

Women underrepresented and unprotected on the live comedy circuit, MPs hear

Women working in live comedy face a lack of representation and unsafe working conditions, the Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) heard at parliament yesterday (15th April).

Chaired by Labour MP Sarah Owen, the WEC heard from six witnesses in the second of two oral evidence sessions on the experiences of women in live comedy.

Aimee Perry, head booker at Manchester's Frog and Bucket Comedy Club, told the Committee that ensuring women appear on comedy line-ups is "something you have to have consciously in your mind every day".

Perry said: "You have to fight continuously. It is a hard job; it is very tiring and a lot of people give up quite easily."

A 2024 study by online comedy guide Chortle found that some of the UK's most prestigious comedy clubs were booking more than six times as many men as women. Chortle reported that between 12th September and 30th November 2024, almost one in five weekend line-ups at 12 of the UK's most prestigious venues were all male.

Lynne Parker, founder of Funny Women, an online community running workshops and awards for female comedians, told the WEC that while there is now a "much better percentage balance of men versus women" on comedy panel shows, it remains difficult for women to book gigs early in their careers.

Parker said it is important to "make the people at the top more aware of the struggles at the bottom level".

"That is where the misogyny exists, because it is harder as a new female comedian to get the gigs," she said.

Interviewed after the committee hearing, Parker said: "If you look at the women who have been really successful, they've all got something amazing to say and they are putting forward a very different perspective on womanhood and what it's like.

"So, the minute you start getting more female comedians on telly and everything, you're getting a much bigger representation."

According to Dr Natalie Diddams, assistant professor at the School of Creative Arts, Performance and Visual Cultures at the University of Warwick: "We're just more comfortable with men always making jokes and girls just learn, and women learn, that is not really what was expected of them."

Diddams runs comedy workshops for women, during which participants create a "comic persona" to present at a live showcase.

She said creating spaces where women can "discover their sense of humour and realise that they're funny" is "the first level" to addressing the lack of women on the comedy circuit.

"I think the issue is that women don't have that chance to practise."

The WEC also heard evidence of the sexual harassment experienced by women on the circuit. Get Off! Live Comedy, a support network for women in comedy, found that more than one in five people had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment.

Kelly Edwards-Good, senior marketing and press officer at Komedia Brighton, said that while larger venues have “rules and regulations” to keep performers safe, at grassroots venues women are more vulnerable to abuse.

Edwards-Good said that a national body for comedians might encourage women to speak out: “People often do not feel comfortable reporting to promoters and venues themselves.”

Commenting after the evidence session, stand-up comedian and actress Charlie Vero-Martin echoed Edwards-Good’s concerns over the lack of a national body to represent those working in live comedy.

She said: “The main issue is there’s no HR in comedy.”

She explained: “Unless you're like at a specific club, most comedy nights are just a night in a pub or a bar, that's run maybe once a week or once a month or maybe it's a random thing. The venues in question don't really have a clue about what the comedy night is and who's running it.”

Vero-Martin also highlighted the lack of safeguarding measures in place to ensure women can travel home safely at night.

She said there is an “unspoken rule” that performers stay until the end of a show, even if this means travelling home alone late at night.

“If you don’t stay until the end, you’re considered stuck up and rude,” she said.

“That would mean me having to get three buses home at one in the morning because I didn’t want to seem rude or get a bad reputation.

“A lot of men just don't get the whole idea of having to get home late.”