

Speech: PM speech at reception for Women MPs of the World conference: 7 November 2018

Good evening everyone, and a very warm welcome to Downing Street for what is a very special event.

The women here tonight come from many nations, many cultures and many backgrounds. We have lived very different lives, we hold different political beliefs, but each of us have answered the unique calling that is public service. And we all have the privilege of serving our communities and our countries in our national legislatures.

Here in the UK, women have been allowed to do that for just 100 years – later this month will see the centenary of the law being changed to allow women to stand for Parliament. A year from now we will also mark the 100th anniversary of Nancy Astor becoming the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons.

Celebrating is something we should be doing this evening. Because today, 2018, we see more female members of parliaments and legislative assemblies around the world than there have ever been.

And that is good news for all of the citizens we serve.

More women in elected office means a greater voice speaking out on issues that affect women, certainly. It also means a greater focus on preventing gender-based violence, on girls' education, on childcare and on women's health.

One of my proudest achievements as Home Secretary was passing the Modern Slavery Act, which makes a real difference in the fight to protect women and girls.

And as Minister for Women and Equalities I was delighted to change the law on parental leave so that both parents are able to take on caring responsibilities for their child – something I'd long campaigned for in opposition.

But the benefits of a more equal parliament are also felt more widely. After all, if half the population is systematically excluded from politics then you're excluding half the talent.

A parliament where women are a rare sight is a parliament working with one hand tied behind its back; a more representative parliament leads to better decision making, better politics and ultimately better government.

So we should absolutely celebrate the progress that has been made, and the number of women who now have a place in their nation's parliament. And we

should remember that it has not come about by accident. It is the result of many years of effort by people around the world.

That includes one of the women who has been instrumental in helping to deliver tomorrow's conference, Harriet Harman MP.

Harriet has been an MP for 36 years – she won't mind me saying. She has spent much of that time battling to make Parliament a better, more accessible workplace for women. And although we certainly have our differences, Harriet, I want to thank you for all you have done –and continue to do – to support the cause of women in politics.

In 2010 I took over from Harriet as Minister for Women and Equalities. And I want to thank the present Minister, Penny Mordaunt, for everything she has done in making tomorrow's conference possible – and for everything she is doing, as Secretary of State for International Development, promoting women's participation in politics at home and around the world.

While we celebrate how far we have come, we should not lose sight of the fact that there is still a long way to go. Women make up half the world's population but barely a quarter of its nationally elected representatives.

If we want to see that improve in our lifetimes, then it's not enough to simply stand by and wait for change to happen. We have to make it happen. And I'm absolutely committed to doing just that.

Back in 2005, here in the UK, I co-founded an organisation called Women2Win, aimed at giving more women the tools and networks they need to be selected as candidates in my party.

It's not about positive discrimination, but creating a level playing field – and it's making a real difference.

When I first entered the Commons I was one of only 13 female MPs in my party. Today there are 67 of us, and I'm immensely proud at how many have benefited from the support of Women2Win's.

As a government, we are funding nationwide programmes aimed at getting more women and girls interested in politics here in the UK.

And worldwide our Department for International Development is working to empower women in political life.

In Sierra Leone we've worked with groups including the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to run a voter education campaign for women.

In Nigeria, the Women in Politics programme has helped establish a Women's Caucus in Abuja's National Assembly.

And in Pakistan, a UK-funded voter registration drive signed up more than 400,000 women ahead of this year's general election.

By doing so we're helping to give women in the UK and around the world a

greater voice – and we're not alone in such efforts. From Ireland's Inspire to India's Girls Parliament, people and programmes are working to get more women and girls interested in politics, asking them to stand, and supporting them to win.

Getting elected is only half the battle. We also have to make the system work once we are a part of it – and doing so in what is often a male-dominated and male-oriented environment is not always easy.

So I hope that tomorrow's conference, by giving you the opportunity to share ideas and insights, will enable you to learn from one another. Because, together, we can overcome challenges, and can get on with what we got into this business to do: contributing to society, responding to the needs of local constituents and making a real difference to people's lives.

It's the ability to do that – to make a difference – that makes being an member of parliament the best job in the world. It's a privilege we all enjoy, and one I'd like many more women and girls around the world to aspire to.

In the words of the great British suffragist Millicent Fawcett, whose statue took its rightful place in Parliament Square this year, she said, "courage calls to courage everywhere". So regardless of affiliation or ideology, let's all work together, let's learn from each other, let's build the networks that will allow us to succeed.

And let's make sure women and girls know that whatever their views, whatever their party, whatever others may say, a woman's place is in elected office.