**Laksha** was also overlooked in favour of a white woman who had switched from the Conservative Party to Labour, had lost her seat because she had switched and was then looking for a safe Labour seat. **Laksha** was disappointed not only because she had been promised support by selection panel members but also because a former Conservative (whose values had not aligned with those of Labour) was deemed more suitable or deserving.

**Taryn** applied for selection not expecting to be selected first time round. However, she was invited to interview and only came to know later that her candidacy was seen as a way to prevent an incumbent councillor's reselection for reasons of which she was unaware. She explained the manoeuvrings as follows:

> *I got invited to an interview, I got in the panel ... That then made the press that I was on the panel. I heard about me being on the panel via the local press.*

*I then stood for selection. It was quite a contentious selection because that was a point when [Scottish] Labour, there was a kind of churn if you call it, quite a few councillors were being deselected for whatever reason and the new people who were coming forward were seen as part of the problem. If you can see if uh, there's a lot of negativity. So it was quite a quite a difficult selection and I got selected. I was then, in some people's eyes, in some people's views, I was the risk candidate ... I wear a headscarf, so there was a view that me wearing a headscarf could be a problem, that I could, that Labour could potentially lose the seat which was a Labour seat because this was the first time a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf was coming forward.*

(Taryn)

**Taryn's** testimony suggests that news of her being shortlisted was leaked to the press in order to raise the stakes in the selection process, given her visibly Muslim identity and because she was competing against the incumbent councillor, a white woman. She felt like a pawn in an unseen game played by opposing factions and recalled the selection process as highly controversial and difficult to survive. It meant that she became a target of gendered racism and Islamophobia in the local party which was reported by the media; she said that she had experienced:

*... all of it [sexism, racism, Islamophobia]; I've heard that 'she's not westernised enough', she's, you know, my headscarf is an issue for many, has been an issue for them ... they couldn't say my name properly.*

(Taryn)

Following selection, **Taryn** continued to receive a negative reception from some local party members and residents in her prospective ward as she canvassed door-to-door. Her visible Muslim-ness and perceived lack of western-ness were considered factors which made her a weak candidate and unable to perform the role of a local councillor. She was also seen by many as an outsider replacing a long-standing white woman councillor and thus disrupting an established racial and cultural order. Reaction against this perceived disruption of an older order was expressed through denigration of her Muslim dress and the lack of effort to get her name right, for example.

Even where minoritised women are actively sought out, invited to join their local party and asked to apply for selection, they are perceived as outsiders by local members and those against whom they are likely to compete. According to **Taiwo** it was a question of predominantly white local party leaders and members not being able to see past skin colour, the fact she was a Black woman and of equating those characteristics with lack of political knowledge and ability to perform and win:

> *It is, it can be, I don't know, disconcerting, because you come, I come from a background, you're a woman and I and I respect that. I respect that and I know who I am. But because I'm a woman does not make me a second-class citizen and it does not mean because other people have their stereotypical view of what a woman, an African woman should be or behave like does not mean, therefore, that is what I have to do, but you feel it. And ... you know, that's why they're treating you the way they're treating you. And you're sitting there because they don't want to talk to you. They think, 'Oh, no, we can't talk to her. She's African. She's a woman'. So, you know, 'leave her be'. But then you feel like isolated. ... It's like you're taboo, like 'oh no, no, oh, why are you here? What are you doing in this space?' And there were other people who used to ask me, where is my husband?*
>
> (Taiwo)

**Taiwo's** first meeting to discuss her selection application was unsettling as she perceived negative attitudes and body language underpinned by gendered racism. It left her questioning herself, and angered about having to fight for her place when she had expected support from those who had approached and invited her in order to further their diversity credentials:

> *Why you want to do this? What has brought to you into it and you feel like actually, do I need to be selling myself to you because there's none of me here?*

> *You should be you know, be having me, talking to me, encouraging me, empowering me, but I have to prove to you why I need to be in this space?*
>
> **(Taiwo)**

In the cases above, participants recounted experiences of gendered and anti-Muslim racism. However, a few participants struggled against prejudices and discrimination based on more than the perceived characteristics of gender, race and religion. **Jalna** and **Bella's** experiences illustrate this. These two cases also show that parties appear unable to adequately conceptualise multiple intersecting discrimination and to then establish practice which is capable of combating it.

**Jalna**, an intense Labour Party activist over two decades, had applied for selection many times. She was selected just once in 2022, in an unsafe seat which she did not win. After year-on-year selection application rejections, Jalna tells a story of gendered and anti-Muslim racism as a hijab-wearing Muslim woman combined with intra-ethnic and intra-religious community discrimination which she feels has become institutionalised in her local council and has ultimately prevented her from becoming a local councillor.

**Jalna** is from the Ahmadiyya community which since its emergence has been considered non-Muslim by Sunni Muslims in particular.[32] This 'heretical' status is inscribed into the constitution of Pakistan and other countries where the state's interpretation of Islam prevails. Consequently, Ahmadis are denied many basic constitutional rights; in Pakistan they do not enjoy freedom of religion or the right to vote. They also face restrictive and discriminatory practices in civil society which has spilled over into violent attacks against them and their property. The view of Ahmadis as not Muslim and non-citizens has been imported to the UK over the last 70 years through successive migrations from Pakistan and has filtered into the social and political life of South Asian Muslim communities.

The intra-ethnic and intra-religious prejudices and discrimination faced by Jalna were expressed in a number of ways over the many times she sought selection. She gave the example of her last battle. **Jalna** was provided a mentor - a South Asian man though not Muslim - who had been a longstanding local councillor and cabinet member, and who did everything it seemed to deter her from applying for selection. The obstacles ranged from his failure to turn up at successive mentoring meetings to assuming 'controlling, ridiculing, threatening, intimidating' behaviour when talking to her, to categorically warning Jalna to 'stay away' from the safe Labour ward in which she and her family had lived for many years and for which she wished to be selected. **Jalna** believed that he favoured applicants of other faiths and ethnicities in the South Asian community; he told her that her selection, compared with that of the Sikh applicant he was backing, would pose awkward questions:

> *'Your lot [Ahmadiyya community] have too many problems.'*
>
> **(Jalna)**

32. The exclusion of Ahmadis from the Ummah (world community of Muslims) is justified on the basis of their belief in the appearance of a messiah (Mirza Ghulam Ahmed), the community's founder in Punjab, in 1889 when the world ends. For further reading see, Robinson, T. and Lunn, J. (2016); Wolf, S. (2019).

Eventually, due to persistence and her activist experience, **Jalna** was selected with two other prospective councillors for what she termed as 'the last of the last seats', in a ward which historically had proved unwinnable for her party. **Jalna's** mentor was not the only person to stand in her way. As a prospective candidate in 2022 she said she continued to be shunned by incumbent Labour councillors and members in her local party branch, including Muslims who told her that she was not a Muslim and not one of them. This translated into a lack of support when out canvassing and in their social media posts.

**Jalna** felt that the barriers she faced were interconnected, that a complicity operated between those who were blocking her and that her outsider status was triply consolidated: for Muslims she was a heretic; she was not of the same ethno-religious background as the key South Asian male councillors who acted as local power brokers in the selection of prospective minority candidates across different wards; for the bosses in the 'Big House' (white men - leader of the Labour group, council leader, local MP) as she put it, she was an unwanted distraction and met with dismissiveness and was quietly directed back to South Asian 'community leaders' when **Jalna** tried to discuss her situation with them. **Jalna** analysed this as 'institutionalised racism, Islamophobia, sexism and anti-Ahmadiyya persecution' in her local party.

**Bella** was a Liberal Democrat councillor in a London borough until 2022 when she was expelled by her party after formally complaining about unconscious racial bias within its ranks and the failure to make reasonable adjustments with regard to her disability. She had got through an uncomfortable selection process, only to be faced with further hurdles post-selection, on starting her campaign for election as a councillor.

**Bella** spoke of two situations in which she felt harassed and discriminated. The first involved a powerful party campaigns manager whose interest in promoting a close family member as a prospective parliamentary candidate locally over-rode the need to support Bella and produce ample and positive campaign literature and audio-visuals for her. According to Bella, her campaign literature was marked by images of the campaigns manager's relative so as to get the latter known locally, while it highlighted facial aspects of Bella's disability in a way which undermined her self-confidence. **Bella** stated that the campaigns manager expressly ignored her input and wishes with regard to images and text she wanted to include in the literature. In addition, the team responsible for producing the customary social media advertisements and campaign videos for candidates, failed to do so, spending less than half the budget allocated to Bella's campaign, through special Avebury funds set aside for London borough candidates from under-represented groups. **Bella** felt that one key member of the campaigns team had ignored her due to racial bias. The agent concerned had been moved from a party campaigns team in another London borough - because 'there was a lot of complaints about her to do with race' (**Bella**) - to **Bella's** borough where voters and prospective candidates were predominantly white. Besides, this agent had thrown all efforts into supporting the campaign in a ward where three white male candidates were running. When confronted by **Bella** about the uneven support, the campaigns agent was reported to have said:

> *'We just decided that you weren't electable'.*
>
> (Bella)

The second situation recounted by **Bella** was of being deliberately excluded from a victory photo shoot the day after polling had taken place. She believes she was excluded for not conforming to expectations of a suitably deferential, disabled, Asian woman who ought to have been grateful for being given the opportunity to stand for election. Bella, who had suffered a seizure at the counting station was taken home after being declared duly elected as councillor but was assured by the campaigns team that they would let her know where and when the victory photo shoot would take place the next day. When she checked her emails the following morning, she discovered that the photo shoot had been scheduled early in the morning. By the time she got to the meeting place, she had missed it completely and was the only winning candidate who was absent from subsequently released images. She also considers that had there been serious intent to include her, greater efforts would have been made by party colleagues concerned to help her get to the photo shoot, especially as they had known she had suffered a seizure at the counting station the previous night and was feeling under the weather.

**Bella** complained about her treatment (on grounds of failure to make reasonable adjustments for disability, unconscious bias and hence non-protection of her protected characteristics) to the party's then president who asked **Bella** to compile a dossier of her case. However, the president deemed there was little merit in the case and the complaint was 'fobbed off' because, according to Bella, 'it was just about protecting the reputation of the party'. **Bella's** complaint triggered an unexpectedly harsh response from the party which included counter complaints against her by members of the campaigns team among others, disciplinary action resulting in her being banned from standing for parliamentary elections for two years, being blocked from undertaking her duties as elected chairperson of the party's disability body, de-selection as incumbent councillor and eventual expulsion from the party. Because of the party's unwillingness to treat her complaint seriously, **Bella** felt she was obliged to issue a discrimination claim against it.

At the time of **Bella's** interview, a court hearing was expected within a three-month period. **Bella's** case may be uncommon, but illustrates that parties appear unequipped or unwilling to engage properly with complaints brought against them by insiders. The lack of robust institutional complaints structures and agents trained to tackle and mediate in such cases, together with a collective failure to combat sexism, racism, anti-Muslim attitudes and behaviours, intersecting with discrimination based on other perceived characteristics, constitutes a powerful institutional (demand-side) barrier which pushes back women from minoritised communities as they question if they are really wanted and fit in.

**Gulshan**, a Muslim woman of African heritage, spent a long time questioning whether she would fit in and applied for selection with great trepidation about facing complex barriers of intersecting discrimination which she felt could lead to the unmaking of her:

> *I had a lot of self doubt because again, it's that thing where I'm just saying maybe I'm not the right person because people like me don't get elected. Will they elect someone that looks like me etc. and ... you just don't see people like you. And I was also, I'm Black. I'm darker skin.*

*So I was like, I'm not even like South Asian or anything like, so I was just like there's just so many things different about me and ...you know, there's so many intersections where you face various barriers. So I'm just like, I'm just a recipe for disaster.*

**(Gulshan)**

The majority of participants in this study also faced individual expressions of gendered and / or anti-Muslim racism by fellow party members, officials and councillors involved in selection, including the pre and post stages. These expressions were based on prevalent stereotypes of minoritised women's ethnic, religious and social identity and unsurprisingly, evaluation of their ability to perform as a councillor was filtered through these stereotypes rather than the women's respective political identities and the evidence of knowledge and experience they presented. Some of these discriminatory attitudes and behaviours were expressed in face-to-face interactions, others indirectly via intermediaries or social media; the examples are too numerous to list here. However, it is important that such discriminatory attitudes and behaviours are not overlooked because of their individualised nature but that they are situated in the context of the wider structural or institutional discrimination that is faced by women from minoritised communities who put themselves forward as prospective local election candidates.

# Barriers Faced By Incumbent Minority Women Councillors

## 5.1 Overview

Once elected, women councillors generally, and minority women councillors more specifically, follow career paths in local government politics strewn with further hurdles, making councillor (non)retention part of the problem of their under-representation (Allen 2012; Rallings et al 2008). In this section, the focus remains on demand-side barriers which influence the way in which racially minoritised women experience incumbency as local councillors and determine where their journey ends.

Previous research and personal testimonies - in the UK and other countries – indicate that 'councillor drop out' is greater among women than men, and that once women drop out they are less likely than men to return to local government or other institutional politics (Allen 2012; McTernan 2023). Moreover, much of the very sparse literature on councillor drop out has found that it is women (and young) councillors who are most likely to drop out after a single councillorship term (Rallings 2008; Carson 2023). Numerous barriers are considered to account for councillor drop out among women including: increasing complexity of the content and roles contained within the job of councillor, leading to burn out particularly among women who bear a triple burden of political, professional and personal duties; precarity of the job and lack of opportunity to build a financially secure future; a hostile working environment (experiences of bullying and harassment) and fear for personal safety (Andersson 2022; Carson 2023; Garton-Crosbie 2022; McTernan 2023).

For women councillors from racialised minorities, these barriers become even more difficult to surmount when scepticism (and sometimes mockery) about their ability to perform the complex job of a councillor, or hostility in the workplace or job insecurity is magnified because of their gender, race, religion and / or other characteristics. Hence, it is not unreasonable to expect that dropout rates among minority women councillors will be even higher; a number of testimonies which have made it into the media would support this expectation (Bano 2021; King 2021; Mulholland 2004; Nicholls 2023). It is worth noting also that while councillor drop out has previously been defined as councillors standing down due to retirement and non-election (Allen 2012: 208), there is in fact a fine line to be drawn between dropping out (of one's own will) and deselection or being forced out of a party / expulsion. Our research found that deselection and expulsion are often the culmination of long, drawn out disagreements between women councillors and certain hierarchies within their party, and that many would rather see a compromise in case of disagreement than drop out altogether. Arguably, any drop out figures should also include those who are deselected and leave politics or are forced to stand down / expelled.

Apart from the abovementioned barriers which make it difficult for women councillors to stay in post, they are also less likely to be promoted once in office and to occupy committee chair, cabinet, deputy council and council leader positions (Bochel and Bochel 2008). As there is a lack of disaggregated data on representation by gender at leadership levels, only an approximate picture emerges of where women councillors are positioned in local council cabinets across the UK. According to the Fawcett Society women comprise 30 per cent of cabinet members. This rises to 40 per cent when women council leaders are included in the count: 17 per cent in England and 18 per cent in Wales (Bazeley et al 2017:46). The Fawcett Society study also found that only 14.3 per cent of women hold what are considered the top cabinet portfolios of finance or economic development (Ibid.) while research undertaken by Bochel and Bochel (2008: 432) found that women councillors are disproportionately more likely to hold posts which entail: 'caring' areas, such as social services and social inclusion, housing, health and community and neighbourhood services, while they are less likely to hold responsibility for spheres such as corporate affairs, regeneration and economic development and transport.

Given the patchiness of data disaggregated by gender alone, it is unsurprising that data encompassing gender, ethnicity, religion and / or other characteristics has not been collected for local councillors, making it difficult to ascertain the proportion of minoritised women in cabinet and council leadership positions. The limited opportunities for progression feed into dissatisfaction among women councillors who may feel stuck in insecure positions, and who finally leave for improved employment opportunities elsewhere. Among the participants of this study, one held a council leadership post, one a deputy leadership post while another four held cabinet portfolios in Education, Health and Social Care and in Housing. The number in leadership positions appears high given the sample size but these councillors operated in areas with large racially minoritised populations where the diversity among councillors was high. However, the type of cabinet portfolios held aligns with the findings of Bochel and Bochel (2008) which show that women do not gain what are considered 'hard' cabinet posts linked with the finance and economics side of local infrastructure and services.

## 5.2 Increasing demands and gendered pressures of the councillor's job

There is widespread agreement that the job of local councillor, initially conceived as a side line for relatively well-off or retired men, has expanded exponentially in the 2000s. Whereas, councillors used to be mainly involved in the odd ceremonial event, council meetings and committees to discuss and set out financial strategy and planning of infrastructure and services, the LGA's most recent description of 'The role of a councillor' divides a councillor's duties according to four aspects: representing one's local area; community leadership, developing council policy, and planning and regulation (LGA 2024b). All four aspects involve communicating and consulting with myriad stakeholders (whether business, trade unions, third sector organisations, religious institutions, other statutory bodies) and the public, and also advocating for particular groups while managing competing interests for the greater good of the community.

This expansion of councillor duties over the past couple of decades and more is the result of several factors including: national policy and legislation (e.g. the Local Government Act 2000) which has placed greater financing, budgeting and planning responsibilities on local councils; critical events (e.g. the UK's exit from the EU, the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost of living crisis); and the explosion of social media which has obliged councillors to use social media platforms extensively to engage with constituents and local stakeholders, thus adding yet another layer of tasks to their workload.

Moreover, great emphasis has been placed on councillors' direct engagement with their constituents, whether in respect of relaying policy decisions which may affect the latter or with regard to constituents' individual or group needs and concerns in the form of casework. Community engagement, in particular advocating or problem shooting on behalf of constituents, has become the most time-consuming and emotionally demanding part of a councillor's job. For many women councillors such work resembles what they already do in their private life (caring for and advocating on behalf of their children at school, or on behalf of elderly dependents needing health or social care services); and what they might do in their professional life as employees in statutory or third sector agencies which support individuals and communities. Hence an 'ethics of care' dimension is part of many women councillors' approach to the job of councillor, much more so than it is for their male counterparts. Inevitably this means that they become the 'go to' councillor, sometimes even for constituents who live outside their ward.

Participants in this study representing multi-member wards, especially where their co-councillors were men, spoke of constituents preferring to ask them for support with problems rather than approaching male councillors. Many participants came from and represented wards which were home to disadvantaged minoritised groups; they understood the latter's needs and problems first hand and felt they could make a change for the better. Almost every participant of this study, believed that an essential element of a councillor's job was to make a positive difference not just through policy but also on-the-ground daily practice and interactions with constituents. As someone who mentors new councillors and cabinet members, Leela believed that the difference between the attitude of women councillors and that of men councillors was reflected in the following example:

> *Working with this particular councillor, who's fairly new he's male. His perception of his role as a cabinet member ... was completely different to mine. He talks about what powers do I have, whereas I talk about how can I make change? Do you see the difference?*
>
> **(Leela)**

**Laksha** who had overturned a Conservative majority in the seat she contested, also made the point about the importance, especially for women councillors of minority background, of working for change and improving constituents' lives through casework. She explained:

> *The Tories had been in [name of ward] for 22 years until I won right ... three counsellors, all Tory. So I ... had people saying to me 'Oh my God, I can come and see you now, I can come and see a Labour councillor'. I knew if I didn't do a good job, I had to do a good job because I didn't want them to think 'Oh, we've got a Labour councillor and she's not made any difference', right? And also, because I'm a person of colour - and that stigma that we have ... so we have to work harder ... People say we work three times harder. ... for me getting up to there was about working hard making sure I do my casework. Somebody said to me don't forget who put you there.*
>
> (Laksha)

While the vast majority of participants in this study placed great belief and weight on casework, they were also frustrated about working much harder than their male colleagues.

**Sayeeda**, a councillor in a ward represented by three other male councillors had good reason to believe that she carried a far higher casework load than her ward co-councillors and spoke of the indifference that many male councillors demonstrated to casework, accusing some of not even holding a weekly ward surgery as required. As a self-declared socialist feminist councillor of refugee migrant background, she said she felt bound to care about the difficult situations faced by forced migrants and their descendants not just in her ward but across the local authority area:

> *I go to lots of different events with everybody coming, talking to me needing help. Like seriously, I felt like I had surgeries at these events ... I had a chair and people were queuing to see me ... You can see people are in need of help. ... I want to go and do these things, but sometimes it's unhealthy for me. Like after [a particular event] I had literally 20, 23 emails coming in about scholarships, how to apply for them, how I can help them, how I can engage with them for employment rights.*

> *So many things were coming in. … And this is a small, tiny bit I'm talking about, because on a daily basis, people ask me to write support letters because I know them, because I see them in different events. I know their daughters, I know their sons … and like I have a duty as a … refugee person background being elected to support this community … I go beyond my work cause I feel like I'm in a privileged position. I want to help.*
>
> **(Sayeeda)**

However, with casework in addition to public events, council meetings and committee work, **Sayeeda** found she was overloaded and exhausted. She explained:

> *And on top of this [casework], you go to different committees, four to five committees, you go to community council meetings. I have four surgeries personally in my ward … and other councillors don't even have one surgery, don't go to community council meetings, don't engage in festivals, meeting groups in their wards … I need to stop and slow down because it's affecting me personally, so it's very hard.*
>
> **(Sayeeda)**

For **Sayeeda** the councillorship amounted to a full-time occupation but, as for many others, this was in addition to her employment, two days per week as an MP's office manager. **Sayeeda** felt that as a single person, she was fortunate in not having family responsibilities also.

**Quentina** was in a different position. She was a full-time working mother of five children when she became a councillor. As a councillor of African-Caribbean heritage, **Quentina** also felt a responsibility to offer as much support as possible. She experienced a heavy burden of casework emerging from an area where about 60 per cent of voters were from racially minoritised communities. Her own community relied on her first-hand knowledge of their concerns and had an expectation that she would address their problems, while other minoritised communities tried to 'adopt' her in lieu of 'one of theirs'. A sizeable portion of **Quentina's** casework arose from South Asian women who came to her weekly surgeries or who approached her in other public spaces because they felt unable to approach male councillors from their own communities about personal and family problems for fear of being exposed and facing a patriarchal backlash.

**Quentina's** experience shows that representing communities in areas with large disadvantaged minority populations is:

> *Very demanding and very challenging in terms of the constituents that you're dealing with and especially if the constituents are from your community ... it then increases the level of work you get tenfold.*
>
> **(Quentina)**

While **Quentina** had taken up her councillorship on the principle that *'you ... don't give up your day job'*, she found she had to choose eventually between the councillorship in which she was deeply invested and her regular employment, and eventually gave up the latter with a fair amount of misgiving. The same was true for Leela who had somehow managed to juggle personal, professional and political responsibilities over 12 years as a councillor until she was given a cabinet post. After two years in cabinet she decided to focus on politics and her family:

> *Doing this role is literally a four-day-a-week role, sometimes it's even five. I've been a cabinet member, as I mentioned since 2014, and there is absolutely no way, no way I could do my role as a cabinet member [as well as day job].*
>
> **(Quentina)**

The gendered pressures of councillor duties which govern that women take on the lion's share of the intensive day-to-day engagement with constituents while men councillors use their time to tackle the 'hard' business of leading a given local authority leads to frustration and disappointment among women who may then drop out to pursue employment opportunities elsewhere.

Among the participants of this study, none had dropped out because of such pressures as they had found ways to manage them - mostly by working around their family obligations or by dropping out of their 'day job' - but a number of them spoke about the possible effects of such pressures on their mental wellbeing and reaching a breaking point. However, regardless of the arrangements that individual women make to accommodate a councillor's job with family and professional employment responsibilities, the reality is that political institutions have integrated a cultural, gendered conception of time into their structures and workings which is masculine and which assumes that society is based on the nuclear family unit in which women maintain the home and children so that men may be present as and when required to undertake political duties. This conception of time is reflected in the way that council business is organised as discussed.

# 5.3 Precarity of the job and lack of opportunity to build a financially secure future

## 24/7 commitments

Another set of barriers encountered by incumbent minoritised women councillors is to do with the way in which council business is organised on the one hand, and the fact that it is not possible to build a secure future while undertaking it, on the other hand. One of the main features of a councillor's job is its irregularity in terms of when it is undertaken. It is dominated by a masculine conception of time which has not changed as more diverse actors have entered local politics. In this conception of time councillors must make themselves ever available to perform duties, whether it is during the working day, evenings, or weekends. Moreover, there is no set pattern from one day or week to the next. Such irregularity most disadvantages women and those from under-represented backgrounds as it assumes that there are few if any other constraints on a councillor's time, whether that is professional employment which provides their livelihood or family responsibilities. This is why historically councillor roles have been the preserve of men who are retired, self-employed, or in professions allowing them personal autonomy. They do not integrate the gendered roles assigned to women, or any limits imposed on those with a disability, or on anyone who is not in a position to control their work-life time.

The seepage of the councillor's job into all parts of the day and week, was mentioned by several participants in this study. Taiwo described a common day in her weekly calendar:

> *My boys go, 'Mom, you're on the phone. You go from work, you travel to these places to go and talk. You have a parish council meeting almost every other week, you're going to visit people'. Yesterday my son came to say hello, 8:00 o'clock, I got a call from a member of the community who needed support. I rushed, put my clothes on straight there. And I was there with the police and everybody else from about past 8 till past 11. And my son is like, this is why I tell you this is not worth it.*
>
> **(Taiwo)**

**Taiwo** works as a part-time nurse and has family responsibilities which means that every minute of her waking time is occupied with the triple burden of personal, political and professional duties. **Ghazala, Quentina, Deepa, Gulshan, Shana, Tanvi** also commented on the all-encompassing nature of the councillor's job, the lack of formal annual or maternity leave, pension and the long-term unsustainability of the job. Most snatched some holiday time in the summer when local councils pause council and committee meetings during August, although casework and other public-facing activities continued:

> *It can be a 24 [hour] or seven-day-a-week job because I look at everything all the time I have. Even when I went to America to see my son I wanted to keep on working so I'd be on top of things. I've always worked while I've been away … One shouldn't have to and you don't, there's no requirement that you do, but this is you know, it's not it's not a full time job, but it feels like that.*
>
> **(Tanvi)**

As far as forms of leave are concerned, some councils have introduced paid maternity or family leave which covers maternity, paternity and adoption leave,[33] but this does not always work out in practice. **Quentina** pointed out that her council had introduced maternity leave so that women councillors starting from 2018 could formally benefit from it. However, as she explained, the reality was that:

> *Many of those councillors that have taken advantage of it [maternity leave] have actually lost their seat because when you're not there for six months and you're in an area that is very demanding and you're not there, they don't give you any replacement councillors to cover you. You don't get nobody to cover your work while you're gone, there's no backfill. A number of those women don't actually carry on, or they lose their seats, they get deselected.*
>
> **(Quentina)**

33. According to the LGA (2024a), whose Labour Women's Taskforce had drawn up a parental leave policy, only four per cent of local authorities in England had maternity / parental leave policies in place for councillors by 2017, while in some other councils such leave was discretionary and required individual councillors to make arrangements with the agreement of the council leader. While the figure should have increased since then, the Fawcett Society indicated that in 2017, 75 per cent of councils they had surveyed offered no arrangements at all (Bazeley et al 2017: 8-9).

**Ghazala** also found that while her council had introduced maternity leave, her request for it was received negatively:

> *Now there's parental leave and there is, like lots of councillors have signed up to it. But then it's like if you're the first person to take it, what did people say about you? And ... when I, when I spoke to colleagues about it, it was actually the older female councillors who were most against it, because they would say, 'why are you treating this as a job? It's not a job'.*
>
> (Ghazala)

For women councillors from racially minoritised communities, the irregular pattern of a councillor's job is even more of a barrier as many face time constraints imposed either by part-time or full-time employment to support themselves and their families, and by cultural norms which govern gendered expectations of motherhood and family care within their communities. These cultural norms pressure women not to seek political office. Many also work as councillors in disadvantaged communities where the nature of problems faced by constituents (long term unemployment, poverty and debt increased by the cost of living crisis, young people and street crime, violence including domestic violence and so much else) means they must cope with extraordinarily high levels of casework and be prepared to be called out at any time of the day or night to deal with urgent issues. All of these factors mitigate in favour of a higher than normal drop out among women councillors from racially minoritised communities.

## Allowances rather than salary

Councillors' remuneration takes the form of an annual basic allowance (rather than salary) which recognises the time that a 'backbench' councillor will spend on council work, serving constituents. In addition, they may be paid special responsibility allowances or SRAs (e.g. membership of certain committees and council partnership boards, membership of cabinet, council leader and leader of the opposition group responsibilities) and any expenses they incur. However, councillor allowances are set by individual councils and are not determined by suitable nationally accepted metrics.

This has meant that there are huge variances in basic allowances and SRAs paid to councillors across the UK nations and regions; for example, in the last known survey of councillor allowances in 2018-19, the highest basic allowance in England was set by Manchester City Council at £16,926 while the lowest (£687) was paid by Torbay Council. Similarly, the highest SRA for directly-elected mayor was paid by Newham Council at £82,620 while Torbay Council paid its council leader an SRA of £2,333.

The basic allowances are modest[34] and, in line with the masculine conception of time and historical model of the local councillor's job, suggest that a councillor's role must be supplementary to other paid activity or that it is voluntary. For most councillors the level of remuneration means that they must maintain a foothold in paid employment. Additionally, the fact that councillors receive an allowance rather than a salary means that they forego many benefits which salaried employees enjoy. **Quentina** explained the disadvantages of receiving an allowance:

> *As a woman in politics, I'm not gonna sit here and tell you it's easy. But it's what are you prepared to put into it for very little financial gain because it meant during my middle years I paid no pension. So that is a big issue for me in [local] politics ... there is no pension attached to it. ... you have to fight within the community for very little financial gain because up until 2015/16 I earned £16,000 a year and that was classed as an allowance, not a wage. There was no pension attached to it and that's another issue for women who are going through, if you want to go into politics, up until recently there was no maternity leave, there was no care leave, you had no financial support for pensions. You had no rights. It was just an allowance. And they felt they owned you.*
>
> **(Quentina)**

Additionally, the basic allowance does not leave councillors of modest background (without a high-earning spouse, substantial savings, family fortunes or other resources) any extra money which may be invested into private pension schemes or savings accounts for a secure future. Moreover, women councillors from racially minoritised communities tend not to benefit greatly from SRAs as very few occupy the role of committee chair, cabinet member or council leader; in general they occupy the back benches. Among the participants of this study, the majority sat on at least one council committee but did not hold the Chair position while those who were cabinet members (four), deputy leader (one) or leader of the council (one) will have gained from SRAs.

Aside from the basic allowance, councillors are permitted to claim expenses, including those covering childcare where certain council duties are concerned. However, many women councillors are wary of making claims for fear of getting a bad name. For example, **Charifa** never submitted claims for childcare (or other) expenses, pointing out that other women councillors felt the same:

34. Following the calculation method proposed by MoneySavingExpert (Hamilton 2024), the highest basic allowances (for large metropolitan unitary councils) in 2019 fell just either side of the national living wage in the UK in 2019 (£14,942).

> *OK, so if you have childcare expenses, they do pay it. You'd be surprised ... nobody claims it ... you know, if you claim too much expenses you get a bad name in public press, you know, so many women on those grounds don't claim the expenses, you know, for childcare and things because you may get a bad press. We need to come out of that mindset actually, that if you need to claim childcare expenses, you should claim childcare expenses. You know, that's the only way it's going to work.*
>
> **(Charifa)**

A few participants in this study - **Tanvi, Deepa** and **Tasneem** - while recognising that remuneration was modest and that it excluded certain benefits, nevertheless saw the councillor role as primarily a voluntary one which was not to be equated with a paid job. And while they agreed that women from racially minoritised communities should be encouraged to become councillors, they also accepted that it was difficult for many to do so because of culturally gendered roles and expectations and that many did not wish to rock the boat. This stance may be explained by their individual situations. Tanvi had grown up children and was from a comfortable middle class background. **Tasneem** shared responsibility for a young child with her husband and worked as a research project manager but was a relatively new councillor (elected in 2022) within a medium-sized council. She was a backbencher and had not built up extra duties as a councillor. **Deepa** had no family responsibilities and worked for her local Conservative Party office. She indicated that the women councillors who she knew, who were from racially minoritised communities and who lasted longer than one term in office, tended to be single, separated or divorced. The stance of these participants may also be explained by the tension that many women politicians in the Conservative Party face which is that they accept certain values of liberal feminism which promote the feminisation of political spaces without challenging the ideal of (heterosexual) marriage, motherhood and the family as a structural cause of women's disadvantage.

## The risk of deselection

Among the factors contributing to the precariousness of the councillor's role and to difficulty in building a secure future is the risk of deselection. This factor should be taken into account when considering drop out rates and the reluctance of women to return to elected office, once bruised by the experience. There is a lack of evidence surrounding deselection as part of dropout rates among women councillors but the experience of participants in this study suggests that deselection (necessarily against one's will) is frequently used by local leaders to achieve a desired balance of power within their party's council group and is deeply traumatic for those who are deselected.

At the time interviews were conducted for this study, two women councillors, **Shana** and **Tanaz,** were facing deselection battles. **Shana** was deselected in a safe-seat ward and subsequently selected in an unwinnable ward in a clear signal that her local party leadership intended to clear the way for another, more preferred candidate. **Tanaz** was among a number of councillors in the ruling Labour group of a Midlands council who were deselected en bloc as they had refused to comply with certain council policies and were considered disrupters. A further three councillors, namely **Quentina, Sarah** and **Bella** had been deselected or suspended in 2014, 2020 and 2022 respectively. **Quentina** had been deselected due to intense fractional politics along lines of ethnicity within her ward, with a particular ethnic group wishing to select 'their' candidate in place of **Quentina**. After a vigorous push back from **Quentina**, accompanied by mediation between the groups concerned, **Quentina'**s deselection was cancelled and she was re-selected. However, **Sarah** was deselected amid an aggressive smear campaign against her which involved the threat of violence (see below), while **Bella** was suspended, then expelled due to a major rift with party leaders, following a complaint she had lodged against her party for discrimination on grounds of gender, race and disability.

All of the women mentioned above, apart from **Quentina**, have stepped away from politics in order to focus on professional activity in the third sector, Education or grassroots activism, on the basis of the harm they felt had been done to them during deselection processes and by the fear of an insecure future.

The majority of participants across all parties considered that the inability to earn enough remuneration, combined with the possibility of deselection (or in critical circumstances expulsion) from one's party constitutes a significant barrier for many incumbent women councillors from disadvantaged racially minoritised communities who drop out after a term for fear of not being able to build a secure future for themselves.

## Hostile, unsafe working environment

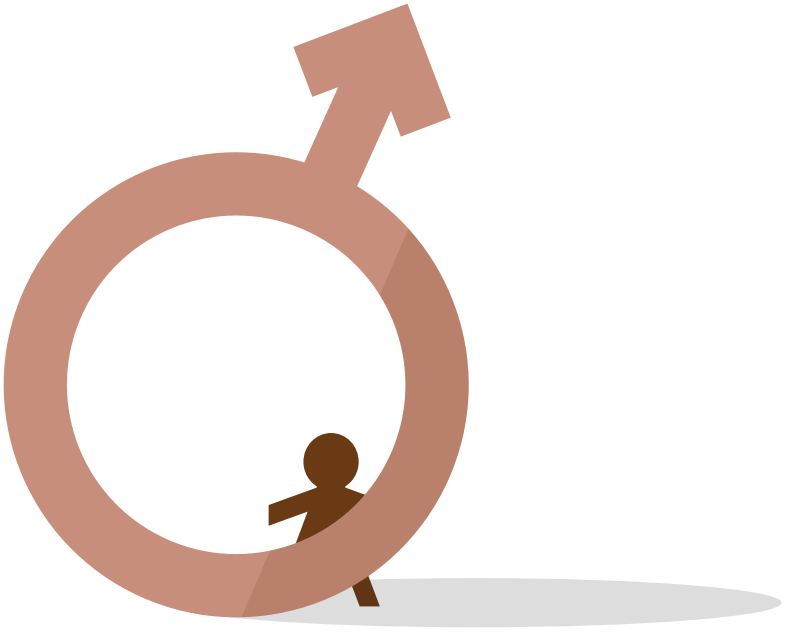
This final section on barriers faced by incumbent minority women councillors considers the working environment which the majority of participants in this study experienced as hostile and sometimes unsafe. Most participants explained the hostility as the product of an intensely masculine culture which has been created and reinforced historically to maintain the position and power of relatively affluent men in the community. According to participants the hostility encountered was expressed in several forms and occurred precisely because of their variously intersecting identities; as women of racially minoritised background and, in the case of Muslim women, because of their belonging to a community whose religion was frequently invoked to keep them out of the political arena. For one participant, the antagonism and lack of support she faced in her role as councillor was also due to her intersecting identities as a 'a woman of colour with a disability'.

# Male domination and masculine culture

The most recent research on the demographic make up of local councils in the UK has shown that 95 per cent are male-dominated, and that not even three per cent (18 out of 382) had reached parity between women and men (Fawcett 2023). In other words, women were continuing to be pushed and kept out of UK town halls, while male power (and its associated advantages) continued to be protected.

The most recent LGA Census figures show that on average, 11.5 per cent of councillors have been in their seats for 25 years or more and that this had not changed since 2010 (2022: 18). Given that the vast majority of councillors are older white men, it is fair to assume that they are the ones blocking seats over a long period of time and refusing to give up power. At the same time the slow rate of increase (under one per cent between 2019 and 2022) in the number of women councillors (Fawcett 2022) is not likely to result in an entrenchment of women councillors because drop out rates are much higher among them, regardless of the natural turnover among older white male councillors. With such hefty majorities of men firmly in control, local councils across the UK are enveloped in traditional, unchanging cultures of masculinity which value apparently masculine qualities (emotional neutrality, certainty, control and assertiveness, competitiveness, discipline, reason and rationality) combined with instrumental skills and public knowledge. As women are seen to lack these qualities, skills and knowledge they are considered unsuitable for political office.

However, when women do enter these masculine spaces, displaying so-called masculine traits and practising certain skills and knowledge, then very often their councillor role becomes restricted and promotion to more powerful roles is blocked as a means of protecting male incumbents' position. In this way, women councillors are pushed into taking care (of constituents) rather than taking charge (of policy and strategic direction of local government). Where women defy this gendered order (by being outspoken, issuing challenges or taking initiatives independently), then numerous methods may be used to force them into compliance or dropping out. Thus, masculine cultures in town halls create a hostile working environment for women councillors. When these cultures are overlaid with factional party politics along ideological or ethnic lines, and with gendered and anti-Muslim racism, then racially minoritised women councillors bear negative impacts disproportionately.



# Hostility / violence against women in politics

Increasingly such hostility has been conceptualised by international agencies and academics, working on issues of gender equality in political arenas, as 'violence against women in politics' (VAWP) (Council of Europe 2020; IPU 2016; Krook 2020; NDI 2018; UN Women 2021; Westminster Foundation for Democracy 2018). VAWP has been defined as:

> ***Various forms of psychological, physical and sexual violence, intimidation and coercion that specifically target women as women, either pressuring them to leave politics or to resign as candidates or political officials, to withdraw from their membership in political parties or other political institutions, or to otherwise remain silent on the political issues they care about.*** *(NDI 2018: 3)*

The above definition may be expanded to also include economic violence (IPU 2016: 5) and semiotic violence (Krook 2020: 187). The five main forms (Physical, psychological, sexual, economic and semiotic) of VAWP are described here.

## Physical violence

Physical VAWP involves direct bodily harm to women or their relatives (including for example physical attack, murder, kidnapping and even domestic violence) which is aimed at stopping or undermining women's political participation.

## Psychological violence

Psychological VAWP refers to verbal and emotional abuse (including for instance insults, put-downs, name-calling, constant criticism or a focus on physical appearance) which is intended to undermine the individual's sense of worth, personal safety and security and also to demean their abilities and skills. Additionally, psychological violence covers threats of physical or sexual assault and forms of stalking which are meant to produce fear or isolation.

## Sexual violence

Sexual VAWP can comprise actual or attempted unconsented sexual acts, uninvited sexual comments and innuendo and sexual harassment. Sexual VAWP may at times be presented by the perpetrator as a beneficial exchange; e.g. forcing women into sexual acts in exchange for political gain such as providing funding or promising promotion.

## Economic violence

Economic VAWP concerns forceful behaviour aimed at controlling access to economic resources. For example, women candidates or incumbents of political office may be denied financial, material or other economic resources to which they are entitled and which are made available to their male counterparts, in order to force them into compliance with the perpetrator(s).

## Semiotic violence

Semiotic VAWP is perpetrated when words, images and body language are used 'to injure, discipline, and subjugate women. Unlike other forms of violence against women, these acts are less about attacking particular women directly than about shaping public perceptions about the validity of women's political participation more broadly' (Krook 2020: 187). Two main modes of semiotic violence are identified: rendering women invisible, in order to 'symbolically annihilate' them publicly; and rendering women incompetent with the intention of highlighting to the public that they are not suited to political roles.

The VAWP framework is useful in considering the hostile working environment in which racially minoritised women councillors operate. To date a very small number of studies of VAWP in the UK have considered women politicians as a disaggregated category, making it difficult to accurately determine the prevalence and impacts of such violence on women politicians from racially minoritised communities. However, Amnesty International's 'Troll Patrol' study (2018) and a few others (Kuperberg 2021; Harmer and Southern 2021; Collignon and Rudig 2020), have shown that there are certain risk factors which increase VAWP and that most significantly, among these factors, is belonging to a racially minoritised group.[35] A review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life also reached a similar conclusion: that hate and prejudice-based intimidation disproportionately impacted women politicians, and particularly those minoritised in relation to their sexuality, race and (dis)ability. (CSPL 2017: 18).

Often different forms of VAWP manifest concurrently against targeted women politicians, in which case it is not useful to consider them separately. Thus, below, the cases of four councillors are presented to demonstrate how different forms of VAWP may operate together through concerted efforts against an individual. In addition, hostility and violence which may be expressed in less obvious ways and which constitute everyday barriers for racially minoritised women councillors is also considered after the four individual cases.

35. These studies have focused on online violence, mostly against women MPs.

## PERIN

### Punished for wresting leadership from the 'old guard'

Coming from a political family, Perin had been a Labour Party member-activist since the age of fourteen, contributing to local election campaigns and other events as a youngster. This activist foundation led her into Young Labour and NUS politics at university, followed by employment as an MP's assistant and a senior executive officer for a Labour Council Leader in another London borough, and eventually into a councillorship, in the locality she had grown up. As an activist, in a fiercely-contested local authority, Perin had witnessed capable young women gaining councillorships only to be hounded from their positions as a result of sexual harassment and bullying. She was also aware of gendered and anti-Muslim racism expressed by white male councillors who had held leadership positions over long periods of time. Although Perin did not enter local politics intending to challenge her council leader for his job, she felt unable to sit back and watch what she considered an 'incompetent old guard' managing local resources and services poorly; and while her views were shared by other councillors, no one was willing enough to mount a direct challenge to the leader. Consequently, following elections in 2018 which returned a Labour majority, Perin announced her bid for council leadership and in doing so triggered a series of reactions.

Initially, she was advised by the incumbent council leader to run for the deputy leader post; it was felt that she should serve as apprentice to acquire requisite competences and knowledge. The message that she should 'learn leadership' first was reiterated by several 'old guard' councillors who even suggested that Perin would not keep up with the amount of reading involved in leadership work, ignoring the fact that she had a Masters degree in social sciences which at the very least would have trained her for reading stamina. Perin declined the advice and thanks to an influx of younger councillors in the 2018 local elections, gathered just enough votes to win the council leadership.

It was at this point of extreme offence taken by 'the old guard' that a young women of minoritised background had challenged their authority, that a smear campaign to undermine and discredit her was launched. According to Perin the campaign was 'explicitly sexist, racist and Islamophobic'. Because the normal smears about women sleeping around to gain powerful positions were hard to level at Perin, her detractors instead demanded publicly - in local party, community and media forums - how a young (29 year old) woman of ethnic minority, Muslim background could have the audacity to seek power and achieve it so quickly without resorting to political corruption. Perin was accused of nepotism, being part of an ethnic 'cult', 'cabal' or 'mob', of buying councillors' votes through her family and ethnic community networks, and of increasing the number of local party members by paying their membership fees and printing membership cards at her home. She was also threatened with physical violence and death, had windows smashed at her council offices and endured both online and in-person stalking regularly.

At the same time, Perin was invited to speak at local party association meetings, and asked to explain her leadership goals and vision to members. Perin described this as a tactic of deliberately giving her a platform on which it was hoped she would publicly 'hang' herself and reinforce negative public perceptions about her suitability as a leader. As it happened, the more such meetings Perin attended, the more she was able to dismantle sexist, racist and Islamophobic stereotypes and create a more favourable impression.

A final tactic used to undermine her leadership, was used by former cabinet members - a group of older white men - who were not offered the posts they had held under the previous leadership. These men set up what Perin calls a 'parallel cabinet' aimed at thwarting cabinet business with the collusion of senior council officers they had known over a long period of time, and at unseating her within a year with calls for a new leadership election; this despite the fact that the council's standing orders (in line with national party guidance) stipulated that a council leader's term must last four years.

As the pressure of threats to her safety, constant attempts by 'the old guard' to destabilise her leadership and a malicious smear campaign - which filtered into the upper levels of the Labour Party and the national media - became unsustainable, Perin took a risky step, unforeseen by her detractors. She decided to 'blow it [the situation] wide open' by taking a particular press organ to court, writing to Labour's National Executive Committee and becoming very vocal about the constant gendered and anti-Muslim racism that she was enduring. Her victory against a national newspaper was the beginning of the end of the concerted smear campaign and ultimately enabled Perin to build a strong basis for her leadership. But the cost was immense in terms of the violence - psychological (sexist / racist / anti-Muslim smears and threats), economic (damage to council offices) and semiotic (attempts to shape public perceptions about her as a leader) - she had endured as a racially minoritised woman in politics. Perin saw her case as unique. She had grown up in the Labour Party, learned its rules and regulations, honed a strong political instinct and, as a senior council officer elsewhere, had closely observed political leadership. This background gave Perin sufficient knowledge, skills and confidence to wrest the leadership from the 'old guard' and hold on to it. Yet as a racially minoritised woman she was not given credit for the valued, apparently masculine skills she had demonstrated but instead was seen as a devious usurper helped by 'Muslim cults' and 'ethnic cabals'. She points out:

> *My experience is unique, not the principles of what I was experiencing or the sexism; it was unique because I took it [council leadership], it wasn't given to me and it happened overnight.*
>
> **(Perin)**

## SARAH

### Punished for dissenting, condemning intolerance, intimidation and corruption

Sarah's membership and active involvement with her local Labour Party spanned 30 years during which time she applied for candidate selection several times but failed to gain support in her local area where the Labour Party, influenced by biradari politics, dictated that women were unwelcome. Women like Sarah - outspoken, perceived as 'westernised' and independent - were particularly spurned. Over her years as a Labour activist, Sarah had condemned candidate selection 'stitch ups' along biradari lines and had called for transparent processes. When she was finally selected in 2018, it was due to positive action measures introduced by the Labour Party in local candidate selection which had caused resentment among a group of local South Asian councillors who also considered themselves exclusive spokesmen for their community.

As a councillor, Sarah said that she was surrounded in her immediate locality by an aggressive masculine culture in which she identified two types of South Asian male councillors: those with wealth who claimed religious piety and assumed community leader roles and what she called 'Jack-the-lad' types who did the bidding (or 'dirty' work) of the former, to gain standing by proxy in the community. In meetings, email exchanges and telephone chats, she found that both types routinely expressed sexist, misogynist, homophobic, transphobic, 'clannist' and anti-Semitic sentiments and behaviours. Although she had been elected along with another Muslim woman, she found herself alone in calling out the prejudices of her male colleagues. Initially, at the start of her councillorship, Sarah's male colleagues tried controlling her through the use of 'softer' tactics such as:

- Instructing her to dress modestly, to show 'respect' when meeting mosque leaders or when speaking to Muslim women's community groups
- Wanting to vet public statements she issued to ensure they were in line with their stance; for example, they argued that statements issued to Muslim parents about PSHE (Personal, social, health and economic) education in schools should not be seen as sympathetic to LGBT+ relationships and issues
- Testing her acceptance of 'banter', which in effect was a vehicle for prejudiced and discriminatory views against women, LGBT+ people and other groups with protected characteristics
- Telling her she was not a reliable team player and proper Muslim when she denounced their views and behaviours.

When Sarah refused to comply and asked them to stop harassing her, tactics of exclusion and disengagement were employed. For instance, this entailed giving Sarah the wrong meeting times or venues so that she missed crucial information and planning, or not offering practical help when she was undergoing cancer treatment (leaving her to carry heavy bags of leaflets when canvassing door-to-door), feigning sympathy and telling her to step down for the sake of her health. Disengagement on their part also involved disrupting initiatives taken by Sarah or making light of them. For example, Sarah talked about the Equality, Diversity and Human Rights training package which she had introduced in her capacity as Chair of the council's standards and audits committee, which included a day-long training session for councillors. The training was missed by a number of the male councillors while others left early, mocking the woman trainer's appearance and approach.

Despite the tactics to control or push her out, Sarah continued to condemn her male colleagues' prejudices and intimidating behaviour and to reach out to constituents (LGBT+ groups, young trafficked women at risk of violence and prostitution) of whom they disapproved. This led to the informal councillor group meetings she attended (usually held at one of the male councillor's home) to disintegrate into shouting matches and threats of violence against her. She described an occasion when:

> *The conversation turns to racism, anti-Semitism. I challenged them ... and I'm like, you need to stop this you guys. It's absolutely disgusting and you need to stop telling me what to wear and what to do. I remember words around, to that effect. And then next minute he [one of the male councillors] tells me again he's gonna break my legs, and that I need to shut my mouth or my legs are gonna get broken and I will be eliminated, you know, I'll be destroyed ... and I thought so, I got out. I just got out and went home ... And I was, I was like, I was actually quite scared cause I thought this guy can do this stuff ... because I thought, you [the perpetrator] know where I live.*
>
> **(Sarah)**

The threats to eliminate Sarah were repeated on several occasions and were not empty according to Sarah. After she had been in post for two years, efforts were stepped up to remove her from her councillorship and when the next candidate selection round occurred, Sarah was deselected through a manipulation of normal processes. Sarah explained that the group of male councillors who had continually harassed her had pushed forward a woman from their circles to be selected in place of Sarah, even though the woman was ineligible according to membership rules. They had achieved this by applying for an exemption to the rules on grounds of positive action even though the candidate they sought to replace was Sarah rather than a man. Sarah complained about the manipulation of membership rules to the regional Labour Party but received no support from the white male officials. Instead, she was told 'this is politics' and that she had been selected in 2018 as a 'tick box' candidate.

Sarah's fight back against the male councillors responsible for her deselection led to actual attacks against her property which she believed were carried out to stop her from pursuing an official complaint: her car tyres were slashed on several occasions and items were stolen from her back yard. When she finally threatened a regional party official with going to the local press with evidence of political corruption, her house was broken into the very next day. The only item removed from her home was her work laptop while jewellery, cash and other valuable items were left behind. Sarah does not believe that the break in, damage to her car and theft from her property were coincidental; besides the violence stopped once a CCTV system was installed at her home.

After her deselection, Sarah dropped out of local party politics for fear of deteriorating mental and physical health. She believed that an alliance of male Muslim councillors bound by kinship rules and white male party elite who required the support of the former (through mobilisation of votes in minoritised communities) had succeeded in ousting her:

> *I know the party, Labour, locally says they've got a good strategy, so on paper every ward must have a woman, but it's, that's literally on paper, it does not, it just ticks a box. It really has nothing for me. They have, they will put ten women in tomorrow as long as they stay quiet, do nothing. What I did was open up the floodgates because I pushed and pushed that door, and so they got people in, other women had to come in because they just didn't want somebody like me.*
>
> **(Sarah)**

To push Sarah out of local council politics, she believed her detractors had been prepared to use psychological violence (threats of harm and 'elimination') in tandem with sexual violence (falsely accusing her of favouring white men, and of being sexually promiscuous by implication) and economic violence (property damage and theft). The use of different and coordinated forms of violence against Sarah as a woman in local politics was ultimately successful in getting her to drop out of politics.

## BELLA

### Punished for complaining against her party

Bella had been a party activist and seasoned campaigner for over eight years when she was elected as a Liberal Democrat councillor, gaining a previously safe Conservative seat. During those years she had accumulated significant political skills and experience having also been an active member of Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats (a Specified Associated Organisation within the party advocating for increased representation of racially minoritised people in its structures and processes) and an executive officer of the Liberal Democrats Disability Association (an Affiliated Organisation of the party) and eventually its Chair. She had also tried for selection as a parliamentary candidate but without success as other contenders were considered to be further up in the queue.

Bella's councillorship had started off on a strained note as far as relations with certain fellow councillors were concerned. She felt that she had been treated badly during the local election campaign of 2018 (see pages 61-62) and that her local party had failed to make reasonable adjustments for her disability which had resulted in worsening physical symptoms including extreme fatigue and seizures, and her exclusion from post-election celebrations and photo opportunities. Bella's experience pushed her to take action which she believed would make her party sit up and recognise the necessity of integrating the principles and obligations of the Equality Act 2010 in its practice, if its goal of increasing diversity in the party's membership and elected representation was serious. Hence, Bella lodged a formal complaint about the treatment she had received during the local election campaign of 2018, when her local party failed to recognise her disability and make reasonable adjustments for her.

To Bella's astonishment her complaint provoked a stream of negative responses and the start of a victimisation campaign over the next couple of years during which she said she was accused of various misdemeanours. For Bella, the reaction was out of all proportion to the complaint she had raised and was at odds with Liberal Democrat values. Her complaint was initially considered informally by the party's president who concluded that there was no merit in Bella's complaint. Subsequently Bella filed her complaint formally on the three grounds of not having due regard for her protected characteristics, not making reasonable adjustment for her disability, and discriminating in respect of using special campaign funds allocated to her in a timely and appropriate way. While Bella's complaint was being investigated she realised that a concerted campaign of complaints against her was developing from 2019, through to 2020. The first complaints were filed against her by two councillors (who were part of the local campaigns team) with the backing of a third councillor. They accused Bella of sexism and bullying and succeeded in getting the party to suspend her approved candidate status as a potential parliamentary candidate for two years.

The tactic of removing Bella's approved candidate status also served the ambitions of other councillors who hoped to be selected to run for parliament. A further wave of complaints against Bella, from other councillors and officers of the party, were lodged in 2019 and 2020 including one from a committee member of the party's Campaign for Race Equality in which Bella was accused of impersonating a Muslim woman because she wore a black scarf at the 2019 Black Pride UK event. The complaints against her were vexatious according Bella as they were submitted without any evidence of alleged bad intentions on her part nor of any harm she was supposed to have caused. Nevertheless, an investigation into Bella's alleged bullying behaviour was set up by the party and led to her suspension and eventual expulsion. Although Bella subsequently stood as an independent candidate in 2022, she did not retain her seat.

The harmful effects on Bella of the coordinated campaign of complaints against her led to a deterioration of her mental health and an increase in symptoms of the degenerative condition from which she suffered.

Bella's analysis of her situation was that the complaints system was weaponised against her due to resentment felt by prominent local party members at the fact that she had so quickly risen through the ranks to build a public profile. Not only that, but as she became known in the party, Bella had been unafraid to voice sharp criticism of racist, sexist and able-ist prejudices and discriminatory attitudes displayed by fellow party members, local councillors and others at national level. Their message to Bella seemed to be that it was unacceptable for them to be instructed by a disabled, racially minoritised woman who did not fit the model of the public Lib Dem woman:

> *Why would they do that when they're meant to be a party of inclusion and diversity and you've got someone hard working and talented who's getting noticed in the party just because they want their preferred candidates whose face fits their, you know, ideal, stereotypical candidate? ... The party that claims to be liberal and accepting and inclusive and pro-diversity and intersectional is then treating people from protected groups so badly it you know, it beggars belief.*
>
> **(Bella)**

In Bella's case, the complaints system seemed to have been used as a tool of control and to inflict psychological violence because of the identity she explicitly claimed:

> *'I am a proud woman of colour'.*
>
> **(Bella)**

She also experienced economic violence by being denied the resources, including special funds reserved for racially minoritised candidates, which she was allocated; and finally the use of the complaint system and party investigation - which mobilised certain words, materials and actions - worked as instruments of semiotic violence to demonstrate to party members locally and nationally that women like Bella (disabled, minoritised and audacious enough to place themselves centre stage and question the party publicly) were unsuitable for the office of councillor.

## QADIRA

### Punished for being young, bold and determined

Qadira had energy and ambition and saw her councillorship as a means of making positive change in her community, but faced continual harassment from male councillors in her local Labour party from the time she became an active party member. She was resented for being selected, elected and later gaining a place in the ruling Labour cabinet when other men felt they were first in line for a cabinet post. She also spoke out against corruption in the local party (manipulation of selection procedures) and local government (to do with irregularities in contracts issued to road surfacing companies) and consequently found that successive bids to become Labour Group deputy leader, council leader and parliamentary candidate were blocked.

Always treading a difficult path between competing power blocks (of white male councillors and those of Indian background) in the local governing Labour Party, Qadira encountered routine harassment. For example, although her competence as a councillor was evident in her work with community groups and charities, in resolving local problems and developing initiatives aimed at increasing community wellbeing, she was constantly arraigned within Labour group meetings:

> *I think it's really hard because I personally didn't ever think that I was going to have to be fighting not only my own party members, and also the opposition. I thought I was coming into part of a team and fighting the Tories, I thought that's the enemy. What you find out is actually the enemy is sometimes within, and they try and take you down. ... And it took me a some time, you know, sometimes I'd be very quiet in response, like [name of incumbent council leader] shouting at me in a Labour group meeting and I'm just shocked and surprised that he would shout at me like that in front of everyone. And you have to make decisions. Do I shout back? And if I shout back, what's the reaction of them gonna be towards me? So that's why I took the decision and then not to say anything to him, just to stare at him and think you're pathetic. ... But it does get to you.*
>
> **(Qadira)**

Her refusal to kowtow to the older men was perceived as ungrateful by white male colleagues who felt they had gifted an ungrateful young Muslim woman opportunities of advancement in the party; and as disrespectful by some of the South Asian male councillors who as community elders could not accept resistance from a young Muslim woman. Echoing the experience of other participants (see Ghazala below), Qadira said she was not prepared to buy into what she called 'male ethnic tribal' rules about respect. Her refusal to be adequately deferential to her 'elders' meant the her age was used to challenge her competence and block her from progressing further:

> *They wrote emails and I saw this email because I was shown it, by other members of the party, and it basically outlined that 'she's too young, she's too new. She doesn't know anything yet. She doesn't have the experience'.*
>
> **(Qadira)**

And when canvassing votes for council leadership, her opponents' mantra was

> *'Oh [Qadira], she's not experienced, she's too young. What does she know?'.*
>
> **(Qadira)**

In addition to being harassed by her Labour counterparts, Qadira said that as a cabinet member, she had also had to contend with repeated bullying and harassment from the opposition who she felt had singled her out because she was Muslim and the author of fiercely critical views of Conservative government foreign policy posted on her Twitter and Facebook accounts. Qadira was accused of anti-Semitism, anti-Britishness and pro-Islam inspired terrorism:

> *Over that past year that I had been a cabinet member, I had been consistently under fire and under attack by the Conservatives and nobody in the Labour Group had defended me and nobody in the Labour Group had come to support me. Every single question at cabinet that the Conservatives put forward was about me was about my Twitter page was about my Facebook page, was about something I said somewhere, trying to paint me as anti-Semitic, trying to paint me as anti-British, like paint me as someone who basically hated my community and*

*all and they didn't do this to any other councillor in the cabinet. They only did it to me and I genuinely believe it's because I was a voice that always held them to account on council, always spoke up against them and I wasn't afraid of calling them out, whereas the other councillors were very quiet, they didn't wanna like rock the boat too much because they didn't wanna be attacked by the Conservatives. And in that year, I basically felt bullied and harassed by the Tories and not one Labour councillor had defended me. ... their questions were never about the policies or the decisions we were making. It was about me, about what I was saying online. It was just trying to paint and create an image of me so that they could use that in any future campaign or thing that they wanted to against me. Yeah ... And I believe that was because I was the only Muslim in the cabinet.*

**(Qadira)**

Qadira's determination, boldness and capacity for working hard and getting things done also showed up the inadequacies of male councillors in her own party. As a result, she became the target of psychological violence which mainly took the form of harassment and a lack of support when she was attacked by opposition councillors. Where the latter were concerned, her own assessment was that she was the victim of bullying and harassment because they did not like her open critique of Conservative government policy and actions internationally, they chose to interpret and present her views as anti-Semitic, anti-British and as a weapon for Islam-inspired terrorism. While they did not succeed in shutting her down, the unrelenting pressures faced by Qadira from all sides led her to step back after Labour lost overall control of the Council in 2022. She concluded:

*I thought for my own sake, my own mental health, I don't think this is the right thing because we've lost the election and it's not my fault. I tried to fix loads of things to try and make us win. But you know that's on the leader and the deputy leader and they didn't want to listen. ... I thought I'm not going to be like, it's just not gonna be good for my mental health.*

**(Qadira)**

These cases clearly indicate the related workings of different forms of VAWP in 'campaigns' calculated to remove the women concerned. In each case, gender, race, religion and disability as markers of identity were relevant. Each woman was punished for challenging the status quo in a very open way and only Perin achieved her goals due to sharp political instincts and experience of the local party she had developed since the age of fourteen. Qadira remained in her councillor role but decided to step away from leadership goals while Sarah and Bella left politics altogether. These cases may lie near the further end of the spectrum of VAWP and may not be common where the intensity of efforts applied to get rid of the women is concerned; however other participants also spoke of open hostilities, instances of force and violations of their self integrity, experienced on an everyday basis, which rendered the environment in which they work unpleasant and at times unsafe.

Such routine instances of force and violation of personal integrity were mainly expressed by the participants' elected male colleagues (including councillors from their own minority communities), but also by white women councillors, council officers, employees and fellow party members. While the constituents they represented also displayed negative attitudes at times, there was a common view among research participants that as elected representatives they were bound to support individuals or groups in their community without favour or prejudice, and that it was easier therefore to cope with negative public attitudes and behaviours. Besides, for many participants, even initially unfriendly constituents could be won over once they were assured of support from their councillor; many echoed Parveen's experience:

> *People now know me so well that they can approach me. I'm walking down the high street and they know actually 'I can say hello to [councillor's name] and if I have a problem, she'll listen and will guide me' so that approachability has become more open.*
>
> **(Qadira)**

However, what wore them down and menaced them most was negative treatment by those who were meant to be a source of allyship (colleagues from their own party) or of professionalism at the very least (opposition councillors, council officers and employees).

# 5.4 Hostility, violence and everyday hurdles

## Misrecognition, invisibility, belittlement

Study participants recounted everyday instances of hostility faced in their role as councillor, aimed at reminding them that if they were enter the 'Master's House', they must know their place or leave. These ranged from being routinely misrecognised (i.e. disrespected or labelled in ways which did not accord with how they saw themselves)[36] , to being invisibilised, ignored, belittled, shamed. Misrecognition was expressed variously. **Taryn** was misrecognised even when she had gained Deputy Council Leader position:

> *I spent so many years when they couldn't say my name properly, they mixed me up with another Asian councillor, I would hear many comments like 'are you counselling or are you a councillor', like they couldn't get it in their head that I was a councillor because as a woman of colour they don't see someone like me in that position. So it's been a bit of an uphill battle.*
>
> (Taryn)

**Tala** talked about names being forgotten, about being present yet invisible in the eyes of her colleagues, about being belittled and upset on a daily basis:

> *I don't think I can disclose much because I'll get kicked out, but yeah, you know you get overseen, you know, you do get overseen sometimes. You know, it's a very male dominated council. ... It's disgraceful. Sometimes people, you're surprised that they remember your name, you know, or you're just, you know, you get dismissed visually, physically, emotionally. You just get dismissed.*

36. The concept of misrecognition is taken from the work of Charles Taylor in which he argues that a person's identity and sense of self is shaped by others' recognition or lack of recognition (i.e. misrecognition); and that misrecognition has negative effects on a person or group if other people or society 'mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves'. He states: 'Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being' (1992: 25)

*... [there's a] high level of assumptions as well that you know ... certain things about women in Islam, you know the strictness that they feel that we [Muslims] have and the box that they put us under. ... how do I acknowledge this arrogance and ignorance I don't know. They just sometimes, they use fancy words just so they can feel better than you. You know, language is a big thing for me, very big thing and they feel, you know, you get laughed at sometimes, you know, or [they say] 'I'm on your side and everything, but by the way, your spelling is not very correct'. And once this [white] woman [councillor] continued to say that to me and I just said, 'you know what, having good spelling never saved the world. So, you know, just calm down with that'. It's just like is that the only thing you've noticed, what I've just written? ... You gotta have thick skin. Yeah, you end up being having a thick skin, very, very thick skin because they can daily upset you and you just leave it. Yeah, because then you will eventually believe it, so you got to leave it alone.*

**(Tala)**

Some participants spoke about not being directly addressed by their name. For example, some of **Bereni's** white colleagues referred to her as 'the African councillor'. **Parveen** too was repeatedly called 'the Asian woman councillor' by white councillors or, in an apparently jokey manner, the 'Bollywood diva' because she dressed in what was seen as 'glamorous Asian style'; while **Charifa**, when first elected, was refused entry into a meeting at the City Council by an employee because she did not 'look like a councillor'.

Finally, others like **Sayeeda** were ignored when their colleagues disapproved of what they were hearing and felt able to dismiss a young, racially minoritised woman:

> *I've kind of been ignored, I'm put aside because I'm very vocal, but very always, always speaking for people who don't have a voice. ... in [SNP] group meetings, I'm always the one ... like asking questions, genuine questions and ... I feel like sometimes you're just ignored or your questions not answered properly and they just, they're kind of like 'oh we did answer'; like no you did not answer. So, I'm gonna repeat the question again and I want you to answer it. You've not answered my question. So the question is just ignored and another answer is brought in and there's a lot of confusion.*
>
> **(Sayeeda)**

Refusing to call **Bereni** and **Parveen** by their name, mispronouncing **Taryn's** name or forgetting Tala's name were ways of demonstrating social disconnection, lack of interest in the person or hostility on the part of the addresser. Similarly, reference to 'Bollywood diva' was, in **Parveen's** view, not just innocent banter but a way of belittling and not valuing her for who she was and what she did. Misrecognition of **Taryn** and **Charifa's** councillor status because they are not white, middle-aged, middle class men, or picking on **Tala's** spelling, or ignoring **Sayeeda** were tied with explicit and implicit references to an Other (ethnic or religious) culture, an Other race. Hence misrecognition may be considered a tool of gendered (and anti-Muslim) racism which tells the people concerned that they are outsiders and has a harmful impact on those targeted.

## Doubting competence and performance

Several participants explained that being challenged about their performance as a councillor on a day-to-day basis, because of who they were, created unyielding pressure to exceed the councillor role. They felt that having to constantly over-perform in order to prove their merit was unsustainable in the long run and had led many minoritised women councillors they knew to leave local politics. Younger women were more likely targets and were often told that they should not be in politics because they were not experienced and knowledgeable enough to be in the job.

**Ghazala** was in her early twenties when she was elected councillor and promoted within six months to the position of council committee vice chair and sometime later to cabinet member. Her election had caused considerable consternation among a number of people in the local party, particularly the older South Asian male councillors who felt they were not given the respect owed by a 'girl' and because she spoke on issues, such as sex and relationship education in schools, of which they disapproved. **Ghazala's** age and gender were constantly highlighted by a group of male councillors, expecting deference:

> *I didn't really buy into this whole like 'uncle culture'. You know, with these older men, just expected me to defer to them or treat them as elders when actually we were colleagues, we were exactly the same. We're on the same level and so I didn't understand why, I didn't understand why that was expected of me and not of others.*
>
> (Ghazala)

Her refusal to meet their expectation led to a challenge of her councillorship. Her marriage to a white man was used to paint her as inherently anti-Muslim and lacking in sexual morals, hence unable to serve the community as required. As cabinet member responsible for housing, she was incessantly censured for policies which were not in the remit of local authorities, accused of lacking knowledge or of being a Conservative government mouth-piece on housing. She was publicly castigated; a male-only congregation at a local mosque was instructed not to re-elect her in upcoming local elections and the message to **Ghazala** was that a woman like her had no right to speak for the local community: 'Seems it's, it seems to be this thing of like, "who are you to have an opinion about this?"' (Ghazala). The pressure of having to combat unwarranted attacks was draining, eventually leading **Ghazala** to stand down despite being told she would be supported if she bid for the council leadership:

> *Actually maybe I don't even wanna be leader of the Council because you have to deal with all these like community groups ... Labour Party members, you know, I was sick of Labour Party members at the end of it, I would come home from branch meetings, you know ... and I would actually cry and be like, why on earth dude, do I give up my time to spare, give up my free time to spend it with these people and ... you know, came to the realization that actually being a local councillor wasn't enough to keep me in that atmosphere, wasn't enough to keep me going.*
>
> (Ghazala)

Age was also used to question **Gulshan's** ability when her detractors found the issues she was backing irksome:

> *'She's too young', you, you get this ageism as well. I faced this ageism, I think ageism came out the most, which surprised me. It wasn't even my race, skin colour. [It] was ageism and they're like oh so they thought I was younger than I actually am ... they thought I was like in my mid 20s and they were like 'what have you done since leaving school pet'? And I was, excuse me? Like I've worked or whatever ... and so that was where a lot of it came from and then obviously the misogyny came in, it wasn't outright misogyny but it's just like oh a lot of people were upset about 'oh we keep doing this women equalities sort of stuff and very soon the men are going to be, they're not getting chances', etc. And it's that sort of grumbling. So that came a lot from some of the old guard, I would say, the men.*
>
> **(Gulshan)**

Finally, **Sayeeda**, also elected in her early thirties, spoke of being doubted as a councillor because she looked younger than her age:

> *Lots of people I would say criticise me to be in politics because I look young and say 'oh you're not very experienced to be in politics'. I'm like, I think I am. I have over 15 years of experience. I look young, but I know what I'm talking about.*
>
> **(Sayeeda)**

As in **Gulshan's** case, **Sayeeda's** age - and presumed lack of adequate knowledge and experience to hold a councillorship - was often used to mask other reasons for the hostility directed at her; for example, that her longer-established colleagues found she was too audacious in challenging entrenched practices and raising 'difficult' issues such as immigration or poverty.

These examples focus on younger women councillors, where age, as a likely proxy for gendered and anti-Muslim racism in some contexts, was used to doubt competence. However, the ability and performance of older women councillors (e.g. **Parveen, Charifa, Taryn, Shana, Sarah, Taiwo, Zelda**) was also under question.

When **Charifa** was nominated for the ceremonial position of Lord Mayor, opposition councillors tried their utmost to block her, citing competence as an issue:

> *I know this lord mayoral role, it was under attack because of my nomination and on the grounds of race and on the grounds of gender. I haven't got the exact words and nobody will share with me exact words ok that was spoken in those meetings. ... So they can't come out and say, well, she's an ethnic minority women, therefore you shouldn't give her that position. You know, they can't say that, it's you know, they raise questions about my ability, which on what grounds? It made me laugh when I was hearing this. And I said, what grounds have they got to raise questions about my ability, you know?*
>
> **(Charifa)**

**Parveen** experienced similar reactions from the two leaders of the small independent party she represented, prior to joining the Conservative Party. She was discouraged and told that although a councillor, she was still learning:

> *She [one of the leaders] was quite controlling. She came round and told me that basically I shouldn't be deputy mayor and that I was her apprentice and people had only voted for me because she had told them to. ... Life became very toxic. Every time you did every anything, whether it's good or bad, you will never be praised for your good work. ... You are always pushed to the side and your work was not recognised and they'd take ownership.*

*So it was becoming quite toxic in the sense that if you ask them a question, they both would be like 'oh, I don't think you should do that' or, and you your confidence was undermined and you were constantly thinking, what am I doing wrong? And every time you opened your mouth it was, 'you don't know anything about politics'*

**(Parveen)**

## Leave it to the white men in the house

Participants, especially those who were newly elected, also identified the old guard tactic of 'we know best' or 'leave it to us' as a means of undermining their position and confidence, and (sometimes unwittingly) creating division. This may be seen as the flip side of doubting competence and performance, and its expression was aggressive in some participants' experience and more benign for others.

**Tanaz** experienced this as an aggressive tactic when she tried to pass a 'common sense' motion on Islamophobia at a council meeting, as a follow up to the publication of the Labour Muslim Network survey report on Islamophobia in the Labour Party (2020). Her motion which did not entail any policy change was met with a great deal of hostility especially from the council's old guard which she pointed out was composed of older men of whom one at least had been an elected representative in local government for almost 50 years. **Tanaz's** analysis was that the unwritten rules of a rigidly traditional male hierarchy had been breached by her because she had taken initiative independently around an issue which did not figure on their agenda. Reacting to the motion, the council's leader did not approach her directly to discuss the motion, but instead sent out two South Asian male councillors to deal with her, thus maintaining a hierarchical distance and showing that the item was not important enough for council business:

*I didn't understand that there would be so much opposition from the leadership on a very, very basic Islamophobia motion, and instead of the leadership sort of engaging with me, what they did was they spoke to, you know, a Pakistani sort of councillor, a male Pakistani councillor and a male Gujarati councillor and they said 'you need to get her in line'. The message wasn't directly delivered to me. [name of leader] never picked up the phone to me and said withdraw this motion now;*

> *the message was sieved through these senior, elder sort of, you know, representatives of the Asian community. They were councillors and they said, 'look, you need to back off'*
>
> **(Tanaz)**

Although **Tanaz** refused to back off and the motion eventually passed, it meant that her position in the Labour group was weakened. Eventually she was included in a list of councillors who were blocked from standing again at the end of their term because they had spoken out against direct mayoral elections, rises in council tax during a cost-of-living crisis and the council's handling of local civil unrest.

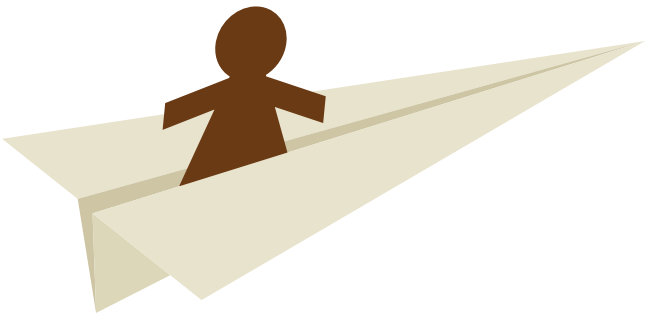
**Zelda**, a councillor of 28 years also recounted her experience as a new councillor when she was told to back off from handling certain issues and leaving it to older, experienced hands. The resistance that she encountered in her early days came not only from long standing, older male councillors but also male council officers who did not like to be challenged, and particularly by a new Black woman councillor. As one of only a few Black councillors when elected, **Zelda** was frequently approached by council-employed Black and Asian workers who experienced racism and discrimination in their workplace. When she took up their grievances she received a furious push back from council officers who told her not to meddle. When **Zelda** persisted, her name was leaked to the press as one of a number of Black councillors who were acting improperly in advocating for Black workers and organisations. Although a director of the council was ultimately charged and found guilty on numerous counts of race discrimination, victimisation and harassment, **Zelda** was marked out by the 'old guard' as someone to be watched:

> *He was found guilty, so you know I was vindicated. But people don't like you to challenge their favourite officers and I learnt you know the hard way that you shouldn't mess about with councillors' favourite officers, in my view, or they will get you back. These are directors, yeah and I wasn't aware that the director at that time, would go on holiday with certain councillors, you know, they were very close.*
>
> **(Zelda)**

On the other hand, **Zenia's** experience of 'leave it to the grown ups' was relatively benign although the resistance to change because things had always been done in a certain way, caused her frustration. She explained:

> *I think the cleavage is more like between the councillors who were there for very long time and the councillors who were freshly elected to find our place, to find our voice, to be able to raise the voice and to not be condescended, look like a bit condescended by some people, which is, that's the annoying part. Like for example, when they say, I raise some issues, and they say 'oh, but we've been dealing with that for a long time and no people don't want to change this or people don't manage to change that'; I say that doesn't mean that I could not try to do it. You know I want better. You know, it's not like because you tried it before and it didn't work that I cannot try again. Don't be condescending, you know.*
>
> **(Zenia)**

These testimonies indicate that whether conscious or not, the aim of the 'old guard' was ultimately to make local politics a difficult space in which to operate, to demonstrate that barring a few exceptions, women generally were unsuited for the role of councillor, and to send the message that women were better off not trying to change things and leaving the job for those who had always performed it. It is a message which reaches young women from minoritised communities, many of whom may consider the role of councillor but feel they are better off in another job.



# 6 Conclusion

## 6.1 Overview

This research finds that although minoritised women share many of the same experiences of sexism and misogyny as their white counterparts, gendered and anti-Muslim racism, often reinforced by forms of patriarchy practised in certain minoritised communities, constitute important factors in shaping their individual journeys in standing for and exercising elected office in local government. In doing so the research adds fresh understandings to a small but growing area of study in the UK and calls on relevant stakeholders to consider how barriers to local elected office may be eradicated.

## 6.2 Barriers in selection processes

The research found that while political party leaderships and strategists have recognised the importance of increasing the number of women in UK elected assemblies, including the representation of minoritised women, that recognition does not always successfully translate to local party level. Where local parties yield to pressures from the national party leaderships (mounting since the 2010 general elections and intensified since 2019) minoritised women are very often selected as paper candidates for unwinnable seats and generally serve long political apprenticeships before being considered for marginal or winnable seats.

Additionally, the recruitment of potential women candidates is *ad hoc*. Participant accounts in this research suggest that if applying for selection is not the result of serving lengthily as a party activist, then minoritised women are mainly recruited through personal contacts, or chance conversations with party activists or officials or, more recently, via feelers put out by party-affiliated organisations or organisations which support the increased representation of women in elected assemblies.

A number of Muslim participants also discussed the existence of biradari networks as a barrier to the selection of Muslim women. When such male kinship networks are pressured to accept women candidates in certain areas, there is a risk that local democracy is diminished because the women they endorse and select do not always have the motivation, experience or knowledge about their local communities but may be controlled by male elders and councillors in their political decision making over local issues and resources.

Finally, where selection processes are concerned, the research demonstrates that for some women gendered and anti-Muslim racism meant being openly passed over in favour of less suitable or deserving white candidates parachuted from outside the area. In other cases, women applying for selection were Othered because of their race and/or visible markers of religion and made to feel like outsiders who were tolerated because of diversity imperatives. Further, women with a disability or belonging to particular religious sects were Othered and deemed not to fit ideal candidate models. As a result, they were compelled to fight battles against gendered and anti-Muslim racism, alongside able-ism and discrimination against the sect to which they belong.

## 6.3 Barriers in elected office

This research identifies various barriers which operate to stop minoritised women councillors from exercising their duties effectively and prevent them from accessing leadership positions. This leads to frustration, disillusionment and eventual drop out and contributes to the under-representation of minoritised women in local councils across the UK while sending out a message to aspiring councillors that there are too many hurdles to navigate.

This research also shows that the complexity and demands of the councillor role have led to an unrecognised gendered division of councillor duties and associated gendered pressures. It shows that women councillors carry the burden of intensive public-facing responsibilities including case work on behalf of their constituents, while men councillors deal with the business of governance, strategic direction and the management of local services, taxation and allocation of resources.

The aforesaid gendered pressures are all the more pronounced for minoritised women councillors who are invariably located in communities with large racially minoritised populations which have borne the brunt of recent events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, economic downturns and cost of living crisis and consequently experience a host of problems. Added to the gendered pressures of the councillor role, the traditional conception of the role as voluntary (designed for retired or older men of affluence) means that it does not carry a basic salary but instead pays an allowance, without attendant entitlements to maternity or sick leave, time off, pensions and so on. The risk of being deselected at the end of a councillorship term or of not being elected also made the role a precarious one.

The voluntary and precarious nature of the role places an additional burden for women councillors from disadvantaged communities with family and caring responsibilities. It demands that they make a choice between continuing as a councillor or dropping out and focusing on earning a living in order to maintain themselves and their family. The research indicates that those who have few or no family responsibilities - and these tend to be older women - manage the councillor role more effectively than women with young families and a day job and are less likely to drop out through burn out or deselection.

Barriers which are manifestations of a hostile masculine political culture and environment may be conceptualised in terms of violence against women in politics (VAWP). These manifestations include physical, psychological, sexual, economic and semiotic violences which may be deliberately and cumulatively targeted at certain 'marked' women (deemed disruptive) or may be used in an everyday routine manner and less intense ways to undermine women. Through a presentation of four detailed cases of women councillors who were targeted by their male colleagues, and a discussion of violences which occur on an everyday basis (misrecognition and invisibilising of women's personhood, doubting women's performance and competence, telling women to leave it to the men), this research reveals the workings of a hostile masculine work culture and environment, in UK town halls, whose ultimate goal is to push minoritised women out.

The research participants in their majority pointed to VAWP as an important factor in their or their colleagues being pushed out (deselected or expelled) or taking the decision to drop out of local politics. The research found that older white mainly male councillors, sometimes with support from racially minoritised male councillors in local authorities with large minoritised populations, were key promoters of the worldview that minoritised women are not credible players in local politics, that by entering town halls, they disrupt established gendered-racialised orders. It is a worldview which reinforces the under-representation of minoritised women in local government.

## 6.4 Questions arising from the research

This research gives rise to a number of questions which cannot be adequately answered here. It indicates that minoritised women in Labour Party local politics speak up far more than women in other parties against barriers small and major which keep women out, complain more loudly about gendered and anti-Muslim racism and discrimination and challenge poor or corrupt work practices. This raises some questions. For example, is this because Labour women councillors from racially minoritised backgrounds have a greater numeric presence in local government and that their voices are more frequently heard? Is it because Labour Party women are steeped more deeply in histories and cultures of workers' and women's rights and gender equality than women in other parties? Is it because Labour women's longer presence in local government, in mainly large and competitive metropolitan city councils gives them the confidence to engage in more contentious politics? These are questions which require deeper investigation.

Among the research participants were women who had carved out a seemingly stable place for themselves in local government. However, because the research was centred on barriers in selection processes and elected office, it was not possible to also focus on these women's individual backgrounds and success strategies alongside effective equality, diversity and inclusion practices in town halls. Therefore, it was not possible to determine why some women have been more successful at negotiating barriers than others.

Finally, given the scope of the research, only women from minoritised communities with experience of local government politics were interviewed. Larger studies may interview men from minoritised communities in local government, so as to ask about their selection and incumbency experiences and determine the demand-side factors of the over-representation (as suggested by Krook and Nugent, 2016) of men, including minoritised men generally (with the exception of men from Black African and African-Caribbean communities) in order to gain a fuller and more nuanced picture of minoritised women's under-representation.

This research takes a step in furthering our understanding about why racially minoritised women are so under-represented in local government. While it provides important information about the types of barriers faced by minoritised women in candidate selection processes and local elected office, it also asks questions which may be addressed in future studies.

# 7 Recommendations

## 7.1 Overview

The recommendations of this report are based on the discussion and analysis of barriers examined in this research and draw mainly on the views of research participants. They relate to the elimination of demand-side barriers (i.e. barriers related to local institutional structures, cultures and processes) in order to increase the representation of women from minoritised communities in local government.

## 7.2 Expanding available data on women's representation in UK local councils

Currently there is no legal obligation on local government to systematically report on local councillor numbers, socio-demographic data, political party, leadership positions occupied and so on. The most wide-ranging data available on councillors is the LGA's National census of local authority councillors (in England), published at intervals of two to five years since 1997, and most recently in 2022.

### Recommendation 1

Legally oblige the LGA, Welsh Local Government Association, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities/Improvement Service and Northern Ireland Local Government Association, through an amendment of Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, to undertake census-type audits of local authority councillors in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively so that a comprehensive UK picture is available to interested stakeholders. These audits must adopt an intersectional approach to data disaggregation, supported by appropriate data collection tools.

## 7.3 Providing data on party memberships, applications for candidate selection, candidates and officeholders

UK political parties are not legally obliged to provide numbers or socio-demographic data on their membership, applicants for candidate selection, selected candidates and holders of elected office.

### Recommendation 2

Legally oblige political parties (through an amendment of Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010) to provide annual data on party membership, applicants for candidate selection, selected candidates and holders of elected office, disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and other protected characteristics.

## 7.4 Political recruitment and identification of potential local candidates

Few research participants decided to apply for candidate selection of their own accord. Most were cajoled by friends, work colleagues or personal contacts within political parties, or invited by party officials through chance meetings at a public event, or through a civil society organisation of which they were a part. This research indicates that none of the parties represented by the research participants have clear recruitment strategies; e.g. outreach programmes targeting schools, trade unions, places of worship and other community networks of women.

### Recommendation 3

Outreach work should be considered an important tool in building a pipeline of talent from which potential candidates may be selected. Political parties should develop outreach work in collaboration with their women's sections and organisations such as Elect Her, Centenary Action Group, 50:50 Parliament etc. which have built up a track record in successfully recruiting and supporting minoritised women on their journey to councillorship. Outreach programmes should target for example, civil society organisations supporting racially minoritised women, schools, university women's groups, Black and women's trade union sections, places of worship which welcome women congregations. Outreach programmes should be supported by funds and endorsement of party leaders at national level.

## 7.5 Respecting selection rules

Many research participants believed that the selection rules of their respective parties were fair but that they were not always respected, much to the detriment of selection candidates who did not fit the local party leadership's ideal type.


### Recommendation 4

Initial and regular refresher training on fair and equitable interview processes (including application of the 2010 Equality Act) should be mandatory for all selection panel members.


### Recommendation 5

Selection candidates should hold party membership for the length of time stipulated in party rules, barring exemption in exceptional cases which should be scrutinised by regional officials.


### Recommendation 6

Member selection meeting attendance should be checked to ensure that only party members resident in the ward concerned were present and voting for selected candidates.


### Recommendation 7

Regional party officials should ensure that party selection rules are respected by selection candidates, interview panel members and those attending member selection meetings

# 7.6 Breaking down structural-institutional barriers to the councillor role

The complex councillor role coupled with little remuneration and lack of entitlements such as pension and paid maternity leave makes the role unattractive to women, especially those from disadvantaged communities.

### Recommendation 8

Councillor allowances should be replaced by a formal annual salary (as in the case of MPs) and should be set and annually reviewed by an independent local government standing authority through legislation. Such a body could also review councillors' special responsibility allowances.

### Recommendation 9

The question of paid maternity leave should not be left at the discretion of individual councils but should be made mandatory through measures taken by the UK and devolved governments.

### Recommendation 10

Access to a pension scheme (such as the local government one which existed between 2001 and 2014) should be reconsidered by the UK and devolved governments and made available to councillors.

### Recommendation 11

In order to break down the gendered division of duties within local councils, council leaders should be encouraged through annual target-setting, to involve more minoritised women into chairing council committees, and build their skills and knowledge to the level required for cabinet posts. Target-setting models should be provided by political parties at national level while monitoring should be delegated to political parties at regional level.

### Recommendation 12

To avoid politically motivated and subjective deselection decisions, every councillor reaching the end of their term should undergo an evaluation process, created by the national party in consultation with councillors. Councillors deemed to have under-performed, should be given the opportunity to present mitigating circumstances and an improvement plan.

# 7.7 Protecting women from gendered and anti-Muslim racism and discrimination based on protected characteristics.

Almost all research participants who applied for candidate selection or occupied elected office faced sexism and misogyny simultaneously with racist attitudes and discriminatory behaviour on account of their skin colour, ethnic or religious background. Currently local councils refer to the Nolan principles of public life in their codes of conduct (and applicable sanctions in case of breaches) and are not required to refer to the Equality Act 2010.


## Recommendation 13

Every UK local authority should be legally required to adopt a code of conduct with clear reference to the Equality Act 2010 and clear definitions of (sexist and racist) bullying, harassment and misconduct. Council codes of conduct should also refer to online bullying and harassment.


## Recommendation 14

The adoption of such a code of conduct should be paired with a structure responsible for monitoring and upholding standards of decent behaviour in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. Such a structure would be composed of councillors in proportionate numbers to their party's representation in the council and should be given powers to investigate complaints and apply appropriate sanctions. The aforesaid measures would require a change in legislation which is in the remit of UK government.


## Recommendation 15

Political parties should establish transparent and accessible complaints systems including an offline structure to receive complaints. The ultimate sanction of deselection should be imposed on any councillor found guilty of sexist and racist behaviour and discrimination, following an investigation in the council.

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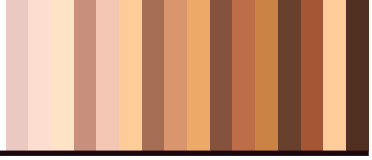



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