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Powerful Perpetrators

Politicians and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature

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Powerful Perpetrators is a five-year project (2023-2028) looking at sexual misconduct and abuse perpetrated by professionals, and the regulatory and administrative justice mechanisms used to investigate and sanction their behaviour. The project team are Dr Natasha Mulvihill (principal investigator); Dr Nathan Birdsall; Dr Emma Yapp and Dr Hannah K. Richards. More information is available at: www.powerfulperpetrators.org

Stage 1 of the project (May 2024 to October 2024) involved searching and synthesising the available literature on professional sexual misconduct. This work is collated in the following open access briefings:

- Yapp, E., Birdsall, N., Mulvihill, N., and Richards, H. 2024. *Doctors and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Richards, H., Yapp, E., Mulvihill, N., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *The legal profession and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Richards, H., Yapp, E., Mulvihill, N., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *The military and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Birdsall, N., Mulvihill, N., Richards, H., and Yapp, E. 2024. *The police and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Mulvihill, N., Richards, H., Yapp, E., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *Politicians and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Mulvihill, N., Richards, H., Yapp, E., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *Religious leaders and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Richards, H., Yapp, E., Birdsall, N., and Mulvihill, N., 2024. *Professionals (general) and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.

The briefings and our 'literature summary interactive tool' to compare our findings for each profession is available on our website: www.powerfulperpetrators.org/publications



What is the nature and extent of sexual misconduct and abuse by politicians in the UK and internationally?

Academic research into sexual misconduct and abuse by politicians has emerged principally post-2017 and #MeToo. A brief international review of parliamentary codes of conduct in 2009 made no mention of sexual misconduct (1). The issue has long been covered by journalists (2–4), and in drama and documentary (5–8), though commonly with a ‘sex scandal’ framing, which does not always interrogate issues of consent, abuse or harm. Available studies focus principally on victim experiences, commonly in relation to ‘sexism’ and ‘sexual harassment’ in the workplace (9,10). In the UK in 2017, 19% of those responding to a survey (n=1,377) of Westminster parliament staff (members of parliament (MPs) and non-MP staff) reported experiencing or witnessing inappropriate sexual behaviour (11). In a similar survey in Australia, 33% of parliament staff identified sexual harassment at work and 1% disclosed attempted or actual sexual assault at work (12). Interviews with women (both politicians and parliament workers) in 50 African countries (13) and 45 European countries (14) reveal similar proportions (between 30-40% of respondents) reporting sexual harassment, assault or sextortion requests. Women were significantly more likely to report abuse (15).

What administrative justice mechanisms do political institutions currently have in place to respond to sexual misconduct and abuse by their members in the UK and internationally?

In recent years, a number of political institutions internationally have adopted codes specifically to address sexual harassment, violence and abuse (16,17), including the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) in the UK (18,19), Canada (20), Scotland (21) and Wales (22). Others have proposals in draft (Australia (23) and New Zealand (24)) or have updated legislation (United States (25)). Processes developed to handle code breaches - such as the UK ICGS (26) - often sit within or alongside an already complex set of mechanisms concerned with conduct, privileges, standards and party discipline (27).

How do (a) perpetrator characteristics; (b) victim characteristics; and (c) the context of sexual misconduct and abuse compare across politicians?

Perpetrators are predominantly male and often in a position of authority over their victim, though may also target elected colleagues (12–15). Forty-five per cent of staff working in the Scottish parliament identified their offender as an elected politician. In a survey of those working in Commonwealth Parliamentary workplaces (CPW) in Australia, 28% of people who had experienced sexual harassment said that the individual who bullied or harassed them had done the same thing to someone else (12). Victims globally are more likely to be female (12–15). In the Australian CPW survey, people who identified as LGBTQIA+ were more likely to experience sexual harassment (12). The privilege of working in parliament and the sense of job insecurity (electoral cycles; contract working) can further deter victims from reporting (12). Long and irregular hours; late and all-night working; working away from home; a work hard/play hard culture and unsafe drinking, have all been identified as contextual factors (12).



How do social relations of power operate and intersect with context and opportunity at the (a) individual (b) organisational-professional and (c) socio-cultural level, to account for the perpetration of sexual misconduct and abuse by politicians?

Westminster-style parliaments have been described as ‘masculinist’ (28). Those who challenge the ‘myth of gender neutrality’ (29) - characterised, for example, by a brash and bullying style of debate and unwritten conventions – can find themselves positioned as interlopers, and censured through ridicule and sexual harassment (28). Similarly, parliaments are termed ‘gendered’ institutions (16), since they tend to be dominated by male workers; enforce gender and sexuality norms and identities (30); and rely on informal recruitment and networking (31). MPs are commonly self-employed (32) and cannot be ‘fired’ (only de-elected), yet have discretionary recruitment power over staff (33) and enjoy deference and loyalty (34). The differing employment status of parliament workers can in turn complicate misconduct processes (12). Threat to career advancement is cited by victims as an obstacle to reporting (12,13). Public attitudes towards, and media representation of, sexual misconduct in politics are mixed (35–38). This includes positioning abuse and harassment as, for women, the ‘cost of doing politics’ (10).

How effectively do current administrative justice mechanisms (a) sanction past sexual misconduct and abuse and (b) seek to deter future sexual misconduct and abuse?

In an Australian survey on responses to those accused of sexual misconduct, a third of respondents disagreed that fair and reasonable action is taken against those accused of sexual misconduct, irrespective of status: indeed a third said there was a culture of protecting ‘high value’ workers, even promoting them (12). There is a perceived lack of transparency around misconduct processes, including where the accused accepts disciplinary action (16,39). Parliamentary privilege may compound secrecy (33), as well the use of non-disclosure agreements (40). A review of the UK ICGS identifies some ‘choice fatigue’, given the range of processes victims can use to report; a lack of investigator experience in handling cases involving MPs (in part a function of the scheme being new); and processes being rigorous but time-consuming (41). Other issues for parliaments globally can usefully be classified into (a) codes/regulations (b) complaint mechanisms and (c) preventative and accompanying measures (31). For (a), these include the definition of ‘sexual harassment’ (16,28); the scope of what is defined as ‘workplace’ related and who is included within that workplace (39); and the degree to which codes of conduct have a formal and permanent footing (39). For (b), this includes the adequacy and formal codification of sanctions (16,28,31); the use of ‘risk-based exclusion’ for politicians accused of violent or sexual offences, pending investigation (41); the deadlines by which a report must be made (31); and the use of informal mediation, including by whips, who may be concerned to protect party reputation (16,28). And for (c), this includes inadequate access to specialised, trauma-informed support (42) and ensuring all parliament workers undertake mandatory training on sexual harassment and abuse of power, and understand their rights and routes to reporting (42). Finally, parliaments have a critical role in modelling social justice and equality (43), yet nesting new rules inside a broadly unchanged institutional culture is unlikely to be effective (44).



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