

NATIONAL WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

INTERIM REPORT

Introduction

I wish you a very warm welcome to the 2021 national women's Empowering Women in UNISON – live! event. We aren't able to meet in person for our conference, so we have organised a series of speakers to celebrate the work of the largest women's organisation in the UK.

It has been an honour to chair the committee over the last year, more so as we have all had to adjust to a different way of working. I am delighted that the women's agenda continues to take centre stage in UNISON, and with the election of Christina McAnea, our first female General Secretary, the leadership will continue to ensure women are at the heart of our union.

This last year has been hard on many of you. For those working on the frontline in the Health sector; those working in the care sectors; local government; the service sectors, all of you have demonstrated your commitment to working for the good of all. Especially crucial has been the support you give to your families, whether it is home schooling children, caring for elderly or vulnerable family members, or helping in your communities.

Our thoughts go out to those members who have lost family members in the pandemic, as well as the families of those union members who have died. In addition, the impact of the pandemic on mental health has been enormous, more so for those of us who live alone and are having to deal with the isolation of lockdowns with little support.

It is important that we continue to support and develop our women activists to ensure that they take their proper place in our union, as leaders and campaigners. As the UK's largest trade union, we intend to keep growing so that we can make a difference for even more women.

I am pleased to say that the National Women's Committee has risen to the challenge of the new ways of working during the pandemic. I am delighted that UNISON's amendment to protect victims of domestic violence at work was passed in the House of Lords on 1st February and you will see from our annual report that NWC has continued to lobby, campaign and bargain throughout the year, keeping women's issues (the issues you tell us are important) at the heart of UNISON's agenda.

Had we been able to hold our usual physical conference, your contributions to the debates would have been an important voice in helping set the work plan for the National Women's Committee for the coming 12 months. As it is, where you have the opportunity to ask questions in the various events, we hope you will do so.

An important aspect of our usual conferences is the opportunity to network, socialise and have fun. Sadly, we can't do that this year, and I'm sure those of you who have attended previous conferences will miss meeting old friends and making new ones. However, on a positive note, as we have given all the women members in UNISON the opportunity to register for the Empowering Women event, we have had many more of you registering your interest.

I do hope you will find the sessions of interest to you, and on behalf of the National Women's Committee, I wish you a great event.

Emma Procter,
Chair, National Women's Committee

NATIONAL WOMEN'S CONFERENCE MOTIONS 2020

INTERIM REPORT

Women in UNISON – organising and campaigning

Motion 21: Women supporting women – feminist leadership

Highlighted the characteristics of feminist leadership and suggested that these should be encouraged by UNISON.

Called on National Women's Committee (NWC) to work with Learning & Organising Service (LAOS) to provide a feminist leadership training activity and make this available to regions and branches and to encourage the practice of inclusive feminist leadership by members and activists.

Update: Consideration of a leadership programme incorporating feminist principles for UNISON's women members had to be put on hold due to the priorities for LAOS generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the meantime, UNISON, historically, has elected its first woman General Secretary.

Motion 27: Producing a Women's Magazine

Set out concerns that there is a section of women members who do not have access to computers, including low paid members, and who may not be IT literate. They are losing out on information about issues that affect women and on opportunities to get involved with their union.

Called on NWC to explore the possibility of developing a women's magazine, liaise with Branches, Regions and communications officers and report back to conference in 2021.

Update: NWC took the view that the first step should be to carry out a feasibility study considering 1) the market for a paper magazine and how many members might benefit 2) the practicalities of producing a magazine 3) options for an editorial board and 4) costs versus benefits.

This initiative had to be put on hold due to other priorities generated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Motion 28: Re-inspiring women

Set out the belief that if women's roles in campaigning are to be remembered, women themselves need to be the ones that tell the story. Referred to the 'Inspiring Women' booklet produced by the STUC.

Called on NWC to work with regional women's committees to create a UK version of the Inspiring Women booklet – a living document, updated continuously.

Update: This initiative had to be put on hold due to other priorities generated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Motion 30: Branch Women's Officer Role

Noted that following a rule change at National Delegate Conference 2018, a Women's Officer should be one of the general officers of the branch. Noted further that it is not known how many branches have implemented (or not) the rule change.

Called on NWC to undertake a survey of branches to find out if they have a women's officer and report back to National Women's Conference 2021; promote the role; ensure the requirement for the role is included in the Branch Organising Framework Assessment.

Update: Work to ensure the Branch Women's Officer post is included in the list of rulebook posts in the Organising Framework is on-going.

Women in Society

Motion 1: Women on the cliff edge

Motion 3: The impact of welfare cuts on women

Noted the proportion of women forced into poverty by changes to the benefits system - in particular, Universal Credit.

Noted evidence about Universal credit claimants who are in work, in particular, that women head up 90% of one parent families and are most likely to be in lower paid jobs where Universal Credit is required to supplement income.

Noted the adverse financial impact of COVID 19 on women, especially Black members.

Noted the impact of the austerity programme that has operated since 2010 and highlighted the increased use of food banks. Expressed concern about the devastating impact of Universal Credit and draconian welfare cuts on women. Highlighted the situation of women

in Northern Ireland in particular - where the £500 welfare mitigation package has been extended due to COVID 19 but will not last. Northern Ireland has the highest weekly spend on childcare in the UK – the 30 hours of childcare provision does not exist.

Update: The outbreak of Covid 19 has worsened an already bad situation for thousands of women. Women who were affected by changes to the Universal Credit have been plunged into further poverty as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

According to a research by Women's Budget Group (WBG), women expect their incomes to fall by 26% as a result of the pandemic compared to 18% of men's incomes. It found that Black women in particular are being affected by falls in income and financial insecurity.

A quarter of Black mothers and a third of disabled mothers have been reported struggling to feed their children and 42% of single parents are anticipating living on less than £500 per month. The current benefit system is not enough to protect many people from destitution. Migrant women are particularly unprotected because they are unable to access public funds. Though Universal Credit payments have been increased by £20 per week but the five-week wait for first payment has been maintained. This is leaving people without access to even the basics for five weeks, forcing them to rely on food banks and even pushing some people into homelessness.

To measure the scale and severity of this crisis and get the government to listen to us by confronting them with real life consequences of the system they have created, UNISON created an online platform where members who have been affected by the Universal Credit chaos can share their story. The link to this online platform was sent to women activists to cascade down to women in UNISON.

UNISON has supported the Trussell Trust's campaign, #5weekstoolong, to end the five week wait for Universal Credit. We have campaigned against the two-child limit on tax credits and universal credit claimants.

UNISON was also instrumental in the creation of the coalition campaign, All Kids Count, which brings together 52 organisations to oppose the two-child limit.

Motion 16: Our NHS not for sale not a bargaining chip in trade deals

Noted the positive impact on women's health and mortality rates of the forming of the NHS. Considered by contrast the inevitable negative impact particularly on women as health care workers and NHS patients of dismantling the NHS through trade deals post BREXIT. Particularly, given the US President's stated aim that the NHS would be on the table in any trade deal talks with the US.

Called on NWC to highlight the impact on women in any campaign to exclude the NHS from trade deals and to work with Labour Link to protect the NHS and its predominantly female workforce.

Update: UNISON has continually supported the NHS and our health members and campaigned long and hard against privatisation of the NHS and against the sale of NHS professionals.

This is work in progress and it has been referred to UNISON Labour Link to raise awareness of the issues and also lobby MPs.

Motion 25: Brexit and the impact on women in Northern Ireland

Highlighted how Brexit is set to have a profoundly negative impact on women in Northern Ireland. Women in Northern Ireland do not have the rights that women in other parts of the UK have and Brexit is likely to erode employment protections for women. Other rights concerning the representation of women and funding are likely to be affected – particularly for the voluntary and community sector where many women both work and are service users. The economic consequences of Brexit are also set to have disproportionately negative impacts on women.

Update: A report on Brexit and its impact on the women in Northern Ireland was published in the women's equality e-bulletin to highlight these issues. The report highlights the concerns that the protection provided by many of rights of women that were achieved through the membership of the EU would be eroded as a result of Brexit.

Early in 2020, the impact of Brexit on the supply chain is already being seen in shortages in supermarkets of essential items and also delivery issues for EU suppliers/providers.

Motion 26: Women and climate change

Highlighted how climate change has a particular impact on women and girls because they are more likely to be poor, less likely to be in positions of power and/or decision-making roles, are more likely to be dependent for food and income on the land and more likely to have responsibility in their families for securing water, fuel and food. They also tend to be more exposed to the negative impacts of disasters, including death and injury.

Update: The union has a vital role to play in campaigning for greener politics, working with employers to make workplaces more sustainable, and informing members of global warming issues.

Information on UNISON's Green Network was published in the women's e-bulletin. UNISON is currently working to re-establish the UNISON Green Reps Network, with new training opportunities and new resources. There will be opportunities for members to get involved at their workplace and campaigning at local, regional and national level.

Women in the workplace

Motion 2: The reality of social care unfunded increase in pay

Highlighted continuing pressures on social care budgets. Against this background expressed concerns about the impact on a predominantly female workforce in terms of cuts in jobs and services and pay, terms and conditions. Expressed the view that as this largely female workforce makes an important contribution to local economies, there should be a workforce strategy rather than piecemeal cuts that invests in staff and demonstrates value for the workforce in terms of their pay.

Called on NWC to work with the NEC, Labour Link and the Community and Voluntary SGE to put women at the heart of campaigning on social care.

Update: The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the huge expectations of our largely female social care workforce against the background of low pay, irregular hours and the sharp contrast between the demands on this staff group and how little society values their vital contribution if measured by how little they are paid. UNISON has been at the forefront of campaigning for personal protective equipment (PPE) and pressuring government, councils and employers to address the issues impacting care workers. As the new General Secretary, Christina McAnea has prioritised “pushing for the promised pay rise for NHS staff to be paid promptly, and for the funding and the political will to create a quality, affordable national care service, where staff are respected and paid fairly.”

Motion 20: Sexual Harassment

Highlighted the statistics on sexual harassment of women. Noted the TUC’s campaign to request a new law to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace and UNISON’s own campaign #ustoo. Also noted successful and creative regional campaigns. Committed to continuing to fight unacceptable behaviour in the workplace.

Called on NWC to seek feedback from regions about steps they have taken to tackle sexual harassment; work with Young Members on campaigning and be a champion for branches where best practice has been implemented so it can be rolled out to all branches.

Update: We have made UNISON’s #ustoo resources easier to find on our website. UNISON has included evidence on sexual harassment in our response to the Home Office consultation on violence against women and girls February 2020.

Motion 29: Women in leadership

Noted: the underrepresentation of women at the top of organisations and overrepresentation at the bottom. Highlighted a study by the IES about how women can be supported to gain leadership positions.

Called on NWC to work with SGEs to raise the issues of gender imbalance; encourage employers to coach and mentor women into leadership positions and develop training to support women into leadership positions.

Update: Developing training to support women into leadership positions has not been possible during the pandemic. However, the election of UNISON's first woman General Secretary will give this fresh momentum.

Motion Composite B: Gender Pay Gap

Noted that despite it being 50 years since the introduction of the Equal Pay Act in the UK, there is no sector where women receive the same pay as men. Noted the inadequacy of reporting requirements of gender pay gap regulations. Affirmed that women in UNISON do not wish for another 50 years to go by without achieving pay parity with men.

Instructed NWC to highlight the disparity between male and female earnings; raise the issue at all levels in UNISON with a view to producing a gender pay gap charter and bargaining strategies to redress pay inequity; work with Labour Link to develop Labour Party policy to tackle the gap in the public sector; work with LAOS to develop training material; consider sending the motion to NDC.

Update: Due to the Coronavirus outbreak, the Government Equalities Office (GEO) and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) took the decision in March 2020 to suspend reporting on the gender pay gap deadlines for 2019/20.

There is substantial evidence (Fawcett Society, TUC, Women's Budget Group) that the pandemic is having a damaging impact on the gender pay gap with many women forced by restrictions on movement, the requirement to work at home if possible and school closures, to reduce working hours or give up their job. Women's Budget Group shows that mothers on the lowest incomes are nine times more at risk of losing their job due to school closures in the UK. The gender pay gap between men and women working full time is at its widest for those over 50, according to analysis from Rest Less, the digital community for the over 50s.

UNISON has provided evidence to the Parliamentary Women and Equalities Committee on the impact of Covid-19 on women including the gender pay gap.

Despite the pandemic, UNISON has continued to raise the profile of our #bridgethegap campaign and it has also been possible to continue work with a few UNISON gender pay gap 'Trailblazer' sites. The 'Trailblazer' sites are trialling the implementation of UNISON guidance on reducing the gap and identifying and sharing learning for other local branches and employers.

Women and families

Motion 4: Time off for dependants and special leave – a woman's burden

Noted that society's expectations of women remain that they are the prime carer and that as a consequence they are more likely to work part-time, with a corresponding effect on take-home pay. Because of these factors women are more likely to take unpaid leave to look after dependants.

Called on NWC to work with Labour Link to lobby government and the Labour Party to carry out a national study on the impact of unpaid leave on women; to consider making all leave paid and work with the NEC on a campaign on unpaid leave.

Update: Lockdown restrictions due to the Coronavirus pandemic have had a damaging impact on working parents, but particularly working mums with substantial TUC evidence (January 2021) showing that women have borne the brunt of juggling work and care.

- 7 in 10 requests for furlough have been turned down for working mums
- Nine out of ten mums say their mental health has been negatively impacted experiencing levels of stress and anxiety
- One-quarter of mums (25 per cent) are worried they will lose their job, either through being singled out for redundancy, sacked or denied hours

UNISON has advice for parents with caring responsibilities on the Covid-19 web page and has also published a detailed guide.

UNISON supports the TUC's call for a day 1 right to 10 days parental leave. This was included in UNISON's evidence submitted in response to a Government consultation on parental leave in October 2019 and we continued to campaign for improvements to parental leave during 2020.

Motion 5: Bring parity to shared parental leave

Welcomed the introduction of Shared Parental Leave in 2015. Noted the extremely low take up largely due to the impact on family finances and the requirement for one parent/the mother to sacrifice a proportion of their leave/pay to give to the other parent. Noted that decent maternity leave and pay was hard fought for and that women particularly may be placed in a vulnerable position.

Called on NWC to lobby the government and campaign to ensure that both parents have the right to equal maternity and parental leave and improved pay for mothers, fathers and/or partners, including same sex.

Update: See also update on motion 4. UNISON supports the TUC's call for a day 1 right to 10 days parental leave. This call was included in UNISON's evidence submitted in response to a Government consultation on parental leave in October 2019 and we continued to campaign for improvements to parental leave during 2020.

Motion 9: Employer with a heart charter

Highlighted the issues for women who give birth prematurely in relation to maternity leave – their 12 months maternity leave would normally start from the date of giving birth. Noted the charter promoted by “The Smallest Things Charity” which promotes the good health of premature babies and has developed a charter for employers to sign up to extending maternity leave on full pay, by the number of days a baby is born premature.

Called on NWC to raise awareness of “The Smallest Things Charity” and of their charter; to gather statistics on the numbers of women (members) affected and campaign for employers to sign up to the charter.

Update: UNISON has supported the work of ‘The Smallest Things Charity’ throughout the year.

While the law remains that maternity leave starts the day after a birth regardless of whether it is full-term or premature, in March 2020 the government introduced new provision for parents whose babies are in neonatal care for over a week. They are now entitled to statutory paid leave for every further week their baby is on the unit up to a maximum of 12 weeks. This applies to parents of all babies in neonatal care, whether they were born premature or at term. The leave will be paid at a rate of around £160 per week and is in addition to other parental leave, like maternity and paternity leave.

Motion 10: Early miscarriage misery

Considered the figures for early miscarriage and how it can impact on women.

Called on NWC to issue guidance for branches on how early miscarriage can impact on women and what employers could do to be supportive and to develop guidance and a model policy for branches to negotiate with employers.

Update: Issues for women around miscarriage will be considered when UNISON's maternity guidance is reviewed.

Motion 11: Workplace support for mothers with premature or sick babies

Noted the numbers of babies born prematurely (before 37 weeks) in the UK. Noted this can be a very worrying time for parents and highlighted that more could be done to support working parents in these circumstances.

Called on NWC to campaign for additional paid leave for women who have a premature or sick baby; collect examples of best practice of employer support for women in this situation; support World Prematurity Day -17th November.

Update: As set out for motion 9 above, in March 2020 the government introduced new provision for parents whose babies are in neonatal care for over a week. UNISON has campaigned throughout the year for improvements in paid leave for working parents.

Motion 12: Ending the hostile environment for pregnant women

Highlighted the current situation in the UK regarding requirements for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers to pay for maternity services and related issues about ability to pay and the lack of consistency in the way the NHS applies the rules. Expressed concern about the hostile environment for vulnerable women and agreed that all women living in the UK should be able to receive free maternity services regardless of their immigration status.

Called on NWC to inform members about the issues related to regarding requirements for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers to pay for maternity services, including Maternity Action's on-line toolkit; raise awareness of UNISON members likely to work with this group of women; publicise Maternity Action's campaign; work with Labour Link and other groups to adopt Maternity Action's recommendations and produce a template for Regional Women's Committees and Branch Women's Groups to make Freedom of Information requests to their local NHS Trusts about the experiences of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers seeking maternity care and pass this information via the NWC to Maternity Action.

Update: UNISON has campaigned with Maternity Action, the TUC and sister trade unions throughout the year on the requirements for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers to pay for maternity services including a legal challenge to the NHS charging regulations.

Motion 13: Breastfeeding and lactation facilities in the workplace

Noted NHS advice that breast-feeding has long term health benefits for both mothers and their babies – stretching into adulthood. Highlighted the impact of a lack of suitable facilities to breastfeed or express milk in the workplace on the number of women deciding not to return to work.

Called on NWC to work with the national health and safety committee to draw up good practice guidance to encourage and enable branches to work with employers to support new mothers and provide accessible facilities for breastfeeding in the workplace.

Update: Issues for breast-feeding mums will be considered when UNISON's maternity guidance is reviewed.

Women's Health

Motion Composite A: Menopause

Highlighted the fact that roughly half of UK workers are women and experience the menopause and noted that a number of trans and non-binary people also experience symptoms. Discussed the experience of Black women and the influence of cultural factors. Highlighted the proportion of women for whom menopause is likely to be difficult and the importance of employer support that is not a 'one size fits all' response as menopause is a unique experience. Congratulated UNISON on the new menopause bargaining guidance and model policy.

Update: UNISON has produced an updated bargaining guidance on menopause that includes a model policy for branches and reps to use in negotiations to highlight the issue. UNISON has also produced leaflets and stickers to publicise the issue.

A menopause campaign page has been set up on the women's site on the UNISON website where an online quiz is available to help branches start conversations with members and potential members about how supportive their workplace is.

The guide, quiz, leaflet and stickers were publicised to commemorate World Menopause Day on 18 October. All the resources are available to order from the UNISON online catalogue.

Motion 14: Disproportionality in the treatment of women suffering heart attacks

Noted research by the British Heart Foundation confirming that 50% of women were more likely to receive wrong diagnosis when suffering heart attacks.

Called on NWC to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of heart attacks among women, to work with the Heath Service Group to influence Public Health England on this issue and liaise with the NEC and other appropriate.

Update: There is concern about inequality in the way women were being diagnosed when suffering heart disease in comparison to men. UNISON has produced a briefing on women and heart attacks. The briefing was published in the women's e-bulletin. The briefing has also been included in the women's campaign handbook.

Motion 15: Health & safety testing – a world built for men

Noted Criado Perez's book 'Invisible Women' about how the domination of men in the design industry has had a major impact on women's health and safety at work. An overwhelmingly negative one.

Update: An article on becoming a safety rep was published in the women's e-bulletin which included information on how to become a health and safety rep.

Motion 17: Impact of domestic abuse on workers

Motion 18: Supporting reps who offer workplace support – women affected by domestic violence

Noted the wide-ranging impact of domestic abuse on workers, colleagues, families and friends. Recognised that domestic abuse is a workplace issue and that not enough is done to make the link between women presenting with mental health issues and domestic abuse with a consequent impact on sickness absence management. Agreed there is a need to train and educate line managers but also health professionals.

Update: UNISON's 2020 Equality Survey found that 4% of respondents had either experienced domestic abuse during the Covid-19 lockdown or knew someone who had.

Protections at work can ensure that victims are not trapped in a dangerous relationship because they are concerned about losing their job. UNISON has been working very hard to amend the Domestic Abuse Bill to include the workplace:

- to introduce paid leave for victims of domestic abuse
- add conditions for perpetrators which would protect victims in the workplace as well as the home
- and a requirement for employers to provide training to enable colleagues and managers to spot signs of domestic abuse and know how to respond

We won substantial cross party support for our amendment to extend protection orders against perpetrators to the workplace and now have another opportunity to press our points in the House of Lords. We are meeting Members of the Lords to set out why they should support our amendments.

We are also engaging with the government's review of support available to victims of domestic abuse in the workplace and have provided detailed evidence about what good employer support looks like based on real life stories from our women's networks.